

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

(December 20, 2020)

Dave Smith

Sermon manuscript

Hope-Filled Messages from Angels

(Matthew 1, 2; Luke 1, 2)

Study #2

Sermon series: Traveling the Road to Faith

Introduction: Angels all around...

There's hope. And then there's **HOPE**.

I hope that in the coming years there will be a return of the winning ways of the San Antonio Spurs, like it the good ol' Tim Duncan days.

I hope for a cold Christmas with snow and great food next Friday, success in a couple of fitness goals for 2021, and the chance to go camping.

But...

I **HOPE** for the things that I believe will help me thrive.

I **HOPE** to be involved in something of transcendent importance.

I **HOPE** to make a difference in the lives of people I love for Jesus.

Some hopes are trivial, and some aren't.

During the season surrounding the birth of Jesus, angels were busy breathing non-trivial hope deep into the souls of people who were in desperate need of the hope only God can give.

If there was ever a season when angels were active, it was in that time surrounding Jesus' birth.

This morning, we'll consider angelic appearances to three people in those months that satisfied hope. Now, of course, angels appeared on more than three occasions in and around that season.

There is the story we saw last Sunday of the shepherds who saw Jesus lying in a manger in Bethlehem's stables.

That story includes the amazing appearance of an angel with "**good news of a great joy which will be for all the people**" and of an angel choir singing praise to God. (Luke 2:8-20)

After Jesus' birth, wise men (*magi*) who had come to Judea to worship the new-born king of the Jews were warned by God - I assume through angels - to not return to their homeland by way of Jerusalem, but to avoid Herod. (Matthew 2:12)

Then, an angel warned Joseph, Jesus' earthly stepfather, to take Jesus and Mary to Egypt to escape Herod's attempt to kill Him. (Mt. 2:13)

And some years later, Joseph was told by an angel to bring Jesus and Mary back to Israel, but to not go to Bethlehem, since Herod's successor, Archelaus, was also a threat to Jesus. (Mt. 2:22)

During the Advent season, we rightfully give attention to angels. And when we do, we usually associate angels with hope.

The three appearances we'll look at this morning are all about hope, and all in their own, unique ways.

The Angel (Gabriel) Appears to Zacharias (Luke 1:5-25)

Herod, Nothing More Than a Bookmark (v. 5a)

We'll take the appearances chronologically, which means that we'll begin with the first story recorded in Luke's Gospel.

Like any good storyteller, Luke gives us the historical context of the events he is about to describe. It's not, "*Once upon a time...*" but **[1:5a] In the days of Herod, king of Judea...**

This is Herod the Great, the granddaddy of all the other Herods we read about in the New Testament.

This Herod was an embarrassment to the Jews. He was a violent, immoral, unjust monster whose family life was a joke and whose personal life was a wreck.¹

He was the king of Judea. But, in the big story of history, Herod isn't such a big deal.² He is just a bookmark to help us place the events and people who are important in what is the big story.

Among the really important people is a mature / elderly couple who loved the Lord: the priest Zacharias and his wife, Elizabeth.³

Empty Arms (vv. 5-7)

[5] In the days of Herod, king of Judea, there was a priest named Zacharias, of the division of Abijah; and he had a wife from the daughters of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth.

Elizabeth and Zacharias were righteous in God's sight, faithful servants of the Lord. But they were chronically sad.

[7] But they had no child, because Elizabeth was barren, and they were both advanced in years.⁴

Zacharias and Elizabeth loved the Lord and each other. But they had always wanted children, and they don't have any children.

¹ A proverb of those days was, "Better to be Herod's pig than his son." He put two of his sons to death for fear that they were trying to usurp his throne.

² After this one reference, Luke never mentioned Herod the Great again. Matthew mentions him only as the mad king who killed the babies around Bethlehem.

³ Note that Elizabeth, like Zacharias, was of priestly descent.

⁴ Just how elderly were they? For years I envisioned Zacharias being what we would call today a "senior citizen", well into his sixties, maybe his seventies or beyond. But Luke tells us that Zacharias was an active priest. And Moses wrote that a man could work as an active priest ONLY until he was fifty, at which time he had to retire, due to the difficulty of the work. This means that Zacharias, this OLD MAN, "advanced in years," was in his FORTIES. I find that depressing...

Luke covers their barrenness in one phrase, but you could write a book about that one phrase. Some of you know exactly how they felt, because you have walked - or are walking - in their shoes.

Actually, all of us can put ourselves in their shoes, because, to some degree and in some way, we all deal with disappointment.

