Angels: Messengers of God
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Ancient Witness: Matthew 1:18-21

I wonder how many of us would say that we have ever seen an angel. According to a *Time* poll some years ago, most Americans believe in angels. There is a fascination about angels in our culture today. There are angel-only boutiques, angel newsletters such as *AngelWatch*, and angel seminars. Harvard Divinity School has a course on angels, and bookstores have established entire angel sections.

What do you think of when you think of angels? Many use the term to designate sweetness and innocence, babies and cute little children. Perhaps we think of a gentle soul like Clarence in “It’s a Wonderful Life.”

This, however, is a far cry from the angels in the sacred texts. In Genesis, they guard the gates of Eden with flashing swords. In Ezekiel, they overpower the prophet with awesome visions, four-headed, multi-winged and many-eyed. In Revelation they do battle with the dragon. Angels, in the biblical tradition are often terrifying creatures. In an article in *Time* magazine, Nancy Gibbs wrote,

> Anyone who invites an encounter with an angel should be prepared to be changed by it. In scriptural tradition, angels pull back the curtain, however briefly, on the realm of the spirit. In offering a glimpse of a larger universe, they issue a challenge to priorities and settled ways.

In the Bible, the word for “angel” is *angelos*, which means literally, “messenger.” The essence of what an angel is, is a messenger. They “pull back the curtain.” The word for “gospel” comes from the same word: *euangelion*, literally “good message.” And so here is the basic point of my sermon this morning: Angels are what convey to us the message of God. If you want to know if you have ever seen an angel, ask yourself, “When did I encounter the message from God?” And there you will find a messenger, an angel. Whenever we encounter a life-changing message from God, we encounter an angel.

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Medieval theologians believed that angels had to exist to fill the gap between God and humankind. They were intermediaries between the one awesome and powerful God, on one hand, and mere fallen humanity, on the other. In those times, they saw this vast divide between the ultimate, absolute and unknowable God and mortals. And so angels helped bridge this chasm, moving easily between the layers of the universe with their wings. Angels were said to move the stars, spin the planets, make plants grow and help creatures reproduce. By the Middle Ages, theologians had constructed an intricate model of heaven. They divided the heavenly host into nine choirs, each
with its own task. In this layered model of heaven, the highest angels were the seraphim and cherubim, who existed to worship God. Under these were thrones, dominions, virtues, powers, principalities and other angels.

Now in the Reformation, the reformers were interested in a more democratic model of church life, and not only did they do away with the hierarchy of Bishops and Cardinals, but they did away with the hierarchy of angels as well. And so they removed all the images of angels from the churches. The reformers emphasized that each person could commune and interact directly with the Creator without the need for a winged creature to intervene.

And so today, many people do not know what to do with all this talk about angels. How do we talk about angels today? The Bible, as always, is a good place to start. In the Bible, people saw angels when they were asleep, in their dreams. The prophets also saw visions of angels when they were in their ecstatic trances. Angels occurred to people as thoughts, ideas, impulses; they were experienced as a subtle force or a spirit. *Basically, angels were what people saw when they encounter the Message.* Most angels speak in silence; they whisper in the stillness of night, through intuitions, insight and images.

In our familiar Advent gospel text this morning, Matthew wrote that an angel, a messenger from the divine, “appeared to Joseph in a dream.” Something telling Joseph that in spite of the unknown father of his fiancée’s unborn child, God would work a unique and holy purpose in this new life.

Now, one characteristic of angels is that they disrupt the usual order of things. They bear unwelcome challenges and make us uncomfortable. As I said earlier, they are not sweet and innocuous but have a terrifying streak. Joseph would attest.

In the Bible, angels were not necessarily the image of a supernatural creature, either. In Luke’s account of the empty tomb, it says that the women saw “two men in dazzling clothes.” They were not winged creatures, but appeared to be ordinary people. It says, “The men said to them, ‘Here is not here but has risen.’” It is not until later in this chapter that the apostle concluded that the women had seen “a vision of angels.”

At the beginning of the gospel accounts it says “As it is written in the prophet Isaiah, ‘See, I am sending my messenger (angelos) ahead of you, who will prepare your way; the voice of one crying in the wilderness.’” The heavenly messenger or angel they were talking about is none other than John the Baptist, a real human being.

One story from the Hebrew Scriptures is about an encounter that Abraham and Sarah have with “three men.” It doesn’t say anything else about them, just three men, passing by Abraham’s camp. Abraham did not recognize them as divine beings, but he does greet the visitors with the kind of courtesy and hospitality that was characteristic of the Middle East in those days. He brought them water; Sarah baked some bread; they had some milk; and they killed a calf to eat. And so again, the emphasis is not upon the messenger being supernatural but upon the message that they leave with Abraham and Sarah: “You will have a son.”

