

Angels Out In the Field: Christmas and the Supernatural

Luke 2:8-20

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December 11-12, 2021

Didn't you love hearing the preschoolers and kindergarteners sing this morning?

Whenever we have the little ones up here singing, I'm reminded of a Christmas program my wife and I attended many years ago. The program was for all the elementary students at what was then Temple Christian School, now known as Quad City Christian. There was a sweet little lady who taught Kindergarten there, and for the Kindergartener's part of the program, she had them all dressed in little pillowcase angel robes, with circles of garland for their halos, and each had crafted their own styrofoam meat tray harp. So they were all lined up on the stage and sweetly sang Christmas carols, playing their "harps." When they were finished, Mrs. Bauer turned around from directing them, and started sharing what a great year they were having in the Kindergarten class, etc. Unknown to her, a couple of angels in the middle of the line started elbowing each other. Before long, they were beating on each other with their harps, and the other angels were looking horrified. The audience was giggling here and there and Mrs. Bauer realized something was going on behind her.

Those little "angels" were not angels at all! I know what some of you are thinking...and no, those were not any of our boys.

Years ago, Edgewood hosted the local Moody Bible Institute, which offered evening classes on many Biblical subjects. One year, I was teaching a class on angels. That class attracted a lot of interest, and I fielded a phone call from one woman who was especially excited. She shared with me that she had seen angels often.

That gave me pause. This was a time when angels were very popular. Remember the television series, "Touched by an Angel?" The Wall Street Journal at the time carried an article that stated, "*After a hiatus of almost 300 years and much skepticism, angels are making a comeback.*" From lapel pins to Angel Cards, people couldn't seem to get enough of the celestial world. Also at the time, the Angel Collectors Club of America reported that the hands-down champion of angel collectors was a

woman from Beloit, Wisconsin. Her home was stuffed with 10,455 different angelic artifacts!

Along with all this interest in angels also comes much misunderstanding. That misunderstanding still continues. But you cannot tell the Christmas story without the angels! They are *literally* hovering over the Christmas story.

While the Christmas story is saturated with the supernatural, some of us miss the meaning because we just skim by this season on a superficial level. I want to suggest this morning that we *must* see the mysterious and miraculous elements surrounding the birth of Jesus.

In his book called, "Rumors of Another World," Philip Yancey writes, "*The Bible presents a...view of reality that encompasses both the familiar visible world and an invisible world that coexists as a kind of parallel universe*" (Page 165).

The supernatural star which led the wise men to Jesus gave way to a divine dream that warned them to go home by another route. This week, someone gave me something I got a kick out of. It reads like this: "*Three Wise Women would have...asked directions, arrived on time, helped deliver the baby, cleaned the stable, made a casserole, brought practical gifts and there would be peace on earth.*"

In addition, angelic pronouncements permeate the landscape, appearing first to Zechariah, then to Mary, Joseph, and finally to the shepherds.

2 Corinthians 4:18 challenges us to move our minds from this transitory world to the real world which we have a difficult time seeing: "***As we look not to the things that are seen, but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal.***" We live in one place but we believe in another dimension. I'm reminded of the story in 2 Kings 6 when an angry army surrounds Elisha and his servant. The servant starts to flip out so Elisha says in verse 16: "***Don't be afraid, for those who are with us are more than those who are with them.***" I picture the servant looking around and not seeing anyone but innumerable enemies. Then, Elisha prays in verse 17: "***O LORD, please open his eyes that he may see. So the LORD opened the eyes of the young man, and he saw, and behold, the mountain was full of horses and chariots***

of fire all around Elisha.” If we could pull back the curtain on the spirit world, we would see that this room is filled with intelligent, powerful beings.

My prayer is for the Lord to open our eyes so we will see what is ultimately important this morning. Angels appear in more than half of the books of the Bible, with over 300 total references. They have three primary responsibilities.

