

“A TIME FOR ANGELS,” A Homily delivered by the Reverend Dr. Geoffrey G. Drutchas, St. Paul United Church of Christ, Taylor, December 12, 2021

This morning as we gather for our third Advent Sunday, we celebrate with a “Festival of Lessons & Carols,” interspersing scripture verses of prophecy and proclamation with some of the most beloved songs of the Advent and Christmas seasons. The bible passages and carols foretell the birth of both John the Baptist and Jesus the Christ, the Messiah and describe the auspicious circumstances of their appearance.

Of course, at this time of year, along with John and Jesus, we also recall a wider “cast of characters” who further enliven the story of Advent and Christmas. At the top of the list are certainly Elizabeth and Zechariah, the parents of John the Baptist, as well as Jesus’ mother Mary and her husband Joseph. Yet a no less vital presence is the Angel Gabriel, God’s bearer of messages from high, who makes rather dramatic appearances to both Zechariah and Mary. (*Luke 1:5-26; Luke 1:26-38*)

Although the Bible doesn’t mention it, the Angel Gabriel may likewise have been the angel who appears to Joseph in his dreams, not only to assure him of Mary’s purity but, later, to warn him of acute peril: an evil, power-hungry king is eager to destroy the baby Jesus as a future rival. (*Matthew 1:20; 2:13-18, 22*) Whatever the case, it is angelic help which enables Zechariah, Elizabeth, Mary, and Joseph to make sense of the strange and thrilling things that God accomplishes through their lives.

Not surprisingly, as we move further into the Christmas story, we hear even more about angels. A full choir of herald angels, described as a “heavenly host,” announce Jesus’ birth to shepherds tending their flocks the pastures surrounding Bethlehem. (*Luke 2:8-15*) Presumably, it is also an angel who advises the three Wise Men in their deepest dreams *not* to report back to evil King Herod with any information about the birth of Jesus which might cost him his life. (*Matthew 2:12*)

Honestly speaking, I can’t say that I have ever met an angel face-to-face. Yet their presence in scripture is so frequent over thousands of years of Biblical history that I *cannot* not believe that angels are real. As one scholar notes, “there can be no question that the existence of angels is presupposed in the Bible. In the Old Testament, the word “angel” appears 15 times in the Books of Moses, 13 times in the Historical Books, 8 times in the poetical books, and 17 times in the Prophets. Angels are mentioned much more frequently in the New Testament: 30 times in the Gospels, 16 times in Acts, 30 times in the Epistles, and 74 times in [the Book] of Revelation.” That’s quite a tally! [Larry Richards, *Every Good and Evil Angel in the Bible* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1998), 48]

Abraham and Sarah, the great patriarch and matriarch found in the Old Testament Book of Genesis, received word from three angels that they were going belatedly to be blessed with a son and heir. Abraham was subsequently dissuaded by an angel from sacrificing that precious son. (*Genesis 22:10-11*) Abraham and Sarah’s grandson, Jacob, later wrestled with an angel of the Lord. (*Genesis 32:24-32*) In a wonderful dream Jacob also witnessed angels descending and ascending a ladder between heaven and earth. (*Genesis*

28:10-13a) The experience made him realize that heaven and earth were more intimately connected than he ever realized.

Abraham's nephew Lot was saved from the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah by an angel summoning him and his family to safety. (*Genesis 19:12-16*) And an angel spoke to Moses through the burning bush. (*Exodus 3:2*) The prophet Daniel had his own encounters with the Angel Gabriel. (*Daniel 8:16, 9*)

In the New Testament we not only see angels making an appearance at Jesus' birth but also at pivotal moments in his life. In the desert wilderness where Jesus spent forty days and nights faithful and devoted angels arrive to minister to him after he is thrice tempted by the devil, who according to legend was a fallen angel. All these experiences of credible witnesses prompted the author of one New Testament epistle to advise us take heed and stay alert because some have "entertained angels unaware." (*Hebrews 13:2*)

Angels acquired their name from the Greek word *Aggelos*, meaning "Sent messenger." Over the centuries, whole volumes have been written about angels serving as God's helpers and as intermediaries between heaven and earth. Based on the Old Testament, plus the Talmud and other rabbinical literature which interprets it, Judaism has traditionally maintained there are ten different ranks of angels--some greater, others lesser, in importance. Christianity has also subscribed to the notion of a truly vast hierarchy of angels. By the historical counting of the Catholic Church, there are nine, rather than ten, angel ranks, with each rank further defined by three subcategories. In Catholic reckoning, the highest rank, guarding the throne of God, is composed of the Seraphim, the Cherubim, and those angels called Thrones. Of middling importance are angels variously known as Dominions, Virtues, and Powers, who are said to maintain divine order. At the lowest rung are angels who hold the heavenly offices of Principalities and Archangels, as well as those deemed just Angels, who fight against evil and communicate heavenly news to earth.