We all know what it is to not have that one thing in life that we believe we need for L-I-F-E!

Zacharias was a priest, and the story begins while he is performing his priestly duties in Jerusalem's temple.⁵

Good News! (1:8-17)

Zacharias, in his priestly role... (vv. 8-10)

He was offering the normal, daily sacrifice, and ***[10] the whole multitude of the people were in prayer outside...***

This was what people customarily did. They would gather outside the temple to pray that God would accept the priest's sacrifice AND that God would protect the priest from harm while he was in The Presence.

But priests offered sacrifices several times every day and nothing ever happened. Except on THIS day. Something happened on THIS day.

"Zacharias, meet Gabriel!" (vv. 11-12)

[11] And an angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing to the right of the altar of incense. [12] Zacharias was troubled when he saw the angel.,

⁵ In those days, there were more priests than priestly duties. So, the priests would "cast lots" (like drawing straws) to see who would offer sacrifice. On this day, it was Zacharias' "turn" to offer the daily burning of incense.

This was no vision or dream. Just as *really* as you and I appear to each other right now, an angel *really* showed up in the temple and appeared to Zacharias, located ***“to the right of the altar of incense.”***

We’re told ***“fear gripped him.”*** That response - fear - is a common response to the appearance of an angel throughout the Bible.

The patriarch, Abraham, and the false prophet Balaam, and the true prophet, Isaiah, all feel down in fear when angels appeared to them.

Angels are glorious beings of a different order than we are, so we’re not surprised that Zacharias was frightened when the angel showed up. The first words out of the angel’s mouth were spoken to reassure:

[13] “Do not be afraid, Zacharias!”

Then, the angel gave the Good News message he had been sent by God to bring.

Gabriel has GOOD NEWS for Zacharias! (vv. 13-17)

[13]...“your petition has been heard, and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you will give him the name John.”⁶ [14] You will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth.”

Nothing about the angel’s message was unclear. No big words. It was unambiguous and uncomplicated.

Zacharias tried to take it all in.

He has prayed for years (maybe decades?) for a child. He and Elizabeth have hoped past the point where hoping made sense.

⁶ The nation of Israel was sometimes called God’s “Dove” - a term of endearment. The word we translate “dove” is the Hebrew word “Jonah.” Thus, Jonah, the man, was given a ministry of reaching out to the nations (i.e. - Nineveh) with God’s call to repentance. Given that *John* was the Greek equivalent to the Hebrew *Jonah*, Zacharias understood that his son’s career would involve calling Israel to repent.

And while serving God in the temple, an angel has now appeared out of nowhere and promised him that his prayers had been answered. He and Elizabeth are going to have a baby.

The angel has even filled in the blanks of his son’s story. He’s going to be all about God from the start.

“John” will be filled with the Holy Spirit from the womb, will turn hearts back to God, and will prepare Israel for the coming of the long-awaited Messiah. (vv. 14-17)

With all of that in mind, listen to what Zacharias has to say.

Disbelief Leads to Discipline (1:18-23)

Zacharias QUESTIONS Gabriel! (v. 18)

[18] Zacharias said to the angel, “How will I know this for certain? For I am an old man, and my wife is advanced in years.”

How does that question strike you? Considering all the facts that Zacharias KNEW, his question makes us...a bit uncomfortable.

- He KNEW what was true about his life - that he and Elizabeth had been childless for a long time, that Elizabeth was past the normal age of child-bearing,⁷ and that he himself was an old man.
- He also KNEW from Israel’s history that babies could be born to parents considered too old to have them. (think Abraham and Sarah)
- And he KNEW that his senses weren’t lying to him.

But what he KNEW didn’t drive out his FEAR. His was the fear of news that was too good to be true.

He couldn’t / wouldn’t believe that God would be this good and kind to him. That fear prompted that question.⁸

⁷ It is not clear that she was post-menopausal. It is clear that she was past the age at which women normally bore children.

This promise was like winning the Lottery AND getting a negative COVID-19 test on the same day. Too good to be true.

So, he asked a question. Rather, he questioned the angel. *“I heard what you said, but how can I know ‘FER SURE’ that what you have told me will actually happen?”*

The angel was not amused

Gabriel DISCIPLINES Zacharias! (vv. 19-20)

[19] The angel answered and said to him, “I am Gabriel⁸, who stands in the presence of God; and I have been sent to speak to you and to bring you this good news. [20] And behold, you shall be silent and unable to speak until the day when these things take place, because you did not believe my words, which will be fulfilled in their proper time.”

