

ANGELS WITH SKIN
Third Sermon in an Advent Series: “Angels We Have Heard on High”
Third Sunday Advent –December 15, 2013 –Matthew 25: 31-46
The Church of the Covenant

There were angels all around that first Christmas. Last Sunday we heard of the Angel Gabriel come to announce to Mary the Mother of Jesus *“that you will conceive...and bear a son, and you will call His name Jesus.”* (Luke 1: 31) The week before that we learned of the *“heavenly host”*, an angel army standing guard over the baby Jesus and saying, *“Glory to God in the highest!”* (Luke 2: 13-14) There is the angel who appears in the field to announce to the shepherds the birth of Jesus (Luke 2: 9). There is the angel who appeared to Zechariah to announce the birth of John the Baptist, who would herald the arrival of Jesus as Messiah (Luke 1: 14-17). In the Gospel of Matthew an angel of the Lord appears to Joseph in a dream to tell him not to put away Mary his betrothed because she is pregnant by reason of the Holy Spirit and the child within her you will name Jesus, his name literally meaning salvation, because *“He will save His people from their sins.”* (Matthew 1: 21) The Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream warning him to flee with the Holy Family to Egypt for Herod is seeking *“to destroy (Jesus)”*. (Matthew 2: 13) Angels, angels, angels –everywhere around the birth of Jesus, suspended over the nighttime sky in Bethlehem.

I have a view like the early Reformers of the Protestant Reformation that we need to be precise in relation to what the Bible actually says about matters. We need to cut away “stuff” that has been added to the story that does not fit what the Bible actually says; we need to understand what culture or tradition has added that does not necessarily fit with the biblical narrative of what actually happened. In its most precise terminology the word we translate “angels” which is “angeloi” in the Greek means most simply and most properly “messengers”. In its most correct form it does not necessarily mean “heavenly beings”; it may just mean a messenger. It is used elsewhere in scripture to mean a human messenger. Our church newsletter that is called The Messenger perhaps could be called “The Angel”. An “angeloi” most properly speaking then is any being who is sent with a message to someone else to convey a message from the sender. There is a man (or woman) and there is a message and there is a moment in time when God, the message sender, sends the messenger with that message. There are human messengers just as there are human “angels”. Most properly speaking, say, a sermon is not what Stu has to say, like it is some human lecture on some human subject; no, rather a sermon is what God has first shared with me to share with you. In this way, and trust me ONLY in this way, are preachers angels of God sent by God to spread the same GOOD NEWS that the original angels shared at that very first Christmas. But its not just preachers. Its any Christian who shares the Good News of Jesus’ birth into the world with any other person. When we do that we become messengers of the love that God sent into the world that first Christmas. Beloved, the angels we see on a daily basis have skin on –and we are they! So I want us to get out of the mode of thinking that angels are only heavenly beings, that they are only robed in white, carrying harps and with large fluffy wings. The person sitting beside you today could be God’s angel, sent by God, to give you encouragement and Good News that can stamp out the Bad News in your life. Today I want to tell you that you are God’s angel that He will give a message to, in order to share with someone else God will put right in front of you, this very Christmas.

It is GOD breaking into His creation to give a spiritual message of Good News in the birth of Jesus Christ to a messenger who then passes that message on to another that I say is the very essence of the Christmas message as it is laid out in scripture. There is no Christmas without spiritually experiencing the new birth of that Christ Child into our lives and without sharing that Good News with another. You gotta literally see Jesus. You have to literally hear the angel message. Jesus has to come, the angels

have to gather and you have to receive the Good News again. You have to share that Good News as a messenger, or as an angel, or its not Christmas.

I love Christmas. I love decorating the tree and decorating my house; it always reminds me of when we did this as a family when I was growing up. But I think you can do all that “stuff” and not necessarily see Jesus or hear the angel voices. Because Christmas is not decorating a tree, its seeing Jesus and seeing the angels and hearing again from them the Good News of Jesus. You will not find a Christmas Tree mentioned in scripture but you will hear a lot about angels.

I love Christmas. I love overindulging in the consumption of delightful Christmas cookies. I hosted the session Christmas party in my home recently, but secretly only because I knew it would prompt all kinds of kind people to bring with them delightful baked goods. I never met a cookie I didn't like. But Christmas is not Christmas cookies. You will not find Christmas cookies mentioned in the Bible (although secretly I am just sure that the manna in the wilderness mentioned in the Old Testament looked a lot like Christmas cookies). No cookies but a lot of angels equals Christmas.

