

Living Nativity: The Angels Rejoice
By Jason Huff
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Psalm 103:19-22; Hebrews 1:1-9; Luke 2:8-15

Our final Scripture reading today is from Luke 2:8-15. May God bless the reading of His holy, infallible, perfect Word. "And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord. This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger." Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men on whom his favor rests." When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let's go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about.""

There are some things in life that are hard to understand...some good, some bad. I don't understand why the Lions and the Tigers can't put together a decent team. I don't understand why ice cream doesn't just taste good, it makes you feel better about most everything. I don't understand why you need to take out a loan to buy popcorn at a movie theater, even though it's one of the cheapest foods on the planet. I mean, I know *why*, but I am still amazed that we are all still so willing to plunk down a chunk of our paychecks for a quarter's worth of popcorn.

I recently learned more about the history of tipping in America. It wasn't until the era of Prohibition that tipping became a regular part of our culture. When alcohol became illegal, hotels that had made a good deal of their money selling alcohol at the bar had to analyze where all their money was coming from. Even though waitstaff was paid reasonable well then, tips suddenly became a way to make up for lost income from booze. But guess what? When prohibition ended, tipping stayed! Why didn't it die off back then? Lots of reasons, it turns out...but it's hard to understand while we still have this unwritten rule of tipping that makes the end of every meal into a math lesson and some sort of moral judgment about our waiter.

Something else that our popular culture, and even the church, doesn't understand is the idea of angels. Artwork of angels is often really cheesy, no matter what form the angels take. Sometimes it's the little baby angels we see primarily around Valentine's Day; sometimes it's feminine angels at Christmas. I've seen artwork of warrior angels, too, and I don't know about you, but I've never thought of warrior angels with backdrops of puffy clouds and baby blue skies and soft lighting, but that's what they usually are. Sappy poems talk about our loved ones becoming our guardian angels. Friends, we are confused!

As we finish off our Living Nativity series, we're going to discuss angels, particularly as they are related to the Christmas story. At the same time, we'll get a better understanding of angels and how they relate to us. We may not think that angels are particularly important today, but I think when we understand who God made them to be and what they do, we might have a far better appreciation for them and for how God makes things happen in our world even now.

Angels appear a lot in the stories surrounding the birth of Jesus. The angel Gabriel appears to Zechariah in the temple, announcing to him that he and his wife Anna would have a child in their old age named John who would lead the people back to God and prepare them for the coming Messiah. Gabriel is the same angel who, six months later, goes to Mary and announces to her that she will bear the Messiah and name Him Jesus. Angels appear to Joseph in dreams no less than three, maybe four times. They may have appeared to the Magi in a dream, warning them not to return to Herod; from the wording, we're not sure. And of course, there's an angel surrounded with a multitude of other angels that announce Jesus' birth to the shepherds. Angels are all over the place!

But who exactly are these beings, and what do they do? Why are they here? The word "angel" in Hebrew and Greek both is the word for "messenger." Sometimes, we have to rely on the context to know that we're talking about a heavenly being. Angels do a lot of things in Scripture – at certain times, we see them as agents of God's help and protection; at other times, they fulfill God's wrath. They sometimes oppose those who would hurt God's people, as we saw in the story of Balaam the wayward prophet. In Matthew 10:18, in a hard to understand saying, Jesus teaches that the young have some sort of special angels who always see the face of the Father – it as if they somehow have priority, if that is even possible. But their main role is as messenger. They bring the word of the Lord to God's people. In every circumstance that revolves around Christ's birth, the angels are here to share the good news that Christ is coming, or has come, or how Jesus can be protected from those who would mean Him harm.

We really don't know much about angels. From Genesis, we know that they can take a disguised form where they appear much like human men. Hebrews 13:2 tells us to extend hospitality because some have entertained angels without knowing it. Angels never appear in Scripture as women or children. Jesus taught us in Mark 12:25 that the angels in heaven do not marry, so we shouldn't expect there to be female angels or child angels. Angels are different from humans like dogs are different from cats, so you can't become an angel, and while an angel can appear human, an angel never becomes human. Most angels do not reveal their names, though Gabriel appears to Zechariah and Mary, and Michael is named as the protector of Israel who later in Scripture takes the angelic lead in the battle against Satan and his forces.

