

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

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Sermon manuscript

Merry Christmas!

Hark, the Herald Angels Sing

(Luke 1, 2)

Study #2

Introduction: Angels all around...

Have you noticed that there are angels all around? They are probably more “all around” us than we think they are. But they are certainly all around in popular culture.

There is, of course, the lovable Clarence in the classic movie, “It’s a Wonderful Life,” but there are lots of others in movies and on tv.

The current “angel emphasis” seems to be tilted toward the dark side with more attention given to bad than to good angels. But clearly, angels are on our minds - and with good reason. According to the Bible, angels are real, and they are active in our world.

Angels show up in quite a few Bible stories. They saved the prophet Daniel’s life by shutting the mouths of lions. And an angel opened the doors of a prison for the Apostle Peter.

Jesus said that there is rejoicing among the angels in heaven over one sinner who repents. (Luke 15) And the author of the letter to the Hebrews (1:14) tells us that angels are ministering spirits, sent to give help to Jesus’ followers.

Of course, much of what we hear and read about angels today is thoroughly unbiblical and untrue. But what we’re going to read today about angels comes straight from Scripture and is perfectly reliable.

The template we’re following this Christmas season is to use a Christmas carol as the launch pad for our exploration of a biblical Christmas theme.

The theme for today is angels, and the hymn of choice today is “Hark, the Herald Angels Sing.”

An all-star cast put the song in its present form.

In 1739, the great hymn-writer, Charles Wesley, wrote the words. His friend, George Whitefield, edited them.

Then, the somber music to which Wesley fit the original words was adapted to the festive tune we sing today by Felix Mendelssohn.¹

The song is both a musical gem and a theological masterpiece.

It describes Jesus’ entrance into the world He created, the inhospitable welcome He received, and the outsized role angels played in announcing His arrival.

And as for our theme, out of all human history, the months and days surrounding the birth of Jesus is the season of the greatest public activity of angels I can think of.

And so, out of several angelic appearances we could choose to highlight, today we’re exploring three major appearances of angels in the birth narratives of Jesus.

We’ll take the appearances as they occur, which means that we’ll begin with the first story we find in Luke’s Gospel. The focus is on a “mature” couple - the priest, Zechariah, and his wife, Elizabeth.

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

Herod, Nothing More Than a Bookmark (v. 1a)

¹ The song can just as easily be sung to the tune to which we sing, “*Christ the Lord is Ris’n Today.*”

Like any good story-teller, Luke gives us the historical context. And he doesn't frame it as, "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. Herod was a violent, immoral man whose family life was a joke and whose personal life was a wreck.²

He was a monster. But in the big picture of both secular and biblical history, Herod's really not that big of a deal.³

He is just an historical placeholder to help us orient to the really important events and people in the Big Story.

First to be listed among the story's VIP is a married couple who loved the Lord.

The Barrenness of Elizabeth (vv. 5-7)

[5] In the days of Herod, king of Judea, there was a priest named Zachariah, of the division of Abijah; and he had a wife from the daughters of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth. [6] They were both righteous in the sight of God, walking blamelessly in all the commandments and requirements of the Lord. [7] And yet they had no child, because Elizabeth was infertile, and they were both advanced in years.⁴

² A proverb of those days (used by Caesar himself) was that it was "better to be Herod's pig than his son," Herod had two of his sons - and his wife - put to death for fear that they were trying to usurp his throne.

³ After this one reference, this Herod is never mentioned again in Luke's gospel. He is mentioned in Matthew's gospel but only as the madman who killed baby boys in and around Bethlehem to do away with any potential threat to his throne.

⁴ How "advanced in years" were they? I had envisioned Zechariah being what we would call "elderly" today until I remembered that Zechariah still served as an active priest to God. Moses wrote that a man could work as an active priest ONLY until he was fifty, at which time he had to retire, presumably because the work was too strenuous. (Numbers 8:24-26) This means that Zechariah, this "advanced in years" man was in his FORTIES.

Zechariah and Elizabeth had served the Lord all their lives. They loved the Lord, and they loved each other. But while they had always prayed to have children - and were still praying for children! - they didn't have any children.

