

The Angels of Christmas

Luke 2: 8-14

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During the Christmas season families frequently display a nativity scene similar to the one on the communion table this morning. Placed in a cozy stable, you will always find Mary and Joseph and the baby Jesus. There will also be several shepherds along with some sheep and usually three wise men and a few camels. But if that's all there is, something is missing. You can't portray the birth of Christ without mentioning the angels of Christmas. They are everywhere!

Here's a brief summary of their various appearances. The angel Gabriel appears to Zechariah at the temple in Jerusalem to inform him that he will be the father of John the Baptist. A little later Gabriel visits Mary in Nazareth of Galilee to let her know that she will be the mother of the Christ Child. Then Joseph, Mary's fiancé, is visited by an angel while he is sleeping. In that dream the angel tells him to proceed with the marriage because the child that she will bear is from the Holy Spirit. Months later on the night of Christ's birth, a choir of angels announces His birth to a group of startled shepherds in the fields of Bethlehem and finally once again in a dream Joseph is warned to take his family and flee to Egypt. As you can see, God's angels are quite busy, appearing over and over again throughout the Christmas story.

So this morning let's see if we can come to a better understanding of angels, who they are and if they are still making their presence known in our day and time. Mentioned nearly three hundred times throughout the Scriptures from Genesis to Revelation, angels are described in a variety of ways. This is what the Bible says. First of all it tells us that angels were created by God. He made them. Psalm 148 is a hymn of praise. All that God has created is called upon to honor Him and that includes the angels. Verse two declares, "Praise Him, all His angels, praise Him all His heavenly hosts." The second thing that we learn is that angels have been around for a long, long time. This is what Job discovered in the thirty-eighth chapter of the book that bears his name. During an ongoing conversation with God regarding all the suffering he had endured, the Lord asked Job a question, "Where were you when I created the earth and laid out its foundations? Where were you at the moment of creation when the stars sang together and the angels shouted for joy" (Job 38:4-7)? In other words, even before the earth came into being, God had already created the angels and they looked on with joyous excitement as it was brought into existence.

The Scriptures also tell us that angels are spiritual beings. They never die. On one occasion Jesus was asked if people in heaven were married. This is what He said, "The people of this age marry and are given in marriage, but the men and women who are worthy to rise from death and live in the age to come do not marry. They are like the angels and cannot die" (Luke 20:34-36). So angels are different from human beings. They are God's special creation. They do not enter into personal relationships with one another like we do and they do not live under the restraints of time and space which we must endure. Furthermore, for the most part they are invisible. They go about their business without us recognizing their presence. When they do make themselves known unto us, it is always an experience that is unforgettably awesome. In the days of Elisha, the prophet, an entire regiment of soldiers from Syria had been sent to capture him. Seeing this multitude, Elisha's servant was petrified. Elisha, however, was not afraid. He saw something that his servant could not visualize. He asked God to open the eyes of his servant so that he too could see the army of angels that had been sent to protect them. Now clearly seeing what had been previously invisible, the servant realized that the hillsides were filled with angelic horses and chariots of fire (2 Kings 6:17).

The Bible tells us some other things about angels. It says that they are stronger and wiser than human beings and that they are highly organized like the ranks of an army. One of them, Michael, is identified as an archangel in the book of Jude in the New Testament. Others are described as standing before the throne of God constantly lifting their voices in praise as recorded in the sixth chapter of the book of Isaiah. There are also vast multitudes of angels. In the book of Revelation the writer, John, says, "Again I looked, and I heard angels, thousands and tens of thousands of them" (Revelation 5:11). Finally, the Scriptures tell us that although angels were created holy, some of them rebelled against God and were cast out of heaven. Their leader was Satan, the devil and he has continued to stir up trouble here ever since.

Without a doubt the Scriptures tell us over and over again that angels are real. In fact, the writer of the book of Hebrews tells us that they have a special responsibility. He says, "Are not all angels ministering spirits sent to serve those who will inherit salvation" (Hebrews 1:14)? In other words, angels are the Lord's servants, sent to encourage and help God's people. Besides honoring and praising the Lord, they are commissioned by God to make their presence known unto us in three specific ways.

First, they are God's messengers. In fact, the word "angel" means messenger. That was certainly true with regards to the birth of Christ and it was true in two distinctly different ways. When the angel Gabriel greeted

Mary, he informed her of what God was getting ready to do in her life. By the power of his Spirit, she would become the mother of the Christ child (Luke 1:30-33). Later when an angel appeared to Joseph in a dream, the message was a little different. This time it was not what God was going to do, but rather what the Lord wanted him to do. The angel told him, "Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit" (Matthew 1:20). The same is true for us regarding any angelic messages that might come our way. Sometimes it will be to inform us of what He's up to, what He's going to do. Sometimes the message will contain instructions as to what He wants us to do. Either way, angels are God's messengers.

Angels have the responsibility of protecting God's people from harm. Do you remember the story in the book of Acts when Peter was imprisoned? Herod was preparing to execute him the next day. But that night an angel awakened him while he was sleeping. The chains that were binding him fell from his wrists. The angel told him to get dressed and then he led Peter out of the prison, the gates swinging wide open as they made their departure. Peter was so confused by what had just happened, that at first, he couldn't believe he was really free. Maybe it was just a vision that he had imagined. But standing there on the street outside of the prison, he realized that he had been the subject of an angelic rescue. He said, "Now I know without a doubt that the Lord sent His angel and rescued me from Herod's clutches and from everything that the Jewish people were anticipating" (Acts 12:11). Sometimes God's angels rescue us from harm.

Finally, angels reveal the presence and the power of God. That's what happened when the angel of the Lord revealed Himself to Moses at Mount Sinai. The angel of the Lord appeared in a bush that was on fire, but which was not consumed by the flames of that fire. Turning aside to see this unusual, angelically inspired sight, the Lord then spoke to Moses, telling him first to take off his sandals because he was standing on holy ground. Then He proceeded to tell Moses that He had a special job for him to do. After explaining why the time had come to rescue the Israelites from their slavery, the Lord said to Moses, "So now, go, I am sending you to Pharaoh to bring my people the Israelites out of Egypt" (Exodus 3:10). So sometimes God chooses angels to get our attention, to make His presence known, so that we can undertake a mission with His strength and purpose which would otherwise be impossible for us to perform.

Down through the years, I have collected a sizeable number of accounts regarding angelic visitations. One of them is a remarkable narrative in Billy Graham's book *Angels*. A missionary family was saved from hostile villagers who saw tall warriors, dressed in shining garments, guarding their home

with drawn swords on the evening of the attack. Another account was shared by an Israeli tour guide during our family's visit to the Holy Land years ago. It was reported that the Syrians had fled from their positions on the Golan Heights in northern Israel because they saw huge white tanks advancing on their positions. However, that was impossible. The Israelis didn't possess any white tanks. In fact, there were no tanks at all in that sector of the conflict.

One of the most remarkable accounts and the one with which I will close this message occurred a little closer to home. A father and mother and their two children were camping at Big Bear Lake in California. While sitting around the campfire the father read from the Bible and asked God to protect them during their camping trip. He then took a picture of the family just before five men roared up on motorcycles demanding that they hand over their valuables. But before the family could empty their pockets, the five men suddenly became agitated, hopped on their bikes and took off. The family wondered what in the world was going on until they returned home and had the pictures in their camera developed. This is what they saw.

As the Scriptures so beautifully remind us, "For God will give His angels charge over you, to keep you in all your ways. They shall bear you up in their hands, lest you dash your foot against a stone" (Psalm 91:11-12).