

An Angel's Point of View: Christmas Day

Text: Luke 2:8-15

One of the striking features of the Christmas story is the almost universal presence of angels. They are everywhere. Almost every major character in the Christmas story has an encounter with an angel: Joseph, Zechariah, Mary and the shepherds. These supernatural figures announce the coming of the royal king even though this king would be born a pauper without privilege. This morning we are, therefore, going to look at this story of the birth of Christ from the angels' point of view.

But before we come to angel's appearance to the shepherds, it might be helpful to contrast the Biblical portrayal of angels in the Christmas story with our cultural images. If we were to create a profile from popular culture, what impressions about angels might predominate? Either they are pudgy cupids, roley polley infants or beings that look like pre-pubescent young girls clothed in flowing gowns, their faces graced with the trace of a smile and child-like innocence. Certainly, these are not creatures to fear.

Though our infatuation with angels probably reached its peak a few years ago there is still a desire to have beings who will protect us from a dangerous and unsafe world. Therefore the angels most commonly come in the form of guardian angels. The latest books along these lines are *Contacting Your Spirit Guide* or *In The Arms of Angels: True Stories of Heavenly Guardians*. The *Time Magazine* writer Nancy Gibbs began her article on angels with this question, "[What idea is more beguiling than the notion of lithesome spirits, free of time and space and human weakness, hovering between us and all harm?](#)" What an attractive idea it is to believe that each of us has been assigned a protector in this mysterious world who is thoroughly benign! Angels today seem more like celestial boy scouts or the projection of doting grandparents. O, to have one who will heal our diseases, thwart off evil, and stand at death's door and carry us safely into God's arms!

Though the Bible does not have a fully developed theology of guardian angels there are some tantalizing suggestions upon which we could build such a case. Psalm 91 speaks about coming under the shelter of the Most High. How is this to be? The Psalmist says, "[For he \[God\] will command his angels concerning you to guard you in all your ways; they will lift you up in their hands, so that you will not strike your foot against a stone](#)" (Psalm 91:11,12). In the book of Hebrews the writer takes great pains to show that Jesus Christ is by far greater than the angels, but this does not mean that they don't have a role to play in our lives. At the end of the first chapter he teases us with this comment, "[Are not all angels ministering spirits sent to serve those who will inherit salvation?](#)" Angels who serve us unbeknownst to us? What does this mean? How do they serve us? Unanswered questions.

Into this void, it is natural to create rather tame beings who hover over us, ready to step between us and harm's way. In fact, for many they are God substitutes. One professor wrote, "[With angels around, people feel they don't have to bother an Almighty God in order to help](#)" nor might I add, deal with him either.

Yet in the Christmas story we are introduced to supernatural figures who are quite startling. Almost without exception they begin every conversation with human beings with, "[Do not be afraid.](#)" If I were an angel and had to regularly apologize for my presence at the beginning of every conversation, I might have a complex. "[Sorry to startle you.](#)" I will let you look up the appearance of angels to Joseph, Zechariah and Mary to confirm the fear of the supernatural. This morning we will focus on the appearance of an angel to the shepherds camped in the pitch black of night on the Palestinian hillside, not far from Bethlehem.

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We might think that the rugged rogues that shepherds are might take an angelic appearance all in stride. Shepherds show fear? Nonsense! These are not shrinking violets. Shepherds are used to protecting their flocks against predators of all kinds using rods, knives and bare knuckles. Confronting the fright of night rustlers goes with the job. But this night they were up against it. Someone flipped on the light switch and the stadium floods set the hillside aglow.