Luke covers their barrenness in one phrase. But you could write a book about that phrase. They were living with an unfulfilled, deep longing.

That is not uncommon. Most of us here live with an unfulfilled longing or dream of some sort. So even if we haven't experienced what Zechariah and Elizabeth did, we have a taste of what they endured.

We pick up the action as Zechariah was performing his priestly duties in Jerusalem's temple.⁵

Zechariah Hears GOOD NEWS from Gabriel! (1:8-17)

GODLY Zechariah serves as a priest (vv. 8-10)

He was inside the temple's Holy Place (NOT the Most Holy Place), presenting the normal, daily incense offering. Luke tells us that **[10] the whole multitude of the people were in prayer outside...**

It was the custom that a crowd would gather outside the temple to pray that God would accept the priest's offering AND that God would protect the priest from harm while he was in The Presence.

But priests offered sacrifices every day. Nothing ever happened while the priest was serving. Well, something sure did happen on THIS day.

FEARFUL Zechariah meets Gabriel (vv. 11-12)

⁵ In those days, there were more priests than priestly duties. So, the priests would draw straws (that is essentially what "casting lots" was) and rotate duties among them. On this day, it was Zechariah's turn to offer the daily burning of incense.

[11] Now an angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing to the right of the altar of incense. [12] Zechariah was troubled when he saw the angel, and fear gripped him.

This was not a vision or dream. Just as *really* as you and I are together right now, an angel *really* showed up in the temple while Zechariah was there. And fear gripped him like a vice.

It is fascinating that throughout the Bible, FEAR is the typical response of people who come in contact with angels.

ABRAHAM (Genesis 18:2) bowed low in reverence before the Angel of the Lord.

BALAAM (Numbers 22:31), the false prophet, bowed in reverence when he saw an angel.

ISAIAH (Isaiah 6), the prophet, fell on his face in the presence of angels.

Angels are glorious beings of a different order than we are. As others had been, Zechariah was afraid in the presence of God's angel.

So, the first words out of the angel's mouth were, **[13] "Do not be afraid, Zechariah!"**

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

PRAYERFUL Gabriel hears GOOD NEWS from Gabriel (vv. 13-17)

[13]...“your prayer has been heard, and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you shall name him John.⁶ [14] You will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice over his birth.

[15] For he will be great in the sight of the Lord; and he will drink no wine or liquor, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit

⁶ In the Old Testament, the nation of Israel was frequently referred to as God's *Dove*, a term of endearment. The word we translate *dove* is the Hebrew word, *Jonah*. The prophet Jonah's ministry to Nineveh was a call to Israel to repent of her refusal to reach out to the surrounding nations. (See Genesis 12) Since *John* was the Greek equivalent to the Hebrew *Jonah*, Zechariah would have understood that his son would be calling Israel to repent.

while still in his mother's womb. [16] And he will turn many of the sons of Israel back to the Lord their God. [17] It is he who will go as a forerunner before Him in the spirit and power of Elijah, TO TURN THE HEARTS OF FATHERS BACK TO THEIR CHILDREN⁷, and the disobedient to the attitude of the righteous, to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.”

That is a clear message. There was nothing ambiguous about the angel's message. He didn't use big words. It wasn't complicated.

So, put yourself in Zechariah' shoes.

You have prayed for years (maybe decades?) for a child. You're still praying for a child. And while you're serving God in the temple, an angel appears out of nowhere and promises you that your prayers have been answered.

You and your wife are soon going to be blessed with a baby! The angel has even given you details about the life of your soon-to-be-born son. His will be a life filled with God. Zechariah's response?

Zechariah Disbelieves and is Disciplined (1:18-23)

Zechariah questions Gabriel! (v. 18)

[18]...“How will I know this? For I am an old man, and my wife is advanced in her years.”

Considering all the facts that Zechariah KNEW, his question makes us a bit uncomfortable.

- Zechariah KNEW from his own nation's history that babies could be born to parents considered too old to have them. (We remember the story of Abraham and Sarah, first time parents of Isaac at ages 100 and 90, comes to mind.)

