

The Angels' Song

Luke 2:8-18

Dec. 24, 2023 Fourth Sunday of Advent

Series: *Symbols and Songs for the Season: Waiting with Hope*

Rev. Cynthia Cochran-Carney, First Presbyterian Church of San Rafael, CA

8 In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. 9 Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. 10 But the angel said to them,

"Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people:

11 to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord.

12 This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger."

13 And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying,

14 "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!"

15 When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which God has made known to us." 16 So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. 17 When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; 18 and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them.

God of Grace give us ears to hear the angels' song. Give us eyes to see your glory shining around us. Like the shepherds, give us hearts that are ready to hear what your spirit is calling us to do today. Amen.

Luke tells this story well. He sets up the dynamics of the story powerfully with contrast - the contrast of Heaven and Earth. And the contrast of angels and shepherds. We don't really know what to do as 21st century people with angels. A couple things I noticed as I read this text this week. Whenever angels or heavenly messengers show up in a biblical story, they have big news to share and must have seemed strong and intimidating. They show up and seem to scare the be-jesus out of people because the first thing they always say is - Be not afraid!

The other powerful thing about them is they are not of this Earth. Not part of our common life. They are clearly different. They represent Celestial Beings. That phrase is translated Heavenly Host. It is used one other time in in Luke's writing in the book of Acts (7:42). It is an interesting word - an army; a host of angels, the hosts of heaven – the stars and constellations. So it is meant to capture the celestial existence. Not the common stuff we see all the time around us.

They **say** words of Gloria. Words or poem or song that is shocking and amazing. There is good news of great joy that will bring peace. Peace to you, ordinary shepherds. Peace to the whole earth, despite the Roman occupation of your land. The angel/messenger's language is excessive in a good way. It could be translated "I am good newsing great joy." And the good news comes in the form of a babe wrapped in cloth lying in the feeding trough in Bethlehem. "Joy to the World... Alleluia."

Who hears this song of Glory? Shepherds. When you read the Old Testament, shepherding was a fairly common way of life, a noble way of life. And of course, it was ennobled even more by King David having been a shepherd and speaking of shepherding. However, by the time you get to the New Testament era, shepherds were like the essential workers of our day whom we need but easily ignore. They were needed to raise sheep for food and they were needed for clothing for the wool and they were needed for worship because they provided what was needed for the priests to make the sacrifices.

But under the Roman Empire, the economy had shifted to where most people had lost their ancestral land. They didn't have pasture lands. You didn't have the ability to have a flock of sheep or goats. Most people in fact were urbanized. They had moved to the city and became day laborers. So shepherds were still around. They were still needed, but they were out there.

Shepherds living, abiding in the fields where animals live. That's where the sheep belong. Out in the hinterland. These shepherds live there. So you've got on the one hand these Celestial Beings and on the other hand these humble folk. They're outsiders.

In this story Luke brings them together and he also makes this great contrast between the highest Heaven and the Earth. The Earth back in the first century people thought of the world as a three-storied universe and so the heavens would be just way up there..

We think about our round earth and we are learning more about the cosmos and galaxies. Perhaps it'd be better for us to say the angels came from "out there" instead of the highest Heavens. These celestial messengers from farthest edges of the expanding Universe way out there. That shows us the grandeur and the glory of God is what the heavens are all about and the simple Earth the place where we are, the place we know.

Luke tells in this story to talk about how Heaven and Earth come together. This glory of God shone around them. It's a light around them that appeared so that the glory of the Lord is right here right, here the glory of the Lord which always seems to be that distant far-off thing that we can't look at directly. This fabulous thing is right here all around us and then the Angels make the point when they sing glory to God in the highest and on Earth peace. So what happened in the heavens is inherently connected to what's happening on Earth. Peace is the intention – this peace, this wholeness.

We don't know exactly what the shepherds told Mary and Joseph when they arrived. Whatever it was, it left those who heard it filled with awe, in wonder, and inspired. They were amazed.

What is so amazing about this story that two thousand years later we are still telling it? What about this story amazes you today?

I'm not asking about your amazement at what happened to the shepherds, Mary, or Joseph. I want us to push through the sentimentality of the story to its power and meaning for our lives. Think about your amazing story. When something happens to us that changes us.

Is it a story about recovering hope when you thought all was lost, finding freedom and forgiveness of past guilt and regret, or facing and moving through your fear? Maybe it's a story of discovering light, meaning, and direction for your life when you were walking in darkness, or grief. Maybe there were moments when you senses your life was going in a new direction. Maybe your amazing story is about experiencing peace in a time of turmoil or getting through another day when you didn't think you could even get out of bed. Maybe it is a moment of discern how to use your resources to help others have amazing hope. Amazing can be quiet or it can be jubilant.

The amazing Mystery in Christmas is the same Mystery at the heart of all things. It is a holiness that welcomes and frightens us in the same moment. Heaven and earth, a presence that is more than once a year candles and carols. It is a holy gift to want to go deeper, beyond one set of theological beliefs and to experience the heart of it all. If you are longing this, for the mystery of the presence of Christ's love and light, then set about your search.

This amazing, good news is what we long to hear and want to believe and pray for – Peace on earth. To know each person is beloved.

My Christmas prayer for you: to be interrupted by Something greater than yourself, to know in your bones that this Holy Source of Love has visited us & then never left us alone. I pray for you to be consumed and held by the Light and Life of the Christ, to live in the great certainty that the whole world is loved, and to know that your life continues in the presence of angels. May you hear their song. Amen.

Resources

Mark Davis, "The Angels' Song," Sunday, December 18, 2022

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=23R1fS9SyX0&list=PLdviRwhc_HGyaXMDbWKhdHEP3Y2HAfdj_&index=59&ab_channel=St.MarkPresbyterianChurch

Interrupting the Silence, "What Is Your Amazing Story?" Dec. 25, 2022

<https://interruptingthesilence.com/2022/12/25/what-is-your-amazing-story-a-christmas-eve-sermon-on-luke-21-20/>