

## What the Angels Said

Sermon by [Cynthia A. Jarvis](#)

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**Genesis 16:7-13**

**Matthew 1:18-21; Luke 1:11-17; 26-33; 2:8-14**

*“The angel of the Lord said to her....” “...and angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream....” “But the angel of the Lord said to him....” “And he came to her and said....” “But the angel of the Lord said to them....”*

On these Sundays leading to Christmas Eve, we will tell ourselves a story we already know by heart, a story that begins on the sixth month when the angel Gabriel is sent to a village in Galilee named Nazareth and culminates with shepherds who return glorifying and praising God for all that they have seen and heard. Yet how often is it the case that when you know a story by heart, you forget to listen, really listen to the plot or pay attention to the characters or notice the details? So on this second Sunday in the season of Advent, I want to focus our attention on one mysterious character in Luke and Matthew’s accounts of Christ’s birth. It is a character who appears throughout the story of our salvation--a character known variously as the angel of the Lord, as cherubim and seraphim, as a multitude of heavenly host, as Michael or Gabriel or Raphael. It is that creature with wings, according to the artist, who may sit atop our Christmas tree or dangle from its branches, but who is seldom thought of as a credible character in the present drama of our own salvation.

There is nothing in our experience save for our reading of the Biblical story that would lead us even to cock an ear in hopes of hearing a tangible word from on high. Yet in this season more than any other, in this age of high anxiety and overwhelming sorrow, we find ourselves longing for such a word; listening not for Santa's reindeer on the rooftop but for an angel singing simply anything suggestive of God's nearness.

In the next few minutes, therefore, I will invite you to listen again in the region where you are keeping watch. For I tell you that the God who is on the way to you from heaven is the God who has already sent an angel to hover in the vicinity of the fields where you abide, sent the angel of the Lord whose message has not changed in two thousand years: to you is born a savior...and you shall find him.

First we need to be clear about what we are not considering this morning. As Karl Barth put it, we are not “in the sphere of Red Riding Hood and her grandmother and the wolf, or the stork which leaves babies, or the March Hare and Father Christmas.” Nor are we in the arena of repeatable historical phenomena where we can draw upon analogies that will help us grasp the reality of heaven coming toward the earth. In addition, we are not interested in the culture’s obsession with magical beings that can be prevailed upon for a price to bring luck or fortune or make dreams come true. Rather we are asking after a character *in Scripture*, in the story that tells us the truth concerning our human condition without God in the world and the God who, from the beginning of time, was and is coming to dwell with us in Jesus Christ.

In the first place and before we can consider what the angels said, there is the question of how we can speak of such things at all. On the border between heaven and earth where angels apparently do not fear to tread, mortals can only employ the language of poetry; can only dare words that, if they are comprehended at all, are

known by way of the imagination. Angels are to be found in the realm of saga and legend and myth, stories in the Bible that tell a truth we could comprehend in no other way. Put negatively, the sort of truth revealed in the birth of God's Son cannot be contained in a volume full of propositions about the nature of God's being, though God knows theologians have tried! The truth Luke and Matthew tell can only be grasped as Mary grasped the words God spoke to her in Gabriel's speech, prompting her to ask, "How can this be?." Likewise, if what the angel said to Mary is to become God's word to us, we are left to ponder these things in the imagination of our hearts as well.

But ponder what things exactly? What, in the second place, is there to notice about the angels we meet throughout the pages of Scripture? We know them only by their appearance: they enter the story, speak or act as they have been commissioned to speak or act by God, and disappear. We know nothing of their existence before or after, only of their appearing. What struck me about Fra Angelico's fresco of the Annunciation at the top of the stairs in the Cloisters of San Marco in Florence was that, unlike Mary, Gabriel cast no shadow. He was insubstantial, so to speak. Angels are nothing in themselves except as they are witnesses to the God who is soon to be God with us; they have no being except as they are messengers waking us up to the event of God's drawing near. Being nothing in himself, Gabriel was apparent only as he was sent by God to a town in Galilee named Nazareth, to a virgin espoused to a man named Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. He came in unto her. He spoke to her. He departed from her. Angels are eloquent, says Barth, "in the very fact that they slip between our fingers.... They merely come and go again, having maintained the freedom of God. They never catch the eye."

In the third place, it is important to notice where angels come from. If you read through the whole of the Bible, you would have to say that they come from wherever God is and appear to announce, one way or another, the impending presence of God on earth. We call wherever God is "heaven." They come from heaven because heaven is "the starting point in creation from which God moves through creation toward us," says Barth. Heaven is "wherever in creation God has taken [up] residence in order to come to us."