⁷ This would be a direct fulfillment of a prophecy about Elijah, whose return was predicted to happen before the coming of the Messiah. Jesus said that John was fulfilling the role of the ancient Elijah, not that he was that Elijah. (See Malachi 4.)

- And Zechariah KNEW that his senses weren't lying to him, and that he had received a promise from God's angel.

But he also He KNEW what was true about his own life - that he and Elizabeth had been childless for a long time, that Elizabeth was past the age at which women *normally* bore children,⁸ and that he himself would be an older than normal father.

So, Zechariah allowed what he KNEW about his own life to make room to disbelieve what he KNEW God had done in the past and what the angel promised God would do for him.

The angel told him, ***“Don't be afraid!”*** but it was his fear of believing the angel's *“too good to be true”* news that led him to question the angel's promise.

Now, I don't know how you and I would have responded to the angel's promise. (I'm afraid that I would not have done better than the faithful old priest.)

But Zechariah did not believe. For him, this promise was like winning the Texas Lottery AND hearing good news after the biopsy on the same day. Too good to be true.

So, he asked the question, *“How can I KNOW that what you have told me will actually happen?”* - and the angel was not amused.

Gabriel disciplines Zechariah! (vv. 19-20)

[19] The angel answered and said to him, “I am Gabriel,⁹ who stands in the presence of God; and I was sent to speak to you and to bring you this good news. [20] And behold, you will be silent

⁸ It is not clear from the text that Elizabeth was post-menopausal. It is clear that she was past the age at which women normally had children. But that they were still praying leads me to think that, while unlikely, it was possible that she could still conceive and bear a child.

⁹ His name means, *“God is great!”*

and unable to speak until the day when these things take place, because you did not believe my words, which will be fulfilled at their proper time.”

Gabriel was offended. He had delivered God's message to Zechariah, and he - a priest! - had not believed God. That is why Gabriel pronounced discipline against Zechariah.¹⁰

Now, with all of this going on in the temple, Zechariah was taking longer than the priest normally took to finish the incense offering.

The people gathered outside suspected that something was up. There might be trouble. There was always the danger of the priest's death when in God's presence.¹¹

But Zechariah had been struck dumb, not dead, because of his refusal to believe God's word as it was delivered by Gabriel.

Now, the great news, of course, was that nine months after Gabriel's message, Zechariah and Elizabeth welcomed a little bundle of joy into their home.

They named him “John” (like the angel told them to do) and he grew up to be the man we know as John the Baptist.

The message of God came true. So, sure enough, Zechariah should have trusted that message.

We'll call this our first angel snapshot of the day. From it, we learn a few things about the ways and the world of angels.

- Angels are glorious beings who prompt fear in those they meet.

¹⁰ Clearly, Gabriel had been sent with a message from God to deliver to Zechariah. But, unless we assume that Gabriel had been told that he was to make Zechariah mute if he didn't believe, we conclude that the angel had unilateral authority to act.

¹¹ The book of Exodus tells us that the priest's robes had bells tied to the bottom hem, so that the people outside could hear him moving around as he was serving. If there was no sound, they would know that he had been struck dead.

- Angels have the authority to act unilaterally, as Gabriel did when he struck Zechariah dumb for his disbelief.
- Angels deliver the always true message of God.

Now we come to snapshot number two.

Six months after his visit to Zechariah, God commissioned Gabriel to make another “Coming Attraction!” announcement to another person who had never been a parent.

This time, though, Gabriel went, not to the Hill Country of Judea, but to the northern part of Israel, to the region of Galilee. And this time, he went to a young woman.

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

Gabriel Greets Mary! (vv. 26-29)

[26] Now in the sixth month¹² the angel Gabriel was sent from God to a city in Galilee named Nazareth, [27] to a virgin betrothed 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 was pondering what kind of greeting this was.

By referring to Mary as a virgin, Gabriel means to say exactly what we mean when we use the word “virgin.” Mary had never been with a man. She was engaged to a man - Joseph - but they weren’t married and hadn’t consummated their relationship.

Mary was troubled by the angel’s greeting, probably in much the same way that Zechariah had been troubled.

So, Gabriel spoke to Mary’s fear, just like he did for Zechariah.

