



SERMONS AT SAINT MARK'S

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THE FOURTH SUNDAY OF ADVENT, DECEMBER 22, 2019
ISAIAH 7:10-16; PSALM 80:1-7, 16-18; ROMANS 1:1-7; MATTHEW 1:18-25

ABOUT ANGELS

Matthew 1:18-25 *[Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly. But just when he had resolved to do this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins." All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet:*

"Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel,"

which means, "God is with us." When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife, but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son; and he named him Jesus.]

Good morning. I am delighted to have the privilege of preaching to you today. Normally I preach through my choices of hymns we'll sing together, or through the sound of our pipe organ, or through the singing of our choirs. But today, I get to do it in front of you. I'm both humbled and thrilled by it.

This sermon will be a meditation in two parts about angels. Part one: angels tell us things we need to hear but don't necessarily want to. Part two: they praise God unceasingly, usually in song.

In today's reading from the Gospel according to Matthew, an angel appears to Joseph in a dream and tells him something he needs to hear, but doesn't necessarily want to hear. The angel says, "Joseph, I know you are fearful about the fact that Mary is pregnant with a child who is not yours. Don't run from this, Joseph. Move toward it; it's important. You need to marry her, and you need to name her child, Jesus." This surely is not what Joseph wants to hear. But he takes the angel's message to heart and in so doing lets himself be caught up in God's work.

In the next chapter of Matthew's Gospel, Joseph receives another message from an angel in a dream. This message says, "Get up, 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." It was a message urging him and his wife and their newborn child to become political refugees, to seek sanctuary in a foreign land. Again, it was a message Joseph needed to hear, but surely did not want to.

Why all these dreams with angels? Not only is Matthew describing in mythical terms what we might call intuition, or a gut feeling, he is connecting his narrative about Jesus to stories known well to his Jewish audience. Joseph's dreams would remind them of one of the formative dreams in Hebrew scripture – that of Jacob, grandson of Abraham. It's in the 28th chapter of Genesis:

Jacob left Beer-sheba and went towards Haran. He came to a certain place and stayed there for the night, because the sun had set. He dreamed that there was a ladder set up on the earth, the top of it reaching to heaven; and the angels of God were ascending and descending on it. And the Lord stood beside him and said, 'I am the Lord, the God of Abraham and the God of Isaac; the land on which you lie I will give to you and to your offspring; and all the families of the earth shall be blessed in you and in your offspring. Then Jacob woke from

his sleep and said, 'How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven.'

– Genesis 28:10-17, abridged

Whether Jew or Gentile, I think we all can relate to this experience. Have you awakened from a dream knowing that the dream revealed some truth to you that you had hitherto resisted knowing? Even in daytime wakefulness, has someone ever said something to you that was easy to dismiss in the moment, but which haunted you later? Have you ever felt called to deliver a message to someone who needed to hear it, but may not have wanted to hear it?

When I was working at Trinity Cathedral in Portland, Oregon, about six years ago, a colleague on the staff there whom I respected and admired was called away to serve another church. In my last conversation with him before he moved, we spoke about where he was going and what excited him about it. Then he asked me, "So, Michael, what's next for you? I know you haven't been here long, but it seems to me you could phone this job in." In the moment, I was put off by his question. I thought, who are you to suggest that I'm not working up to my potential? I love it here at Trinity, Portland; I still feel like I just got here! But the next day, and the day after that, and the day after that, his question echoed in my heart and mind. And you know what? It led me here, to Seattle, to Saint Mark's. I believe that colleague in

Portland was – if not an angel – at least functioning as one. He gave me a message that I needed to hear, but didn't necessarily want to.

That's part one of this meditation. Now comes part two. In addition to engaging people in God's work by sending messages in dreams and through other people, angels praise God unceasingly, usually in song, especially at pivotal events in the development of God's relationship with humanity.

Let's back into this through today's first reading, which comes from the seventh chapter of Isaiah. Ahaz, King of the House of Judah, is fearful that Jerusalem is about to be taken over by two rival kings. He seeks reassurance but is afraid to ask God for it. So Isaiah steps in and prophesies that a child will be born – *Immanuel* (God is with us) – and that the land of Ahaz' rivals will be wasted before the child is weaned. Isaiah is the prophet of the Messiah. What does that have to do with angels? It's the scene one chapter earlier that reveals much about angels. In it, God commissions Isaiah to be that prophet. Here is Isaiah's own account:

In the year that King Uzziah died [Uzziah was King Ahaz' grandfather], I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lofty; and the hem of his robe filled the temple. Seraphim [in Saint Thomas Aquinas' ranking of angels, seraphim are the closest to God] were in attendance above him; each had six wings: with two they

covered their faces, and with two they covered their feet, and with two they flew. And one called to another and said:

'Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of God's glory.'

Then one of the seraphim flew to me, holding a live coal that had been taken from the altar with a pair of tongs. The seraph touched my mouth with it and said: 'Now that this has touched your lips, your guilt has departed and your sin is blotted out.' Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, 'Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?' And I said, 'Here am I; send me!'

– Isaiah 6:1-8, abridged

Did you recognize the cries of the Seraphim? "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of God's glory!" Those are words we sing or say in every eucharist. When bread and wine is consecrated, the prayer always begins with those words of praise. Just as Isaiah heard them in the cry of angels when being commissioned as a prophet, we utter them today to orient ourselves in the work of God as we prepare to receive the sacrament of the altar.

On Christmas Eve we will be reminded of another song of angels – the one first uttered by angels to shepherds: "Glory to God in the highest." In Christmastide and Eastertide, those words are an immutable part of our eucharistic liturgy, and have been for centuries. As we sing or say them, we unite

our voices with those of the angels. This is one of the reasons why we sing in church.

When you sing with a tiny child in your arms, you are connecting that child with the song of the angels. With its ear up against your breastbone, the child learns how your very being – right down to your bones – vibrates as you sing, and the child’s flesh resonates with that vibration right along with your own flesh.

My friends, don’t ever let someone tell you you can’t sing, or that you are not musical. If your heart is beating, you are a drum. If you are breathing, you are a wind instrument. Yes, there are as many variations in tone quality and pitch awareness as there are human beings, and not everyone is called to sing in a choir, but pulse and breath and the ability to phonate are common among us all; we are all called to sing.

Give thanks for those people in your life, past, present, and future, who sing while they hold you; who teach you hymns, Psalms, and spiritual songs; who engage you in singing rounds in the car, or around the camp fire; who send you into the land of dreams with a song at bedtime. For in so

doing, those people connect you with the unbroken song of the angels.

Give thanks also for those people who deliver messages to you that you need to hear even when you don’t want to; who guide you through tough decisions; who redirect you even when you don’t realize you need to be. Give thanks for those people who engage you in the realization of God’s dream for humanity.

Finally, let us strive to be as angels, sharing truth with one another in love, and praising God unceasingly,

For lo! the days are hastening on,
by prophets seen of old, when
with the ever-circling years
shall come the time foretold,
when peace shall over all the earth
its ancient splendors fling,
and all the world give back the song
which now the angels sing.

- Edmund H. Sears
("It came upon the midnight clear," stanza 4, in The Hymnal 1982 #89)



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EPISCOPAL CATHEDRAL