As far as we can tell, they don't have wings. There are winged beings that God created to glorify Him, but they seem to be of a different type of creature than angels. Even in today's passage, we have this idea of angels flying overhead terrorizing the shepherds. But if you read closely, that's not what it says. It says, "Suddenly a great multitude appeared with the angel." Imagine these empty fields suddenly covered with angels upon angels. They return to heaven, but did they fly there? It's uncertain. Forty days after his resurrection, Jesus was taken up to heaven, but He didn't have wings. It reveals just how little we really know about angels.

While angels have physical form, there's also something very curious about how they manifest themselves in other ways. Mary's husband Joseph has dreams featuring angels. When we have dreams, we tend to take them as our brains processing all the information and stresses and hopes and fears locked away in our heads. But even then, dreams are strange and mysterious; we have conversations with those long gone and have deep, sometimes disturbing insights we wouldn't have otherwise. An angel in a dream in ancient Near Eastern thought is essentially the same as an angel visiting in the flesh.

We also know that angel visits were not important because of the angels but who they represented. The word the angels spoke were taken as God's own message. For example, when the shepherds are talking amongst themselves after the angels' visit, they say, "Let's go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about." Not what the angel has told us about, mind you, but what the Lord has said. An angelic visit meant that God Himself had spoken and sent one of His heavenly host to deliver the message. The message was never questioned because an angel brought it.

In fact, nobody ever expected God to show up directly and talk with them. On those very rare occasions when God did speak to someone face-to-face, as He did with Moses, it was beyond extraordinary. In virtually all cultures, a king's messenger was not seen just as an errand boy but was the full representation of the king himself. That's why the best way to start a brutal war was to literally "kill the messenger" -- it was as if you had taken your sword and murdered the king yourself. An angel coming to you had all the weight of God Himself speaking to you.

This also explains why virtually everyone is terrified by an angel's visit and deeply disturbed by their messages. While sometimes the glory of God is with them and that's scary, it's what they represent -- the supernatural, indeed the Creator of all things, interacting with them. It's one thing to believe in God and another thing entirely to meet a being that proves He's there, right?

Angels also don't bring simple news. They never come with the message that the dry cleaning is ready, right? They usually come with profound, life-changing, sometimes world-changing news. That can be terrifying too. Even Mary, the one who trusted and became the mother of the Messiah, the one who all generations called blessed, she is greatly disturbed by the news Gabriel brings her. That's why the angels enter the scene so often by saying, "do not fear." During my study on angels this week, I found that the angels you have to be worried about are the ones that don't make their presence known -- the angel who opposed Balaam, for example. An angel visit can be panic inducing, but it often means God is planning to be at work in your life in a very specific way.

So now that we've got a little bit of a handle on who angels are and what they do, I want us to turn to their Christmastime appearances and see what they might mean for us. I don't know if any of this will hear from an angel in this life; I don't know if any of us would want to! But what they do and don't do, what they mean for us, is worth thinking about.

First thought is this: *God loves us so much that He created a set of beings whose primary purpose is to glorify Him through helping us.* That's astounding, isn't it? Angels are greater than we are. They have seen God. They have never rebelled against God and so see Him for who He is. They glorify Him constantly. They rejoiced at Jesus' birth. Some creatures that are a part of the heavenly host, ones named the seraphim and cherubim, may do nothing else but worship God directly, from what we see in the Bible. But the angels, this particular set of spiritual beings, they are constantly at work for God, making things happen in God's Kingdom, for our benefit. Now let me be very clear – they are not our servants. But they do serve us as they serve God. That's amazing.