Gabriel’s Announces Good News to Mary (vv. 30-34)

A clear message (vv. 30-33)

[30] And the angel said to her, “Do not be afraid, Mary; for you have found favor with God. [31] “And behold, you will conceive in your womb and give birth to a son, and you shall name Him Jesus.”

The baby’s name, *Jesus*, (Yeshua) means Savior. Gabriel went on to describe the life 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 expectant mother would be thrilled to hear this sort of news about her yet-to-be-born child.

But a question mark forms in Mary’s mind because...she was not expecting.

The angel seemed to be speaking about an imminent conception. And Mary knew enough biology to know that this, for her, being a virgin, was impossible. Inconceivable.

So, Mary has a question. And we want to shout to her, “*Careful, Mary!*” It can be dangerous to question Gabriel.

But Mary wasn’t questioning Gabriel. She simply has a question.

Zechariah failed because he asked an “IF” question. Mary expressed her confusion and asked a “HOW” question. Hers was a good question.

A confused young lady! (v. 34)

¹² That is, the sixth month of Elizabeth’s pregnancy.

[34] But Mary said to the angel, “How will this be, since I am a virgin?”¹³

Gabriel answered Mary’s question with an honest answer.

Gabriel Explains the Good News to Mary (vv. 35-38)

A clarifying word (vv. 35-37)

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

With that explanation the question mark was erased. Mary accepted - she couldn’t possibly have understood - the mystery of the virgin birth.

And the virgin birth IS a mystery, on so many levels. 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!**

Imagine the thoughts swirling around in Mary’s mind.

“OK. I will bear a Son. I will conceive Him uniquely. What my mother told me about the birds and the bees won’t apply. Without a man, without sexual experience, I will conceive by the agency of the Almighty.”

Those may have been Mary’s thoughts as she processed the angel’s message. We don’t know. What we do know are her words.

When we hear the words that came out of Mary’s mouth, we are listening to FAITH.

For twenty centuries Mary has been honored as a model of faith because of what she revealed of her heart by these words.

A receptive heart (v. 38)

[38] “Behold, the Lord’s bond-servant; may it be done to me according to your word.”

I have long believed that the most powerful, the most liberating, and among the most spiritual words any one of us might ever say are these: *“God, my life is in Your hands. Whatever You want to do with me is fine with me.”*

That’s the meaning behind Mary’s words.

The story of Zechariah is a warning. Don’t disbelieve God’s message because it seems to be *“too good to be true.”*

By contrast, Mary invites us to a submissive, receptive welcome of God’s message, even if it is disruptive, even if it doesn’t conform to our understanding of how the world works, even if it is hard to accept.

For all of us, some of God’s message will be exactly that, from time to time. But the path to Jesus’ abundant life is the path of faithful submission to His word.

And notice.

When God wanted to let Zechariah, the father of John the Baptist, know of His plan to give him and Elizabeth a son, He sent an angel.

¹³ Some have suggested that Mary was confused because she was pre-pubescent. Her question, *“How can this be?”* had less to do with her being a virgin, and more with her physical immaturity. This seems to me to be less likely.

When God wanted to reveal His plan to the young woman who would usher His Son into the world that Son created, He sent an angel.

There were other angelic appearances around the time of Jesus' birth. A couple of them involved Joseph, Mary's husband.¹⁴

But the other of the most famous of the angelic appearances and the one that probably comes to mind when we hear, "*Hark! The Herald Angels Sing!*" is the appearance they made on the night of Jesus' birth to a group of Jewish shepherds who were out watching over their flocks by night.

An Angel - and Angels! - Appear to Shepherds (Luke 2:8-20)

Shepherds of Israel from the Beginning, Respected

Throughout much Israel's history, shepherding was an honored and respected way to make a living.

Leaders like Abraham and Isaac, Jacob and his sons, Moses, and David were all shepherds.

And when God told priests and prophets how they were to lead the people into His ways, He told them to "*shepherd*" the people.

Shepherds provided a template of caring for and protecting their sheep that the leaders were to follow when leading people.

So, the shepherds we meet in Luke, chapter 2, were carrying out a noble profession with a storied past.