You know, so often when we Western people approach the ancient Hebrew world of the Bible, we have the wrong emphasis. So often we are obsessed with the messenger and miss the Message. So often we look at the form but miss the content. And the whole question of angels is a good case in point. The question is not whether an angel is a fantastic dream-vision, a supernatural being, an intuition, an insight or just an ordinary person. The real question is, “What did the angel say?” The
point is the message. And that message is always a message of hope, of comfort and peace. “Fear not” they say; “Do not be afraid.” It is a message of love, of justice, of liberation.

And in a world where there is a mass murder almost each day, where we reel from news of the horrible shootings in San Bernardino, where there is violence and fear—we are in dire need of messages of hope and courage.

When someone or something is acting as an angel, they are transparent. It’s all about the message. There’s an old saying: “The reason why angels can fly is because they take themselves so lightly.” Angels aren’t focused on themselves. They evoke compassion and generosity. They break open our hearts. Who does that for you?

In her last column before she quit to write as a novelist, Anna Quindlen wrote about everyday angels. She wrote about Harold Brown, who saw the homeless on midtown subway grates and, instead of looking away, organized a small shelter in his parish church. She wrote,

*They do dazzle, the everyday angels, just as the angel did in the Christmas story, scaring the wits out of the shepherds. But the angel said, “Fear not,” and that’s what I’ve learned from its contemporary counterparts—the rape counselors, the good cops, the nuns, the librarians...*

*The heavenly hosts prove it every day, in Coney Island, in Washington Heights, in Flushing, with cots, with comfort, with boxes of tissues on their desks...Those who shun the prevailing winds of cynicism and anomie can truly fly.*

What Quindlen did that I like so much is that she put the focus back on the message. This is how you find out where the real angels are.

Larry Kushner, who in *Honey from the Rock* wrote out of the Jewish mystic tradition called the Kabbalah. He said that as human beings, we are all born with pieces to a puzzle—someone else’s. These pieces we have are for other people. And during our lives, some of the relationships that we have are for the purpose of either getting or giving our pieces. And we are made more whole, and we exist to help others become more whole. And when that happens, you become truly a messenger from on high.

He wrote:

*We understand that most ordinary people are messengers of the Most High. They go about their tasks in holy anonymity. Often, even unknown to themselves. Yet, if they had not been there, if they had not said what they said or did what they did, it would not be the way it is now. We would not be the way we are now. Never forget that you too yourself may be a messenger.*

Finally, in this season of expectancy and hope, of visions and visitors, are there really angels? Sure there are. They’re not just dressed up in Christmas pageants but are all around. Everything that exists is a manifestation of the One Being. Everything that is reflects the Creator’s image and is a messenger, an angel, in this sense. We encounter angels every day, every moment—messages from God in trees, in birds, in each other—and the question is, “Do we see them?”
And there are messages coming from on high each moment to all things in this universe—angelic voices speaking to the entire creation at every instant. As it is written in the Talmud (the Jewish writings),

*Every blade of grass has an angel that bends over it and whispers, “Grow! Grow!”*

Messages stream to the world from on high.

There is a message always coming to us—a voice of the Spirit in our ears—speaking to us even if we don’t hear it. And that voice is whispering, “I love you.” Over and over, again. “I love you.”

Deep in our hearts is the real message that humans are meant to deliver. Too often we have delivered the wrong message: a message of fear, a message of anger and violence. Yet deep within us is a message to remember our real nature and to become what we really are. Our message is love and joy, hope and peace.

And we can take this message of our heart and share it with the world. We can gather our hearts together, make our love strong and send this love wherever it is needed. We can send this love to the homeless and the poor, to those who are suffering physical or emotional pain, to where there is warfare and violence, to families who have lost loved ones, to the atmosphere, forests and oceans.

I read a little book (*Prayers: A Communion with Our Creator*) by Miguel Ruiz, and I wholeheartedly agree with his conclusion he shares with his readers. He says:

*I believe in angels. I believe in you. I believe in myself. I believe in us.*

Are there really angels? It is what each of us are meant to be—our deepest calling. Me. You. Everyone. And so I’ll conclude with a portion of his Prayer for Humanity:

*Today, Lord, help me to deliver the real message of humanity: the message of joy and love. Help me to deliver this message to my own mind, to that part of me that is always judging and abusing me. Let me deliver this message to that part of me that judges other humans. Beginning today, help me to free my mind from all false messages I deliver to myself, to every human, to every life form on this beautiful planet.*

*Today, Lord, I will manifest your love in every word I express, in every action I take, so that everything I do becomes a ritual of love for you.*

Amen.