Not surprisingly, Gabriel took offense at Zacharias’ lack of faith. He was offended that he hadn’t believed God’s message.

He took action, and the action Gabriel took says something about the authority of angels. Unilaterally, and without asking permission to do so, he pronounced discipline against Zacharias.¹⁰

Now the people waiting outside the temple were getting nervous, because Zacharias was taking far longer than was normally required to finish a sacrifice.

Something was up and they may have thought that he had been struck dead, something that was always a possibility when the priest was serving in the temple.¹¹

Thankfully, Zacharias had just been struck dumb, not dead. And even that loss of speech was only temporary.

The new father regained the ability to speak shortly after the baby’s birth, nine months after this experience in the temple.

He named his son, *John*, just like the angel told him to, and the boy grew up to be the man we know as John the Baptist.

That is our first angel snapshot of the day. From it, we learn...

- ...that angels are glorious, and they prompt fear in those they meet.
- ...that angels have authority to act unilaterally.
- ...that angels deliver the always true message of God.

Add to all that something else that this angel brought to this couple. He brought a message that fulfilled their hope.

The Bible is a book that describes what happened.

It tells us of some of the terrible things that people have done, awful things that have happened to people, and powerful, wonderful, loving things that God has done.

The Bible is not a book that predicts what will happen every time.

So, we don’t look at the story of God’s gift of a child to Zacharias and Elizabeth and conclude that since He did this for them, He will certainly give us a child, too. That doesn’t follow.

But this episode does invite us to relish the beauty of what God did here.

⁸ Of course, you would have immediately believed the angel, had he appeared to you while you were ministering in the temple. And I would have, too. (*Yeah, right...*)

⁹ His name means, *“God is great!”*

¹⁰ Note that angels have the authority to act with a great amount of personal discretion in their dealings with people.

¹¹ The book of Exodus tells us that the High Priest’s robe had bells tied to the bottom of his robe, so that the people could hear the sound of him moving around in the Holy of Holies as he was offering sacrifice. If they didn’t hear the sound of the bells, they would know that he had been struck dead, and that the Lord had been displeased with the sacrifice.

A faithful, elderly couple, having longed for children throughout their married life, having experienced decades of disappointment, are graced by God with a child, a child who will grow to be a man greatly used by God.

Was there anything MORE gracious that God could have done for them than this. So, how sweet is that?

In response to the story of Zacharias and Elizabeth, I would urge that we all relish and revel in God's goodness and kindness.

So often, we wrestle with the thorny question, "*Why do bad things happen to good people?*" Equally thorny is the question, "*Why do good things happen to people like me?*"

Easy. It's because of the goodness and the kindness of God. And we have each experienced it.

- The wreck that didn't happen.
- The consequence that didn't fall.
- The discipline that taught us something.
- The windfall that made the difference.
- The kindness of a stranger.

Listen to the story of Zacharias and Elizabeth and John the Baptist and let gratitude to God grow strong in your heart today. And rejoice that God used an angel to bring that message.

That's the first event. Next comes snapshot number two.

Some six months after his visit to Zacharias, Gabriel was commissioned by God to make another "*Coming Attraction*" announcement.

Like the message given to Zacharias, this message was given to someone who had never been a parent.

This time, though, Gabriel didn't go to an elderly couple in the hill country of Judea, but to a young woman who lived in Nazareth, a city of Galilee.

The Angel (Gabriel) Appears to Mary (Luke 1:26-38)

Gabriel's Stunning Greeting; Mary Ponders... (vv. 26-29)

[26] Now in the sixth month¹² the angel Gabriel was sent from God to a city in Galilee called Nazareth, [27] to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the descendants of David; and the virgin's name was Mary. [28] And coming in, he said to her, "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you." [29] But she was very perplexed at this statement, and kept pondering what kind of salutation this was.

By referring to Mary as a virgin, Gabriel meant to say what we mean when we use the word "virgin" today. Mary had never been intimate with a man.¹³

She was engaged to a man named Joseph, but they weren't married and hadn't consummated their relationship.

Mary was "**perplexed**" by the angel's greeting. So, Gabriel spoke to her just as he had spoken to Zacharias.

Gabriel's Shocking Announcement; Mary is Confused... (vv. 30-34)

A clear message (vv. 30-33)

[30] The angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary; for you have found favor with God. [31] "And behold, you will conceive in

¹² This would be the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy.