An angel appears to shepherds accompanied with radiance, as if the sky had been set on fire. **"An angel of the Lord appeared to them and the glory of the Lord shone around them and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, Do not be afraid..." (Luke 2:9)** The old King James Version says, **"And they were sore afraid."**

Angels have two primary roles in God's scheme. First they are messengers. *Angelos* literally translated means messengers. They deliver God's message. Throughout the Christmas story they are basically declaring the identity of this child born in Bethlehem. **"Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you, he is Christ the Lord."**

Secondly, as beings who bask in the unfiltered light of God's presence, they naturally reflect it. In this case, the angel also brings with him the presence of God in the form of radiance. This angel is an incandescent bulb. You get the sense that angels are translucent, transparent, glowing white lights. Why? Because angels are reflectors. They are simply mirrors of the glory of God. The glory of the Lord shone around them. Angels absorb and reflect the light of the Lord, like we will one day. Loving luminescence is the essence of God. Any being exposed to the presence of God glows as well.

Do you remember the account of Moses being invited by the Lord to be alone with Him on Mt. Sinai? The glory of the Lord descended upon the mountain in the form of a cloud which enveloped Moses. Moses had asked God to assure him of His presence with the request, **"Show me your glory."** The Lord's response was essentially, *"Moses, why don't you just ask me if you can take a stroll on the sun? You would have just as much chance of surviving that as surviving an exposure to my glory."* The glory of the Lord makes the brilliance of the sun look like a match stick in comparison. What Moses was allowed to see was the backside of God's glory as Moses was hid in the cleft of the rock. Even with that when Moses came down after 40 days in the Lord's presence, the Scripture says, **"And when Aaron and all the people of Israel saw Moses, behold his skin of his face shone, and they were afraid to come near him."**

My guess is that the shepherds on this night of luminescence ended up on their back side shielding their eyes. It was like walking out of a dark movie theater on bright sunny afternoon. Their eyes stung with pain as they rubbed them back into focus.

For a moment the veil of hiddenness was lifted; the curtain that separates time and eternity was drawn back. The angelic chorus that perpetually sings the glories of God's splendor out of our sight was allowed to break into the darkness of this world for a fleeting instant. Forget these pudgy cupids or the affectionate sweet faced darlings, the Biblical angels scorched the heavens. These angelic beings stride interstellar space with legs like columns of fire. The holy retinue followed their Young Prince of glory straight to a Bethlehem stable. Otherwise stripped of royalty and regal fanfare, the lone indication of his kingly reign is this spontaneous outburst on high. We get to see the birth of Jesus from an angel's point of view.

J. B. Phillips has an imagination far greater than mine. He wrote a little story entitled *The Angel's Point of View* or *The Visited Planet*, which helps us capture the wonder of what the angel of the Lord announced to the shepherds on that hillside some 2000 years ago.

Let's hear the story of The Visited Planet by J. B. Phillips

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THE ANGELS' POINT OF VIEW (or "The Visited Planet")

Narrator: *Once upon a time a very young angel was being shown round the splendours and glories of the universes by a senior and experienced angel. To tell the truth, the little angel was beginning to be tired and a little bored. He had been shown whirling galaxies and blazing suns, infinite distances in the deathly cold of inter-stellar space, and to his mind there seemed to be an awful lot of it all. Finally he was shown the galaxy of which our planetary system is but a small part. As the two of them drew near to the star which we call our sun and to its circling planets, the senior angel pointed to a small and rather insignificant sphere turning very slowly on its axis. It looked as dull as a dirty tennis-ball to the little angel, whose mind was filled with the size and glory of what he had seen.*

Senior Angel: *"I want you to watch that one particularly," said the senior angel, pointing with his finger.*

Little Angel: *"Well, it looks very small and rather dirty to me. What's special about that one?"*

Senior Angel: *"That is the Visited Planet."*

Little Angel: *"Visited?" "You don't mean visited by -----?"*

Senior Angel: *"Indeed I do. That ball, which I have no doubt looks to you small and insignificant and not perhaps overclean, has been visited by our young Prince of Glory."*

Narrator: *And at these words he bowed his head reverently.*

Little Angel: *"But how? Do you mean that our great and glorious Prince, with all these wonders and splendors of His Creation, and millions more that I'm sure I haven't seen yet, went down in Person to this fifth-rate little ball? Why should He do a thing like that?"*

