

Hear the Angels Sing

“In those days, a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered.... Joseph went from the town of Nazareth ... to the city of David called Bethlehem ... to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child.” For Christians worldwide, these words are as familiar and comfortable as “once upon a time.” They invite us to sit back, open our hearts and, once again, hear the story of a wondrous child, born in a stable, surrounded by the warmth and comforting sounds of sheep and cattle, wrapped in rags and cradled in a feed trough, drifting off to sleep as a magical star danced overhead and the songs of angels rang across the skies. It was a night of miracles, a night that brought hope and promise not only to the people of that little town, but to all the people of all the earth in every generation. Of course God’s angels sang with rapturous joy that night. Of course they did.

For many of us, our patron St. Luke's beautiful telling of the birth of Jesus has been a favorite since childhood. Perhaps you grew up in a household that displayed a nativity scene at Christmas, a charming tableau of shepherds and wise men, sheep and goats, a protective father, and a young woman kneeling beside her baby's cradle as an angel hovered gracefully above, lifting a star to the heavens. Perhaps you had a little statue of an angel, or a favorite angel ornament that you carefully hung on your Christmas tree each year. Perhaps you sang carols at home or in church about the angels you had heard on high, angels who bent on hovering wing to touch the earth as they filled the heavens with their beautiful melodies. Perhaps, before you drifted off to sleep, you paused for a moment to listen, hoping to hear the angels sing.

And perhaps, as you grew older, you also grew up. Perhaps you decided that Christmas stories about Frosty the Snowman, Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer and the Little Drummer Boy were just for kids. Perhaps you stopped listening for the jingling of sleigh bells, the

clattering noise of reindeer hooves dancing on the roof, and the sweet songs of the angels above. I mean, honestly, what grown up believes in angels?

Well, I do. I believe in angels, and my Christmas gift to you this evening is to remind you of all the reasons why you should, too.

Let's get a few things out of the way. Frosty, Rudolph, and even the Little Drummer Boy are characters in catchy tunes concocted by the music merchants of Tin Pan Alley to bring whimsy to the holiday season. Rudolph was originally created as a holiday marketing icon for the Montgomery Ward Company. All three of them are fiction, and no Claymation movie can make them real, however much we might wish otherwise. And there is no Scriptural authority for any of them. It might, indeed, have snowed in Bethlehem on the night that Jesus was born. Bethlehem is in the mountains and, even in this era of climate change, it sometimes snows there during the winter months. But corn cob pipes and button noses wouldn't be invented for centuries. And while the shepherds might well have had a little boy with them when they came to visit our newborn King, the odds of that boy happening to carry a drum with him are slim to none. Don't get me wrong. I enjoy popular holiday songs as much as anyone. I love Rudolf's message that anyone can be a hero and the little drummer boy's assurance that God smiles upon whatever gifts we offer him from our hearts, no matter how modest. But angels are another order of being altogether, and we really shouldn't lump them in with characters from children's songs.

From the Book of Genesis to the Book of Revelation, the Bible is filled with flights of angels. In a recent article for *Christianity Today* titled, "Have Yourself an Enchanted Little Advent," the Reverend AJ Sherrill writes, "Gabriel's angelic presence on earth was not an outlier but perhaps the unseen norm made manifest." The angels certainly make themselves known in Scripture, and they're a divine force to be reckoned with. An angel with a flaming sword stands

at the gates of Eden to prevent audacious humans from sneaking back in before they're welcome. Angels dropped in for lunch on Abraham and Sarah on their way to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah. An angel stayed Abraham's hand as he was about to sacrifice his son, Isaac. Isaac's son Jacob not only wrestled with an angel all night, he once saw scores of angels ascending and descending a ladder from earth to heaven, busily going about the Father's business. The prophet Elisha saw an army of angels driving horsebound chariots of fire. An angel fed Elijah in the wilderness, just as angels fed Jesus after his sojourn in the desert and comforted him in the Garden of Gethsemane. One particular archangel, Gabriel, plays a starring role in the nativity of Christ. It was Gabriel who told Mary to expect the birth of her son and, many Bible scholars believe, who told Joseph not to end their engagement when Mary's pregnancy became public. It was probably Gabriel who warned Joseph in a dream to flee to Egypt with his family to escape the murderous Herod, and who then told Joseph when it was safe to come home. And it was almost certainly Gabriel who appeared to the shepherds on that first Christmas night to announce the birth of the heavenly child who would grow up to be hope of the world.

In a separate article titled, "Angels We Ignore on High," the Reverend Tish Harrison Warren confesses that, as she grew up, she stopped paying attention to angels. "My ambivalence about angels was not due to reason," she wrote. "It was a failure of my imagination." For Reverend Harrison Warren, too much exposure to pop culture images of chubby, winged cherubs and cutesy angel figurines "sentimentalized [angels] into parody, a subconscious caricature, the stuff of myth." If you've spent too much time in gift shops lately, you might feel the same way.

But I think we dismiss the heavenly host at our spiritual peril. I'm not a proponent of biblical literalism. Some Bible stories strike me as more allegorical than real, and I believe Biblical laws need to be interpreted with compassion and common sense. Jesus would have had

an easier time with the Pharisees were that not the case. But I don't think we can cherry pick Scripture based on our personal predispositions, either. I couldn't stand on this altar week after week and recite the Nicene Creed if I didn't believe in "one Lord, Jesus Christ, the only Son of God" and everything that follows. Believing in the resurrected Christ and the things he endured for our salvation, I'm hard pressed to deny the existence of the angels whom Jesus said he could command, and who cared for and comforted him, especially on Christmas Eve.

But even if one disbelieved in the angels, and some people say that they do, why would anyone want to? Angels are an enchanting extension and expression of the loving presence of God in our world. As Reverend Sherrill writes, "we inhabit a God-saturated earth. One of the divine names is Immanuel, meaning that God is with us. Despite the way we may feel at times, we have never been alone, we never are, and we never will be." God *is* with us, and that means God's ambassadors, the angels, are never far away. If we don't see them, delivering messages of hope and comfort, carrying out God's gracious will, protecting us and blessing us in his Name, perhaps it's because we're so caught up in worldly concerns that we don't remember to look for them. But perhaps, if we choose to live, to quote Reverend Sherrill, as if "the world is enchanted with divine presence, chock-full of God stuff," the angels might just let us catch a glimpse of them or hear them singing now and then.

And so, on this holy night, I wish you hope and joy in Christ's coming. I wish you all, and especially those struggling with grief or loneliness, renewed faith in the God who is always with us, and who reminds us each year that we can find him even in the most unlikely places. I wish you precious time with those you love, and cherished memories in the making. Most of all, I wish you peace, and a few moments of sacred silence amidst the happy hubbub of the holiday. Listen well, and you just might hear the angels sing. Merry Christmas, friends. Amen.