¹³ You can look in bookstores and online, and you won't find many recent books that argue that the Bible teaches the virgin birth of Jesus. That's because J Gresham Machen's book - [The Virgin Birth of Christ](#) (1930) - ended the argument. His book showed that there is no way to read the Bible honestly and to deny that it teaches that Jesus was born to a virgin mother. He also found evidence of a credible story. For instance, after studying the Gospels and mythological stories about virgins giving birth, he concluded that there are worlds of differences between the two. The account of the Gospels is original, fresh, and has all the marks of genuineness. He explores the passages in Matthew and Luke in great detail and argues convincingly that they mean what they appear to mean - Mary was a virgin when Jesus was conceived and when He was born.

your womb and bear a son, and you shall name Him Jesus (in the Hebrew language, “Jesus” is “Yeshua”. It means *savior*.)”

Gabriel goes on to further describe the future career of Mary’s Baby.

[32] “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; [33] and He will reign over the house of Jacob forever; and His kingdom will have no end.”

Any mother-to-be would be thrilled to hear this kind of news about her yet-to-be-born child. But we see a question mark forming in Mary’s mind.

It sounded as if the angel was speaking about an imminent conception. And Mary wasn’t a soon-to-be mother-to-be. She knew enough biology to know how the process worked, and she knew that she wasn’t on the verge of conceiving.

You and I want to warn her: “*Careful, Mary!*” Zacharias’s experience tells us that it can be dangerous to question Gabriel.

But Mary is not going to question Gabriel. Mary’s got a question.

Zacharias blew it by asking an “*If*” question. Mary expressed her confusion and asked a “*How*” question. It was a good question.

A confused young lady! (v. 34)

[34] Mary said to the angel, “How can this be, since I am a virgin?”

Here’s Gabriel’s patient answer to Mary’s honest, “*How?*”

Gabriel’s Patient Explanation; Mary Accepts... (vv. 35-38)

A clarifying word (vv. 35-37)

[35] The angel answered and said to her, “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; and for that reason the holy Child shall be called the Son of God. [36] And behold, even your relative Elizabeth has also conceived a son in her old age; and she who was called barren is now in her sixth month. [37] For nothing will be impossible with God.”

That explanation erased her question. Mary accepted - even if she couldn’t have completely understood - the news of the virgin birth.

The virgin birth is a mystery on so many levels.¹⁴ We can only imagine the thoughts swirling around in Mary’s mind:

“OK. The Child I will bear will be conceived other than how my mother told me it would happen. What she had explained about the birds and the bees won’t apply. Without sexual experience, I will become pregnant by the agency of the Almighty.”

Those may have been some of Mary’s thoughts as she processed the angel’s message. We don’t really know. What we do know are her words. And Mary’s words are words of faith. This right here is as good as it gets.

A receptive heart (v. 38)

[38] “Behold, the bondservant of the Lord; may it be done to me according to your word.”

For twenty centuries Mary has been honored as a model of faith because of these words. I believe that the most liberating and God-honoring words to come out of any person’s mouth are these:

¹⁴ This is how Charles Wesley put it in today’s song:

*Christ by highest heav’n adored
Christ the everlasting Lord!
Late in time behold Him come
Offspring of a Virgin’s womb
Veiled in flesh the Godhead see
Hail the incarnate Deity
Pleased as man with man to dwell
Jesus, our Emmanuel!*

“Behold the bondservant of the Lord; may it be done to me according to your word.”

That is a great place to be. So, how did Mary get there?

She seems to have instantly accepted that her life was now going in an entirely different direction from what she had planned. In one angelic encounter, her world veered on to another course.

She now sees *trouble* ahead with Joseph, *problems* with her family and with her Nazareth neighbors, and *challenges* with the religious leaders.

But she heard the angel and recognized the enormity of the message. Her Son will be great, the Son of the Most High, the Son of God, possessor of David’s throne, eternal king over the house of Jacob.

This Child represents the hope of all mankind for all time. Mary embraced the role she was assigned in bringing Him from her womb.

She gladly submitted to the disruption in front of her for the sake of the world’s hope.

Friends, I think you and I can learn something from Mary.

She participated in the work of bringing of Jesus into the world. And that work was, for her, hugely disruptive on every level. But, seeing what was at stake, she counted it as completely worth it. She welcomed it.

Today, you and I are invited to participate in God’s work of bringing Jesus into our world.

And, by our witness, we may find our lives disrupted. But, by our witness, our friends and loved ones may find life in Jesus.