Senior Angel: *"It isn't for us, to question His 'why's', except that I must point out to you that He is not impressed by size and numbers, as you seem to be. But that He really went, I know, and all of us in Heaven who know anything know that. As to why He became one of them - how else do you suppose could He visit them?"*

Narrator: *The little angel's face wrinkled in disgust.*

Little Angel: *"Do you mean to tell me, that He stooped so low as to become one of those creeping, crawling creatures of that floating ball?"*

Senior Angel: *"I do, and I don't think He would like you to call them 'creeping, crawling creatures' in that tone of voice. For, strange as it may seem to us, He loves them. He went down to visit them to lift them up to become like Him."*

Narrator: *The little angel looked blank. Such a thought was almost beyond his comprehension.*

Senior Angel: *"Close your eyes for a moment, and we will go back in what they call Time."*

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Narrator: *While the little angel's eyes were closed and the two of them moved nearer to the spinning ball, it stopped its spinning, spun backwards quite fast for a while, and then slowly resumed its usual rotation.*

Senior Angel: *"Now look!"*

Narrator: *And as the little angel did as he was told, there appeared here and there on the dull surface of the globe little flashes of light, some merely momentary and some persisting for quite a time.*

Little Angel: *"Well, what am I seeing now?"*

Senior Angel: *"You are watching this little world as it was some thousands of years ago. Every flash and glow of light that you see is something of the Father's knowledge and wisdom breaking into the minds and hearts of people who live upon the earth. Not many people, you see, can hear His Voice or understand what He says, even though He is speaking gently and quietly to them all the time."*

Little Angel: *"Why are they so blind and deaf and stupid?"*

Senior Angel: *"It is not for us to judge them. We who live in the Splendor have no idea what it is like to live in the dark. We hear the music and the Voice like the sound of many waters every day of our lives, but to them - well, there is much darkness and much noise and much distraction upon the earth. Only a few who are quiet and humble and wise hear His Voice. But watch, for in a moment you will see something truly wonderful."*

Narrator: *The Earth went on turning and circling round the sun, and then quite suddenly, in the upper half of the globe, there appeared a light, tiny but so bright in its intensity that both the angels hid their eyes.*

Little Angel (in a low tone of voice): *"I think I can guess, That was the Visit, wasn't it?"*

Senior Angel: *"Yes, that was the Visit. The Light Himself went down there and lived among them; but in a moment, and you will be able to tell that even with your eyes closed, the light will go out."*

Little Angel: *"But why? Could He not bear their darkness and stupidity? Did He have to return here?"*

Senior Angel (voice stern and said): *"No, it wasn't that. They failed to recognize Him for Who He was - or at least only a handful knew Him. For the most part they preferred their darkness to His Light, and in the end they killed Him."*

Little Angel: *"The fools, the crazy fools! They don't deserve ----"*

Senior Angel: *"Neither you nor I, nor any other angel, knows why they were so foolish and so wicked. Nor can we say what they deserve or don't deserve. But the fact remains, they killed our Prince of Glory while He was Man amongst them."*

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Little Angel: *"And that I suppose was the end? I see the whole Earth has gone black and dark. All right, I won't judge them, but surely that is all they could expect?"*

Senior Angel: *"Wait, we are still far from the end of the story of the Visited Planet. Watch now, but be ready to cover your eyes again."*

Narrator: *In utter blackness the earth turned round three times, and then there blazed with unbearable radiance a point of light.*

Little Angel (shielding his eyes): *"What now?"*

Senior Angel: *"They killed Him all right, but He conquered death. The thing most of them dread and fear all their lives He broke and conquered. He rose again, and a few of them saw Him and from then on became His utterly devoted slaves."*

Little Angel: *"Thank God for that."*

Senior Angel: *"Amen. Open your eyes now, the dazzling light has gone. The Prince has returned to His Home of Light. But watch the Earth now."*