- **They magnify God.** The number one job of angels is to adore God. Nehemiah 9:6: *“You preserve all of them; and the host of heaven worships you.”* One of the most vivid pictures of praise is found in Revelation 5:11-12: *“Then I looked, and I heard around the throne and the living creatures and the elders the voice of many angels, numbering myriads of myriads, and thousands of thousands saying in a loud voice, ‘Worthy is the Lamb, who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing!’”*
- **They are messengers of God.** The word “angel,” as used in the Bible, literally means *messenger*. Their job is to do what God wants them to do. Angel messengers basically convey two types of messages. Sometimes it’s good news like announcing the birth of Christ, but other times they bring bad news. When they serve in this capacity, they are not cute little cherub dolls that look like ornaments we hang on our Christmas trees. 2 Thessalonians 1:6-7: *“Since indeed God considers it just to repay with affliction those who afflict you and to grant relief to you who are afflicted as well as to us, when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with his mighty angels.”* The Book of Revelation is full of prophecies regarding the role of avenging angels and it is anything but pretty.
- **They minister to people.** Hebrews 1:14 puts it best: *“Are they not all ministering spirits sent to serve for the sake of those who are to inherit salvation?”* Most of the time angels are not seen; they minister invisibly behind the scenes. And yet, on occasion, they break into our world, appearing for a short time to accomplish a specific purpose. The Bible mentions that when they do appear, they often look just like humans. Listen to Hebrews 13:2: *“Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for thereby some have entertained angels unawares.”* It’s quite possible to be face-to-face with an angel and not even know

it. In fact, the person you're sitting next to may be an angel. Go ahead. Take a good look. Some of you ruled that one out pretty quickly, didn't you?

Phillip Yancey refers to a concept called, "*thin places*," where the natural and supernatural worlds come together at their narrowest, with only a thin veil between them ("Rumors of Another World," Page 45). As we read the Christmas story, there are many of these *thin places*, particularly when messengers from the angelic world make an appearance into our world.

Not surprisingly, every time an angel shows up in the Advent Adventure, human beings become very afraid. They're terrified by the messenger and are left tottering by the message. When an angel appears in Scripture, a sense of fear and wonder blasts through the blasé and predictable. Actually, that's one of the functions of angels. This awe-inspiring element was built into the very worship fabric of ancient Israel. The Ark of the Covenant had two cherubim carved into it. The idea is that God is surrounded by powerful beings. Prophets like Isaiah came face-to-face with seraphim who cried out in Isaiah 6:3: "***Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory.***" With the doorposts shaking, and the temple filled with smoke, Isaiah cried out in fear, "***Woe is me!***"

My guess is that many of us are afraid about something this morning. On 65 different occasions, the Bible tells us to "***fear not.***" Let's see how these messages to Mary, Joseph and the shepherds can minister to us today. I'm grateful to Pastor Leith Anderson for his insights in this regard (www.wooddale.org).

Let's look at three different angelic encounters that intersect the Christmas story to help us see what is ultimately real.

1. Don't be afraid of God's purposes. The first messenger was one of the big guns of the Bible. His name was Gabriel and is one of only two named angels in the Bible, the other one being Michael. His first assignment that we know about came when he was called on to interpret a dream for the prophet Daniel (see Daniel 9:21). Then, Gabriel disappears from the scene for six hundred years, until he appears to a young teenage peasant girl named Mary.

As we read the familiar story let's try to imagine what Mary might have felt during this angelic encounter. Luke 1:26-38: "***In the sixth month the angel***

Gabriel was sent from God to a city of Galilee named Nazareth, to a virgin betrothed to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. And the virgin's name was Mary. And he came to her and said, 'Greetings, O favored one, the Lord is with you!' But she was greatly troubled at the saying, and tried to discern what sort of greeting this might be. And the angel said to her, 'Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. And the Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.' And Mary said to the angel, 'How will this be, since I am a virgin?' And the angel answered her, 'The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be called holy--the Son of God. And behold, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son, and this is the sixth month with her who was called barren. For nothing will be impossible with God.'"

Gabriel had the privilege of announcing the most astonishing news ever! God was going to send His Son to earth. I wonder if Gabriel questioned why God would want to accomplish His purposes through such an unlikely person. She was young in a culture that respected older people. She was poor. She lived in an isolated village. Don't you love how God chooses to use people who we might not pick?