He is their hope and it is our fondest hope that we might be the channel through which they hear about Him. And, yes, that would be completely worth any disruption!

That’s snapshot number two of an angel bringing hope. Now we come to the last picture. It’s a picture of Joseph.

Matthew gives us the best account of Joseph’s story, starting with must have been heartache for Joseph.

An Angel Appears to Joseph (Matthew 1:18-25)

Joseph’s Heartache (v. 18)

[Matthew 1:18] Now the birth of Jesus Christ was as follows: when His mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, before they came together she was found to be with child by the Holy Spirit.¹⁵

Like Mary, Joseph understood biology well enough to know that if he wasn’t the Baby’s father - and he certainly wasn’t - somebody else was.

He would have been as heartbroken over this news as any man. Heartbroken and angry over his fiancée’s unfaithfulness.

When Joseph learned of Mary’s pregnancy, he wasn’t buying the “*virgin birth*” story. But he was determined to not act vindictively.

Joseph’s Dilemma (v. 19)

[Matthew 1:19] And Joseph her husband, being a righteous man and not wanting to disgrace her, planned to send her away secretly.

¹⁵ I won’t engage in heavy lifting when it comes to biological matters. (As some of you know, I’m not very biological.) But I understand where babies come from. A husband and a wife come together. An egg and sperm unite. That’s conception, and it defines the formation of a human being. The process moves along, according to plan, until a baby emerges from a mother’s womb. In Jesus’ case, the process moved along nicely, too. But it began without a father providing sperm. The Bible never implies that God had sexual relations with Mary. It says that the “***the power of the Most High would overshadow [her].***” So, there is great mystery here. What, exactly, joined with Mary’s egg? And how did that happen? All we know is that the agent of conception was not human and that it was God.

The tight-knit, Law of Moses-centered village of Nazareth would likely have been unwelcoming to an engaged, but pregnant, Mary. Nazareth would have been just as unfriendly to Joseph.¹⁶

He couldn't continue with Plan A. Marriage was out of the question.

Being a righteous man - and, I suspect, a man who loved Mary - he planned to end the engagement as privately as possible. He wouldn't wreck Mary's life any more than was necessary.

Before he had the chance to carry out Plan B, though, God commissioned an angel to deliver a message of hope that would drive him back to Plan A.

Joseph's Dream (vv. 20-23)

[Matthew 1:20] But when he had considered this, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife; for the Child who has been conceived in her is of 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] Now all this took place to fulfill what was spoken by the Lord through the prophet: [23] "BEHOLD, THE VIRGIN SHALL BE WITH CHILD AND SHALL BEAR A SON, AND THEY SHALL CALL HIS NAME IMMANUEL," which translated means, "GOD WITH US."

Joseph had lost hope in his beloved's faithfulness. This message restored that hope. And that's beautiful.

But Joseph had also lost hope that his life would make sense.

Previously, he had seen decades ahead of him, raising a family with Mary, providing for his family through his work, being a husband and a father who led his family in the ways of God.

Mary's pregnancy had wrecked that hope. What does his life look like now?

The angel's message restored hope that he had an even greater role to play in God's plan than he had before. He would be stepfather to Messiah. He would raise Immanuel.

This message speaks directly to the heart of a man who was asking, hopefully, "*God, do You still have a plan for me? Do I have a part to play in Your work? Can You use me?*"

And having received this message as an answer, Joseph instantly took action.

Joseph's Resolve (vv. 24-25)

[24] And Joseph awoke from his sleep and did as the angel of the Lord commanded him, and took Mary as his wife, [25] but kept her a virgin until she gave birth to a Son; and he called His name Jesus.

For as long as Jesus lived under Joseph's roof, He was under Joseph's authority. Jesus learned craftsmanship and submission from this man who had been given a place in God's great plan.

Conclusion:

When God wanted to let Zacharias know that he and Elizabeth would be the proud parents of John the Baptist, He *kindly* sent an angel to let him know about the fulfillment of their fondest hope.

When God wanted to communicate His *disruptive* plan to the young woman who would bear His Son, He used an angel to deliver that hope-for-all-mankind message.

¹⁶ It is not likely that family and neighbors would have believed either the couple's reports about angelic appearances or their claim that Mary was still a virgin. Their formerly upstanding reputations in the community were destroyed by the disrupting news of Mary's pregnancy.

And when He wanted to give a *life-giving* and *redemptive* message of hope to a godly younger man that he, too, would get to play a part in Jesus' story, He again sent an angel.