Shepherds at the Time of Jesus' Birth, Rejected

¹⁴ When Joseph first learned of Mary's pregnancy, he (understandably) did not believe Mary's story of the virgin birth. He was convinced to not break off his engagement to Mary because of an angel's message that Mary was telling the truth. (Matthew 1:18-25) Later, after he had taken Mary and Jesus to Egypt to avoid the madness of Herod who was killing babies in an attempt to kill Jesus, an angel told him that, since Herod himself had died, it was now safe to return to Israel, and that he should take Jesus to Nazareth. (Matthew 2:19-23)

Shepherds were critical for the nation...

In the era in which Jesus was born, shepherds played a critical role in Israel. They providing sheep for the sacrifices offered at the Jerusalem temple.

No shepherds, no sheep. No sheep, no offerings. No offerings, no forgiveness.¹⁵ So shepherds were very valuable people.

But, by and large, shepherds weren't respected by the Jews who lived around the time of Jesus' birth.

...yet shepherds were disrespected

Because shepherds were forced by their work to be around blood and uncleanness, people considered them unclean.

And because shepherds had to be out in the fields a good bit of the year, unable to take part in regular synagogue worship, people considered them uncommitted to God.

So, we're not surprised that God commissioned angels to announce the birth of His Son on the night He was born.

Of course, God would want to announce the event. And sending angels to do the announcing followed a pattern set with Zechariah and Mary and Joseph who had already heard from angels.

But that He would choose to announce the news, first, to shepherds is surprising and it's one of the best parts of the story of Jesus' birth.

Angels Give Shepherds the Good News! (vv. 10-20)

Late at night, while the shepherds were watching over their sheep, an angel appeared. He shone with the radiance of God's glory.

¹⁵ Given their proximity to Jerusalem, these shepherds were likely watching over some of the flocks that were to have been offered on the altar.

And, just as everybody else we have seen today was frightened by angels, the shepherds were frightened.

[10] And so the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid; for behold, I bring you good news of great joy which will be for all the people; [11] for today in the city of David there has been born for you a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. [12] And this will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.”

Then, *“a multitude of the heavenly army of angels”* appeared, saying,
***[14] “Glory to God in the highest,
And on earth peace among people with whom He is pleased.”***

And with that, the angels disappeared.

The shepherds recovered from their shock and then went as fast as they could to Bethlehem to see what the angels had announced.

They traveled from their fields to the cave where Jesus was, made their way to the manger where Mary and Joseph had put Jesus, and told them what the angel had announced.

I imagine a very worshipful scene there in the birthing stable.

Then, the shepherds left worshiping and praising God that they - SHEPHERDS!! - had been the first people outside of Mary and Joseph to welcome God's Son.

Shepherds lived on the lowest rungs of first-century Jewish society. They weren't invited into polite society or to nice parties.

And that God let shepherds be the first people to hear of the Good News that a Savior had been born says that He loves and lavishes value on all people. Everybody.

No exceptions. He welcomes the least, the last, and the lost. God doesn't keep His distance. He comes near. (He even forms churches made up of ***“not many wise, not many mighty, not many noble.”***)

That is God's way. Every person you and I will ever meet is made in the image and likeness of God, valuable, of inestimable worth.

What the shepherds saw was a living, breathing miracle, God made flesh. Charles Wesley's hymn puts it this way in the song's final stanza:

**Hail the heav'n-born Prince of Peace!
Hail the Son of Righteousness!
Light and life to all He brings
Ris'n with healing in His wings.
Mild He lays His glory by
Born that man no more may die
Born to raise the sons of earth
Born to give them second birth.
Hark! the herald angels sing
"Glory to the newborn King!"**

And if they were honored to be allowed to see Jesus, we are just as honored today that God has revealed to us the *“too good to be true”* message of the Gospel.

Unlike Zechariah, we believe!

Like Mary, we hear Jesus' call to follow and obey and say,
“Behold the bonds slave of the Lord. May it be done to me according to Your word.”

And like the shepherds, we leave this place eager to spread the news of the arrival of a Savior, who is Christ the Lord.