

Christmas with the Angels

Merry Christmas! As this morning's Collect affirms, God makes us glad each year with the festival of the birth of our Savior. It's a time when we fall back on tradition, singing carols we've known since childhood, cooking up favorite family recipes, decorating our homes with cherished heirlooms. And, of course, retelling St. Luke's story of how Jesus was born in a stable, laid in a manger and visited by shepherds from the nearby fields.

Many of us who grew up in church-going households first encountered this story in a children's Bible or Sunday school. In modern, secular America, however, kids often learn about the shepherds and their angelic visitor by watching that cartoon classic, "A Charlie Brown Christmas." Released in December of 1965, "A Charlie Brown Christmas" was the first Peanuts television special, created on a shoestring budget and a whirlwind production schedule. That it instantly became and remains a holiday classic is, I suspect, due at least in part to Linus' heartfelt recitation of today's Gospel passage. "And there were in the same country shepherds abiding in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. And, lo, an angel of the Lord came upon them, and the glory of the Lord shone round about them: and they were sore afraid." Without reading too much into St. Luke's text, it's not difficult to picture the shepherds, drowsing at their posts, suddenly shocked awake when an angel materializes in their midst. It's easy to imagine their terror. But Luke's narrative presents another interesting, if less obvious question: what did the angels think about the events that were unfolding in Bethlehem that night?

Scripture contains many references to angels, but we're given precious few details about them. The word "angel" is derived from the Greek *ἄγγελος* (*angelos*), which means "messenger." Renaissance painters have taught us to imagine angels as beautiful, androgynous beings with flowing robes, shining halos and gleaming, feathery wings. It's a gorgeous image, but not one

that Scripture supports. In the Bible, angels look human. They dress in fine linen, the fabric worn by the Temple's high priests and our own altar. They appear out of nowhere and disappear just as suddenly. And they tend to strike terror in the hearts of the mortals to whom they speak. The angel's greeting to the shepherds in today's Gospel, "Don't be afraid," is pretty standard stuff.

The shepherds might have had reason to be frightened. Luke doesn't name the angel in this passage, but it's not unlikely that the shepherds' celestial visitor was none other than the great Archangel Gabriel himself, the angel who visited Mary and probably told Joseph in a dream not to be afraid to take Mary as his wife. In the angelic hierarchy, Gabriel is a very big deal. He's one of only two angels identified by name in the entire Bible. The other is Michael, commander of the celestial army and unyielding opponent of the Adversary. Of the two, only Gabriel speaks to mortals in Scripture, and he does so on only a handful of occasions. In the Old Testament, Gabriel appears to Daniel, helping the prophet interpret his strange and troubling dreams. Gabriel comes to the elderly Zachariah to announce the impending birth of John the Baptist. When Zachariah doubts, Gabriel strikes him mute for several months. Zachariah wasn't seriously or permanently injured, and some Bible scholars believe Gabriel was simply carrying out God's will. But the angel's rejoinder, "I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God and I have been sent ... to bring you this good news" rings with a certain wounded dignity. There's no question that Gabriel is one of the good guys, unfailingly obedient to God's will and happy to carry messages to anyone whom the Lord chooses. Gabriel is, however, a formidable presence in his own right, one whom humble mortals are wise to engage with respect.

So, what is this noble prince of Heaven thinking as he stands in the cold, dark field, watching the shepherds cower before him? That these scruffy animal herders are a far cry from the righteous Daniel, the lovely Mary and her steadfast fiancé? That it's late, and he'd rather be

back in Heaven with his angelic friends? That humans are hopelessly silly and he wishes God had come up with a less preposterous way to save the world? Maybe, but I don't think so. Though brief, Gabriel's words brim with encouragement. "See, I am bringing you good news, of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord." News doesn't get any better than that. And Gabriel makes it easy for the shepherds to confirm his message for themselves, offering them an unmistakable sign. (That's something Jesus would refuse to do years later when he got impatient with his listeners.) No matter how many travelers were crammed into Bethlehem that night, there would be only one baby sleeping in the feed trough of a stable. The shepherds couldn't miss him. However annoyed Gabriel might have been with Zachariah's skepticism, he seems to have come to terms with the fact that mortals find it difficult to accept miracles without tangible proof. Unlike the angels, people who've been knocked around in life frequently come to believe that some things are just too good to be true.

And to make sure he has the shepherds' attention, Gabriel calls in his back-up band. A multitude of the heavenly host shows up, praising God and promising peace. The skies ring with their glorious voices. Suddenly, the shepherds are no longer afraid. As soon as the angels leave, the shepherds hurry into town, find the promised child, and tell everyone they meet what just happened. Their fear is transformed into praise and thanksgiving. And Mary, mother of the newborn Savior of the world, treasures their words, pondering them in her heart.

Over the centuries, Christian writers have developed what one might call a Christmas vocabulary. For the shepherds, words like "simple" and "humble" get thrown around a lot. Shepherds lived and labored on the bottom rung of the social ladder. That God chose them to be Jesus's first visitors, rather than the resplendent kings of Epiphany, says a lot about our Creator's

priorities. Heaven's most articulate angel tells the shepherds that his joyful news is for all the people. That was good news for them because, in Biblical society, anything worth having was often reserved for the ruling classes. It's good news for those of us who enjoy creature comforts that even Biblical royalty couldn't imagine, because it tells us that God doesn't give two hoots about where anybody stands in the social pecking order. God's grace is infinite, freely available to anyone and everyone who's willing to accept it.

Throughout the centuries, only a very few of us have been blessed to stand face-to-face with a heavenly rock star like Gabriel. You may believe you've never seen an angel, and perhaps you're right. But there's still a lot of sacred magic in this beautiful, broken world. The angels may have figured out, as Gabriel seemingly did, that people are more often frightened than enlightened by angelic visitations. I believe that the angels still speak to us, but by subtler means. It takes patience and practice to learn how to quiet our busy minds and open our conflicted hearts, even for a moment or two. But if we can, sometimes we'll be blessed by a glimpse of heavenly light, a chance encounter with a stranger who does us a kindness, then vanishes before we can thank them, a stroke of good fortune that happens when we most need it, an encouraging word that leaps off the page or rings out of a song. When those things happen, the angels might just be behind them, smiling delightedly as they witness our wondering joy.

Whatever else the angels are, they're a manifestation of the love our Savior has for every last one of us, faithful bringers of divine hope and promise. Scripture tells us that angels surround the throne of God, forever singing our Creator's praise. On this bright and blessed Christmas morning, my prayer is that you will be blessed with the knowledge that, whatever your circumstances may be, you are deeply and eternally beloved. So listen carefully. You might just hear the angels sing. *Amen.*