I love Christmas. I love giving and receiving gifts. There is something eminently satisfying in all that. The moment when the gifts are all opened and the Christmas wrapping paper scattered all about the floor. Now there is gift-giving mentioned in scripture at Christmas. But it is the wise men bringing gifts to give to the *Christ Child*. They don't sit around at the manger and give gifts to themselves; they give their gifts to Jesus. The way we do gift-giving you will not find in the celebration of Christmas as mentioned in the Bible. But there are a lot of messengers.

I am not trying to be the Grinch who stole Christmas today. I love Christmas. I say keep all those holiday and family traditions intact. Do it all. Enjoy everything. But don't try to fool yourself that you have experienced Christmas if you have not seen an angel and if Jesus has not been literally born in your heart this year. Don't just experience a HUMAN LEVEL Christmas, experience a SPIRITUAL Birth of Jesus into your heart Christmas. What the Bible says is how *spiritual* stuff happens. Not what our culture has added to Christmas over all these years. Do what the Bible says.

Our scripture from Matthew asks, “*When did we see Thee Lord?*” (Matthew 25: 37) When did heaven come down and we experience YOU, Lord, in all Your fullness? When did the angels come to us? When did we hear the message of Good News? When are you born and reborn spiritually into our heart and life? And Jesus then answers the disciples. And He is very precise in what He says and in the way He says it. It begins, by the way, by mentioning angels, angeloi, messengers –it says: “*When the Son of Man (when JESUS) comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on his glorious throne.*” (Matthew 25: 31) Then He says: “*I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you visited me.*” (Matthew 25: 35-36) Very precisely and very biblically Jesus responds that if you want to see and experience me you need to do these acts of kindness in my name. “Lord, when did we see thee (this Christmas)?” Jesus answers: WHEN YOU DO THESE THINGS I HAVE TOLD YOU TO DO. That's a biblical Christmas; that's where you're most likely to see Jesus.

You will see the Angel Tree out in the commons area. The “angeloi tree”; the messenger tree, you might call it. It is for the women and small children who are currently staying at Turning Point here in Washington. Often they have nowhere else to go. They often quite literally have an infant swaddled in their arms. They are struggling to kick the darkness of addiction. They have lived the BAD NEWS which is the gospel of this world and they are searching for the GOOD NEWS of possibility and hope promised

in the next world, promised in Jesus. Like Mary the Mother of Jesus they are judged as an unwed mother and homeless, “no room for them at the inn”, seemingly without a wing or a prayer. I heard a story this fall that I want to share with you. A young woman was sharing in a forum on addiction recovery here at the church that she had been at the Turning Point a few years back. And it was Christmas and she had quite literally no gift at Christmas for herself or for her small infant. She was unwed. She was stuck in a recovery center surrounded by people she really didn’t know. It got her down that she couldn’t even provide one gift for her baby that Christmas. And just before Christmas she was given a gift “by some church but she didn’t know which church” and opened it to discover a knit hat for her and a little knit baby comforter for her child. She said that in that moment she knew someone cared for her and loved her and she knew it was going to be OK. It was a sign unto her. GOOD NEWS. It was an ANGEL MESSAGE, if you will. Today she is a very much “together” person; she has gotten training to be a counselor and does addiction recovery counseling for others who are in the same position that she was just a few years before. In another one of our programs this fall a speaker from Turning Point said that The Church of the Covenant is the only church that helps the Turning Point ministry. So the gift that was given by our church quite literally was the Good News at Christmas that this young woman received that turned her life around. The Good News was her TURNING POINT. Debi Nicollela every year takes these gifts from the Angel Tree to Turning Point. Maybe you might want to call Debi on the phone and volunteer to help her this year? I mean, when did we see thee, Lord? Maybe we see thee when we do what you say and give gifts to those in need. Maybe Christmas this year, maybe the angels this year, maybe we will see the birth of Jesus, in the struggle of a young Mother, with baby in arms, searching with all her heart for a little Good News.

I think in order to SEE an angel we need to BE an angel. I think in order to experience the new birth of Jesus this Christmas we have to go and do what JESUS (and not our secular world) says IS Christmas. I think we need to do what the Bible says. I think we need to be ANGELS WITH SKIN ON in order to hear again the Good News for all people and in order to see the Baby Jesus come alive this Christmas.

Lord, when did we see thee this Christmas? And the King will answer them, *“Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it unto me.” (Matthew 25: 40)*

And somewhere at the Turning Point, you know right over on Main Street, you can hear a new born baby crying... and the angels are there...and there is Good News...it is Bethlehem...and Jesus is born again. And Amen.

*By: The Reverend Dr. Stuart D. Broberg, The Church of the Covenant, Washington, PA
IF THIS HAS BLESSED YOU, PLEASE PASS IT ALONG TO A FRIEND!*