But Mary is terrified. She's agitated at this announcement because she doesn't understand why God would want to accomplish His purposes through her. I think she was probably afraid of this mighty messenger *and* dumbfounded by his message. Gabriel must have seen the fear in her eyes and said, **"Do not be afraid."** He knew her fear could keep her from responding in faith and so his first task was to tame her trembling heart. Then, he then explained what was going to happen as best he could. Mary asked a very natural question and Gabriel responded with the mystery of how a virgin could become pregnant with the Son of God. Mary didn't understand this any more than we can explain it.

Gabriel reminds Mary of the miraculous pregnancy of Elizabeth and then makes a statement we still need to hold on to today: **"For nothing will be impossible with God."** As Mary's eyes are drawn to the power of God and away from her situation, she is able to respond with faith in verse 38: **"I am**

the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word.” Mary was ready to respond, choosing faith over her fear.

What about you? What fear is keeping you back? Because nothing is impossible with God He can do the improbable with insignificant people like you and like me.

2. Don't be afraid when everything seems to go wrong. Joseph needed some divine intervention after he found out Mary was pregnant. He knew he wasn't the father. He wanted to settle down into his carpentry business, get married, build a home, and pass on his trade to their children. But now things were falling apart and his plans were blown up. His reputation was on the line, and his fiancé let him down. What was he going to do? Because he was a righteous man, he determined to end the engagement as quietly as he could. Instead of trying to get even, he wanted to do what was right. He was dazed, probably wanted to crawl into a hole and avoid dealing with this overwhelming problem.

In the middle of his misery, Joseph gets a visit. Let's look at Matthew 1:20-24: *“But as he considered these things, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, ‘Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary as your wife, for that which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. ²¹ She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.’ ²² All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet ²³ ‘Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call his name Immanuel’ (which means, God with us). ²⁴ When Joseph woke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him: he took his wife.”*

This unnamed angel fills in some of the blanks for Joseph but first he settles Joseph's anxious heart by saying, **“Do not fear.”** Amazingly, he is being asked to raise a child that is not his. And, he's given a glimpse of the glory of this child as the angel tells him this boy will be the Savior, fulfilling the prophecy from Isaiah 7:14. Then, Joseph moves from fear to faith when we read, **“he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him: he took his wife.”**

Does your life seem out of control right now? We all have been feeling that the last 21 months, haven't we? Have some things happened which have caused you to lose sleep? Maybe your dreams have been destroyed and your

problems seem insurmountable. Does everything seem to be going wrong? Hold on to hope. Immanuel will be with you always, no matter what happens. God will work everything out for His glory and for your good. Romans 8:28 is still true: ***“And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose.”*** What God wants from us is to be obedient like Joseph was. He wants us to serve Him in the midst of the storm, to love Him even when we feel like we’ve lost everything, and to trust Him during our trials.

Joseph actually had two more encounters with angels, and like the first time, he chose faith over fear. Look at Matthew 2:13-14: ***“Now when they had departed, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, ‘Rise, take the child and his mother and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you, for Herod is about to search for the child to destroy him.’ And he rose and took the child and his mother by night and departed to Egypt.”*** Joseph had some “get up and go,” didn’t he? His response was identical some time later after another angelic encounter, in which he was told to go back to Israel because Herod had died. We see his obedience again in Matthew 2:21: ***“And he rose and took the child and his mother and went to the land of Israel.”***

Don’t be afraid when life throws you a curve. Choose faith over fear. And when God makes it clear what you’re supposed to do, and you’re sure He’s the one speaking, then ***“get up and go.”***

3. Don’t be afraid of the good news. The final exhibit of angelic intervention takes place when God rocks the routine of some guys who are just out doing their job. Luke 2:8-20: ***“And in the same region there were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. And an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were filled with great fear.”*** In the midst of the mundane, an angel of the Lord suddenly appeared. Into the darkness of a silent night came the brightness of the glory of the Lord. I’m sure they were rubbing their eyes and shaking in their sandals. In fact, the phrase “filled with great fear” means that they were alarmed and agitated.