That the angel of the Lord is coming from someplace else means there is a distance to be bridged between God and humankind, a leap to be taken that is not so much spatial or even temporal as we think of space and time. Rather the distance is between the lives we are leading without God and the lives we are destined to live with God. It is the distance in the air waves between our silent nights and the sudden sound of heavenly hosts heading us toward Bethlehem. Mind you, the angels do not end the distance; rather they announce that the distance is about to be ended by the God who is on the way to us. We are turned from ourselves and even from the angel to look Godward.

In the fourth place, we also may notice where and to whom angels appear. Though it is not always the case, in the five stories before us you could say that the angel appears to those who are somehow on the margins of history: Hager, the slave of Abraham and Sarah about to be banished with her son to the wilderness; Zechariah, an aging priest with no hope of offspring; Mary, a nobody from Nazareth engaged to a carpenter about to be seen as cuckold in the eyes of the world; shepherds, the outcasts of proper society abiding in the fields. "The angelic appearance and message is to those who are outside," says Barth, and this is so because the first words of the angel have to be said, above all, *to them*. With them there is no question about the darkness in which they dwell, the bleak mid-winter that keeps them from hope. They are afraid. Think of the millions in this season, some of whom are in this sanctuary,

with no prospect of a job or who tremble amid the crossfire of war or who languish in refugee camps or who huddle in an abandoned tenement with no heat or who face the end of life alone. They are afraid and to them the angel's "Fear not" must be said above all the rest. We will say more about this on the Sunday before Christmas, but it is worth saying twice that the subsequent fear called out of those to whom the angel appears is the only fear that is worthwhile: the fear of the living God drawing close to them. "It is only here," wrote Karl Barth in a Christmas message, "with all due respect to our fear of life, that it is really worthwhile to be afraid. Here hearts and reins are tried. Here the question is awe and not agitation. Here no one can escape and no one can console himself. Having reached the ultimate limit of all that we fear, where God is revealed to us, we are no longer afraid of this or the next thing, but of [God] alone."

At last, then, we are ready to notice what the angel said. There is initial the admonition to "Fear not"; but in each of the five encounters before us this morning, the angel also said, one way or another, "To you is born..." In Scripture, a code word for life without the prospect of a future, for human hopelessness, is barrenness. While only Elizabeth literally was barren, each of these characters faced their lives without hope. Therefore the angel's words were pregnant with news of God's impending action from out of God's promised future, action that was humanly inconceivable: Ishmael would be the father of a countless multitude; a son from Joseph's line would save God's people from their sin; the child of Elizabeth and Zechariah would prepare a people for the coming of the long-awaited Messiah; Mary would give birth to the Son of God whose kingdom would have no end; the child born to the shepherds would send them into the night glorifying and praising God. "Still," says Barth, the angel's visitation will be "a light shining against an unfathomable sea of darkness, a light which can only promise, point forward and announce the future." But it is light enough.

The question that remains, of course, is the question of the angel's appearance here, now, to you and to me. "Do the reality and ministry of angels belong only to the history which took place then and there according to the witness of Holy Scripture?" asks Barth. "Or do angels belong...to the history of all ages, and therefore to our own history too, including the life-history of each individual?" The question, of course, must be turned inside-out, for the pressing issue of Advent is not whether an angel will appear to us but whether we will become those who find our lives in the history which began in the beginning and has its center in the God who is always coming toward us in Jesus Christ: whether we will find ourselves as characters in the history to which the angels belong. It is a history, a story, a saga that is always proceeding from and hastening to the manger, to the time and place of God's drawing near. We keep telling ourselves this story season in and season out in hopes that, on one silent night, the light will dawn upon our darkened minds that this is the story that tells us who we are and to whom we belong and why we were born. If that should light dawn upon you, it will surely be the light of God's glory, the light that slips through the fingers and does not catch the eye, the light that shines on the margins of life when you were sure all hope was gone, the light that dispels all of your little fears in favor of the one worthwhile fear.

If what took place in Bethlehem "did not take place without the angels," wrote Barth at the end of a few hundred pages on angels, "the same is necessarily true of the community in every age" and of your life and of mine. For the gospel on the second Sunday of Advent is this: "...known or unknown...where...Jesus Christ is present... there, known or unknown, the ministry of angels is also." For to you is born a savior. And you shall find him, who has found you, even now, even here, in the breaking of bread. Fear not! Amen.