We might ask: if God could do all the work Himself, if He could intervene directly in our lives, what purpose do the angels serve? Why do they exist? Surely God doesn't need them. And yet, in the same way, God doesn't need us. God is pleased to create us, both angels and humans. And God, in His love for all His creation, invites us to participate in the redemption story. He uses us to accomplish His purposes. He remakes us, then uses us to show Himself to the world. In the same way, angels get to be a part of God's plans to reconcile all of creation to Himself. The angels are blessed to see this story unfold throughout the generations.

Second thought: *the angels, as amazing as they are, are not all-knowing and have limitations that make us, rather than them, the crowning glory of creation.* Scripture says in Psalm 8 and Hebrews 2 that we are made a little lower than the angels, but we are crowned with glory and honor; God made us ruler of the works of His hands, and He has placed everything under our feet. Angels are not in charge of the earth; we are. Angels are not the center of God's eternal story; humanity is. Angels, as amazing as they are, are God's aides and servants, but not central to the plot of what God has done over the millennia.

The center of all the ages is the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, through whom redemption comes. Angels rejoice at His birth and are the first to announce His resurrection. And yet angels are not redeemed creatures. Either they stayed loyal to God or they rebelled against him like the demons, but perhaps because they knew the reality of God face-to-face, their choice long ago determined their destiny. Christ did not die to save the angels. 1 Peter 1 tells us that "even the angels long to look into these things" -- the salvation of humanity planned throughout the centuries. Angels do not know when the Son will return to Earth to set all things right. As far as we know, the angels aren't filled with the Holy Spirit as we are. And 1 Corinthians 6 tells us that not only will the saints judge humanity, we will judge the angels.

Even some things we take for granted aren't part of angelic life. You know how the songs say, "Sing choirs of angels; sing in exultation"? I want you to look carefully at the language in our passage from Luke 2 today. What does it say? Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and *saying*, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men on whom his favor rests."

Did you know that angels -- not necessarily the unique creatures in heaven, but the angels -- never sing in the Bible? I hadn't picked up on that until this very week. Even here, in this passage, the one where we get the idea of angel choirs, the angels aren't singing! Do they have the ability to sing? We don't know. All we know is that nowhere in the Bible are they said to sing, even when we expect it, even when we believe they must have.

What's fascinating to me is that songs and singing are mentioned well over 130 times in Scripture. I looked up all the references this week. And as it turns out, the vast majority of them are either God's people singing praise to Him or commands for God's people and creation to sing praise to Him. Music isn't necessarily unique to us humans, but we have the opportunity and choice to sing that the angels might not have. And what's absolutely certain is that we alone have the ability to sing the song of God's redemption of us. We fell into sin, but God has redeemed His people. No other creature can sing about how Jesus to be our king, our great high priest, our companion, our friend.

That leads to our final thought this morning: *Will we trust in the messages God sends us and walk in humble obedience to Him?* When Zechariah heard from Gabriel about how he and Elizabeth were going to have a son, the one to prepare the way for the Messiah, his first reaction was disbelief - "how can I be sure of this?" I mean, an angel from heaven appears to you while you're serving in the temple of the Lord and you don't believe it? Even though he had been faithful to God, because of his skepticism, he was mute for close to a year, until he gave his son the name John -- the name the angel had instructed him to give the child.

On the other hand, great joy occurs when we accept the word of the Lord. Mary believes and becomes the most blessed woman ever to live. Joseph believes the angels and becomes the adoptive father of the King of the ages, saving Him from certain death at the hand of King Herod's men. The shepherds believe and become the first witnesses to the Messiah -- shepherds, despised, lowly, underpaid, less respected than the overnight crew at Taco Bell, because they take the angels at their word, while the powerful sleep in their palaces unawares, they get to welcome the infant Lord.

Friends, we've been given so much. We've been saved by the grace of God alone. We've been given the beauties of this world to enjoy to remind us of God's love for us. We've even been given the angels as protectors and messengers. Our role is simply to obey His ways and spread His fame. Will we rejoice with the angels? As we bring this Christmas season, will we join in their praise, whether they can sing it or not? Will we shout along with them, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men on whom his favor rests"? May it be our anthem all life long.