“And the angel said to them, ‘Fear not.’” Once again, an angel has to tell humans to chill out. The reason they did not need to be afraid is because the messenger was bringing ***“good news of great joy that will be for all the people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is***

Christ the Lord. And this will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger.” As the shepherds are trying to handle the message from this one messenger, they are taken aback again. ***“And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God...”*** The word “suddenly” means that the heavenly host came unexpectedly. I imagine the sky filled with a multitude of messengers. The phrase “heavenly host” refers to the Lord’s army in other passages of Scripture. By the way, while angels do sing in other instances, this time they say, ***“Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased.”***

After witnessing this incredible display of unbridled adoration and praise, the shepherds knew they had to move. ***“When the angels went away from them into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, ‘Let us go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has made known to us.’”*** They discussed what they should do and were unanimous in their decision to head to Bethlehem. I love verse 16 because it shows their fear had been replaced with faith and then their faith went to their feet: ***“And they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby lying in a manger.”*** There was no delay. The word “haste” carries with it the idea of speed.

Then the shepherds became messengers of the message they had received from the angel. ***“And when they saw it, they made known the saying that had been told them concerning this child. And all who heard it wondered at what the shepherds told them. But Mary treasured up all these things, pondering them in her heart.”*** With hearts filled with gratitude, these men broke out into praise: ***“And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.”***

God may be trying to break into your ordinary routine with the message of good news. He loves you and has sent His Son to be your Savior. How long will you continue to ignore Immanuel? When will you hurry to the Holy One? He wants to bring you joy in the midst of all the junk going on in your life. Will you receive what He has done for you? Will you put feet to your faith?

There are angels everywhere and I believe they are still doing God’s work today. But whether we see or hear an angel today doesn’t really matter. What matters most is we get God’s message and respond in faith. Since it’s

important to understand the role of angels in the Bible, let me briefly mention three things good angels never do:

- **Angels Never Take the Place of the Bible.** When they give messages from God, angels never supersede Scripture or contradict the Bible. Angels had a part in delivering sections of the Bible; therefore they would never say anything against it. Deuteronomy 33:2 tells us that myriads of holy messengers came down on Mount Sinai when God gave the Law to Moses and the entire book of Revelation is most likely the result of angelic messages. Revelation 1:1: “...***He made it known by sending his angel to his servant John.***” Then, in the last chapter of Revelation, a curse is pronounced on anyone who adds or takes away from the words of the book (Revelation 22:18-19). Don’t look to angels, or anything else for that matter, to provide you with new messages from God. Everything God wants you to know is found in this book!
- **Angels Never Take the Place of God the Father.** God’s good angels refuse to be worshipped. In Revelation 22:8-9, the Apostle John is overcome by all that he has heard and seen: “***I fell down to worship at the feet of the angel...But he said to me, ‘You must not do that! I am a fellow servant with you and with your brothers the prophets, and with those who keep the words of this book. Worship God!’***” Good angels never draw attention to themselves. They can get our attention, but they always do it for God’s sake, not their own. When Biblical angels discharge their duty and deliver their tidings, they withdraw from human contact. They don’t stay long because they don’t want us to focus on them; they want us to worship God. One other thought in this regard: angels are not to be prayed to. They may help deliver answers to prayer, but the Bible never suggests we should direct our requests to them.
- **Angels Never Take the Place of Jesus.** Angels are not the go-between for us. 1 Timothy 2:5: “***For there is one God, and there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus.***” In the whole scheme of things, Jesus is center stage; angels are just the supporting cast. Like fans of a famous actor, 1 Peter 1:12 says “***things into which angels long to look***” that Jesus has accomplished. The picture here is of angels bending over, trying to peer into the truth of

salvation through Jesus. They're intrigued by the whole idea of redemption.

Christmas cannot be explained apart from the thin places. Ray Pritchard puts it strongly: *"If you take the supernatural out of Christianity, all you have is a religious book club."* Let me summarize what we've learned today.

1. Don't be afraid of God's purposes. When Mary got the news about God's purpose for her life she said in Luke 1:38: ***"I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word."*** Are you ready to surrender to God's purposes right now?