At the time of the Protestant Reformation in the 1500s, the Protestant movement rejected many aspects of Roman Catholic teaching, including intercessory worship through the saints. However, a belief in angels was never repudiated by the Protestant church. Without any willingness to argue about how many angels can dance on the head of a pin, Protestant leaders from Martin Luther to Billy Graham have expressed their own convictions about reality and presence of angels in our lives.

Consulting his Bible and early Jewish literature closely, one Protestant angelologist of our own time has insisted that it is only the categories of angels which the Catholic Church got wrong. In fact, as he interprets Old and New Testaments, he insists that the Cherubim who guard God's throne and remain closest to him actually constitute a much larger category than Catholicism imagined. In his Protestant account, the Cherubim comprise the Seraphim, along with two other overlooked ranks known as the Zoa and the Ophanim. Not to be forgotten either is another band of angels known as Irin-Qadeshin which, while not as prominent, are still impressive. (*Daniel 7:4:17; 7:9-10 and 12:1-2; Revelation 4:4-10. 20:4, 12*) Comprising a Great Heavenly Sanhedrin or Spiritual Council, they sit as

elders on 24 smaller thrones surrounding the throne of God and next to yet another adjoining throne for the Ancient of Days. According to the Old Testament Book of Daniel and the New Testament Book of Revelation, the Irin-Qadashin serve as the keeper of heaven's books and issued God's commands. (Stephen E. Rodabaugh, *The Angelic Ranks*, Trinity Grace Fellowship/ Jumonville Conference) While certainly fascinating, all such accounts of angels found in Judaism and contending Christian communities can end up not a little bewildering and confusing, almost making us wish that God would keep the affairs of heaven simpler.

In a more down-to-earth way, I have heard many folks relate human experiences with angels. Years ago, for instance, our church hosted in this very sanctuary the author Sophie Burnham on the subject of angels. Her talk was based on her recent best-selling book, a compendium of angel sightings and encounters. The audience's enthusiasm that night was incredible. Every pew in our sanctuary, upstairs and down, was taken as Burnham not only described her personal angel encounter but also those reported by countless others. Afterwards, members of the audience milled about in the aisles and up front with Sophie Burnham eager to impart their own unforgettable experiences with angels.

One of our own members more privately once described to me a very challenging situation where she felt surely touched by an angel. It all happened on an ordinary day outside a local restaurant. Her husband had just finished a series of medical treatments. They decided to go out for lunch. All was well until he turned faint, his legs becoming rubbery as they got out of their car to go into the restaurant. In some difficult and tense moments for them both, she rushed over to his side, struggling to hold him upright so that he wouldn't fall to the concrete pavement injuring them both. Suddenly, out of nowhere, a man fabulously dressed in gold lame cowboy boots, fancy embroidered vest, and a wide-brimmed Western-style hat had appeared to lend his hand of help. It was a strong hand. The stranger lifted her husband up and virtually carried him to their car, easing him into the right front seat. By the time our church member, following behind, took over and buckled her husband in, she turned and found the stranger, who had stepped aside for her, gone! He had disappeared, as if in thin air, nowhere to be seen anywhere in the parking lot. He had not waited to receive her gratitude and thanks.

Now our church member, whom I knew well, was a very rational woman. Yet she was absolutely convinced that she and her husband had just met an angel. One of the things I said to her at the time is that even if their helper in cowboy boots was a real flesh-and-blood human being only, he had demonstrated the spirit of a *ministering angel*, which is as authentically beautiful as you can get.

Just as folks can be possessed by a demonic spirit, so too can we be possessed by an angelic spirit. Whenever we truly give ourselves over to the loving way of Jesus Christ and remain in his grace, we become capable of doing angelic things that add to the goodness and beauty of the world. Like the angels of the Bible, we advance God's purposes. In a time of such troubles as our own, when there is too much meanness and not enough kindness, we need all that which is angelic more than ever—don't we?

As we listen to scripture give good account of angelic deeds and happenings, may we all give thought and thanks to the angels from on high and on earth that have saved the day for many, including Jesus and his family. And may we in through our own prayers seek God's guidance as to how we can amid our own lives in this time and place best be true "ministering angels" to others. **Amen.**