Narrator: *As they looked, in place of the dazzling light there was a bright glow which throbbed and pulsated. And then as the Earth turned many times little points of light spread out. A few flickered and died; but for the most part the lights burned steadily, and as they continued to watch, in many Parts of the globe there was a glow over many areas.*

Senior Angel: *"You see what is happening? The bright glow is the company of loyal men and women He left behind, and with His help they spread the glow and now lights begin to shine all over the Earth."*

Little Angel (impatiently): *"Yes, yes, but how does it end? Will the little lights join up with each other? Will it all be light, as it is in Heaven?"*

Senior Angel (shaking his head): *"We simply do not know. It is in the Father's hands. Sometimes it is agony to watch and sometimes it is joy unspeakable. The end is not yet. But now I am sure you can see why this little ball is so important. He has visited it; He is working out His Plan upon it."*

"Yes, I see, though I don't understand. I shall never forget that this is the Visited Planet."

THE VISITED PLANET! That is where we live. What makes our dwelling place special out of all the floating balls of interstellar space? We probably don't think much about the immensity of the universe in which we live because we are trapped in these finite bodies with our feet glued to the earth. But from an astronomical perspective earth is kind of a fifth rate little ball upon which we surf the heavens. Astronomers remind us that in comparison to everything else out there in the vast universe we are riding a piece of dust. If the giant star Antares from our galaxy, the Milky Way, were positioned where our sun is—93,000,000 miles away—Earth would be inside it! Our sun and Antares are only 2 of 500 billion stars that swim around in the vast, forlorn space of the Milky Way. On some clear evening hold a dime out at arm's length, you would be blocking 15 million stars.

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If we simply dwell on the size of the real estate we occupy in a universe measured by millions of light years, you can start to feel awfully alone. The little angel asks, "What's special about that one?" That is the VISITED PLANET. The God who made the universe traversed the vastness of time and space and came all the way to where we are to make himself known.

A missionary at Kumba, in the Cameroun, West Africa, was explaining to her class the American custom of giving gifts at Christmas. She summed it up by saying that Christmas gifts were an expression of joy to God and love for our friends because of the coming of Jesus into this world.

A few days later on Christmas morning a native boy in her class brought the missionary a beautiful shell as a present. Not living near the sea the teacher in amazement asked him where he got the lovely shell. He replied, "At the seashore." "But", she said, "that is 30 miles away!" The lad replied, "Long journey part of gift."

The length of this journey cannot just be measured by the size of the universe, but the distance from the eternity of divinity to confinement of manhood. This is the true wonder of the Christmas story. How far would God go to make himself known to us? On that dark Palestinian hillside the angel told a bunch of ridiculed shepherds, **"I bring you good news of a great joy that will be for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord. This will be a sign for you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger."**

J. I. Packer reminds us that what happened at Christmas is the most staggering claim that Christians make. "The supreme mystery with which the gospel confronts us lies, not in the Good Friday message of atonement, nor in the Easter message of resurrection, but in the Christmas message of incarnation. The Almighty appeared on earth as a helpless human baby, unable to do more than lie and stare and wriggle and make noises, needing to be fed and changed and taught to talk like any other child. Nothing in fiction is so fantastic as is this truth of the incarnation."

You can't make up this kind of story. This is not of human origin. Let me close with the way Harry Reasoner, the former CBS newsman, captured the wonder of this day, "If Christmas is the anniversary of the Lord of the Universe in the form of a helpless baby, it's quite a day."

People are afraid of God (and angels) and standing in very bright light. But everyone has seen babies and almost everyone likes them. So if God wanted to be loved as well as feared, he moved correctly here. And if he wanted to know people, as well as rule them, he moved correctly. And so it comes beyond logic. It's what a bishop called divine insanity. It is either a falsehood or it is the truest thing in all the world. It is the story of the great innocence of God the baby. And it is such a dramatic shot to the heart, that if it is not true, for Christians, nothing is true."

Ah, but we are THE VISITED PLANET