2. Don't be afraid when everything seems to go wrong. Joseph's world was being wiped out and yet he chose to hold on to what was true and to do what God was asking him to do. Matthew 1:24: ***"He did as the angel of the Lord commanded him."*** Matthew 2:14: ***"And he rose..."*** Matthew 2:21: ***"And he rose..."*** What are you going to do? Are you going to stew? Or are you going to get up and do what is right?

3. Don't be afraid of the good news. God is giving you a gift this Christmas and He wants you to respond by receiving it. The shepherds could have ignored the good news but they were so moved by the majesty of the glory of God that they had to move. Did you know angels like to party? I used to think of them as boring and a bit predictable. They certainly don't seem very spontaneous or very fun. Don't they strike you as a serious bunch? After all, if their job is to magnify God, serve as His messengers and minister to people, how could they have time to do anything else? Luke 15:10 describes how this all comes together: ***"...I tell you, there is joy before the angels of God over one sinner who repents."*** Whenever an individual repents of sin and receives Jesus into his life, the angels break out into a wild party! They magnify God and minister to us in far greater ways once we respond to the message of good news of great joy.

What about you? The angels are cheering you on this morning. They want you to surrender your life to Christ's leadership. All the plans are set for a big celebration. They're just waiting for you to respond to the invitation. Angels are watching every move you make. They know the spiritual condition of your soul. And they are anxious for you to repent and to receive Christ for salvation before it's too late. You see, they know what lies ahead for all of us. They understand the joy and rewards that await those who put

their faith in Christ; and they know the harsh reality of hell for those who choose not to receive Christ.

Do you want a party thrown in your honor in heaven? Do you want the angels to rejoice? Then, engage your will and receive the free gift of Jesus. Then, not only will know more about the “Angels Out in the Field,” you will have Jesus in you, Immanuel who will always be with you.

Closing Prayer

J. B. Phillips wrote a wonderful story called, “*The Visited Planet*” to help us shed the limitations of earthbound thinking and to allow the supernatural to break over us afresh (see www.ccel.org).

Once upon a time a very young angel was being shown the splendors and glories of the universes by a senior and experienced angel...Finally he was shown...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.

“I want you to watch that one particularly,” said the senior angel, pointing with his finger. “Well, it looks very small and rather dirty to me,” said the little angel. “What’s special about that one?” “That,” replied his senior solemnly, “is the Visited Planet.” “Visited?” said the little one. “You don’t mean visited by -----? “Indeed I do. That ball, which I have no doubt looks to you small and insignificant...has been visited by our young Prince of Glory.” And at these words he bowed his head reverently. The little angel’s face wrinkled in disgust. “Do you mean to tell me,” he said, “that He stooped so low as to become one of those creeping, crawling creatures of that floating ball?” “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.”

The little angel looked blank. Such a thought was almost beyond his comprehension. “Close your eyes for a moment,” said the senior angel, “and we will go back in what they call Time.” “Now look!” 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. “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...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."

"Why are they so blind and deaf and stupid?" asked the junior angel rather crossly. "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."

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. "I think I can guess," said the little angel in a low voice. "That was the Visit, wasn't it?" "Yes, that was the Visit. The Light Himself went down there and lived among them; but in a moment...the light will go out." "But why? Could He not bear their darkness and stupidity? Did He have to return here?" "No, it wasn't that," returned the senior angel. His voice was stern and sad. "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."

"The fools, the crazy fools! They don't deserve ----" "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...Watch now, but be ready to cover your eyes again." In utter blackness the earth turned round three times, and then there blazed with unbearable radiance a point of light. "What now?" asked the little angel, shielding his eyes. "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."

"Thank God for that," said the little 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." As they looked, in place of the dazzling light there was a bright glow, which throbbed and pulsated. And then as the Earth turned, 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.

“You see what is happening?” asked the senior angel. “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.” “Yes, yes,” said the little angel impatiently, “but how does it end? Will the little lights join up with each other? Will it all be light, as it is in Heaven?” His senior shook his head. “We simply do not know,” he replied. “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.”

Closing Song: “Light a Candle”