

AN ANGEL ANNOUNCES GOD'S GOOD NEWS

"The Angels of Christmas" Sermon Series, week 4

A Sermon by the Rev. Joyce L. J. Lawson

Luke 2:1-20

December 21, 2025

Throughout this Advent season, our sermon focus has been on the angels who make an appearance in the biblical account of Jesus' birth? As we have seen over these weeks, whenever angels appear, they always have something important to say to those to whom they appear. On the first Sunday of Advent, the angel Gabriel appeared to Zechariah to tell him that his longtime prayer and his wife, Elizabeth's longtime prayer had been heard by God and was about to be answered. At their advanced age, they would have a baby named John and not only would their baby be the answer to their prayers, but he would also be the beginning of God's answer to the prayers of others who were hoping for change and longing for a Savior. The angel's message that first Sunday was that God hears our prayers and answers our prayers in ways that bless not only our lives but also the lives of others.

On the second Sunday of Advent, it was once again the angel Gabriel who appeared, but this time he had a message for a girl named Mary. Gabriel told Mary that she was favored and chosen by God for a very important role in God's saving plan – she was to bear, give birth to, and raise God's Son. *Her response, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word"* (LK 1:38) has been held up as an example of a faithful response ever since. On that second Sunday, the angel's message to Mary reminded each one of us, as ordinary as we are, that we are also called to accept and participate in the saving work of God in the world.

On the third Sunday of Advent, God's unnamed, angel messenger was sent to yet another individual with an essential role to play in God's plan. Unlike Zechariah and Mary, Joseph was asleep, so the angel came to him in a dream. His role was to be the human father of God's divine Son. Doing so required Joseph to go against his society's norms and rules, and yet he responded in faith and did exactly what God wanted him to do. The angel's message last Sunday made it clear that sometimes our traditions and accepted rules conflict with the new thing God is calling us to do, but the faithful response is to do what God wants. Like Joseph, our greatest step of faith may be our willingness to go where we would not have gone, and to embrace a role we would have never imagined for ourselves.

Today, our fourth Christmas angel's appearance is found once again in Luke's Gospel, but unlike Luke's previous two angel appearances by Gabriel, this angel is unnamed. Clearly, Zechariah, Mary and Joseph were key characters in God's plan of salvation, and so it was not surprising that God sent special emissaries to those individuals to offer details and to share reassurances. But today, God sends an angel to shepherds, *"living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night"* (Luke 2:8). The implication of this description is that the shepherds are not only going about their work and minding their own business, but they are living in darkness.

But why would God send an angel to shepherds? Why individuals who had no practical function or direct connection to the Messiah's birth? Why poor working-class people? Why uneducated, rough around the edges people who were unable to

And like the other three Christmas angels, a sign is given as proof that what is being said is true. The specific sign given to the shepherds is that they *"will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger"* (Lk 2:12). Because they were shepherds, they were exactly the type of people who understood signs like the signs that bad weather or a predator was approaching. And such signs would always produce a corresponding response. They were used to reacting and doing whatever a situation called for. Yes, there was initial fear when the angel showed up, but the shepherds regularly dealt with fearful situations. If they allowed fear to paralyze them every time they felt it, they and their sheep would have had a slim chance of surviving on the hillsides and in the fields.

And then, if the appearance of one angel wasn't startling enough for the shepherds, so dynamic and important was the news of a Savior's birth that *"...suddenly there was with the one angel a multitude of the heavenly host, 'praising God and saying, 'Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!'"* (Lk 2:13-14). Perhaps you are wondering what is a "heavenly host"? Well, the word "host" means "army." In the Old Testament, there are 293 times when God is referred to as "The Lord of Hosts," and there are two additional times in the New Testament." In the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus mentions that if he wanted, God would send him *"More than twelve legions of angels"* (Mt. 26:53). A legion was a unit of 5,000 soldiers. Not only does God have a massive force in heaven, but God being "The Lord of Hosts" makes it clear that God is all powerful and undefeatable. Yes, we may sometimes feel defeated, but that term "heavenly host" assures us that the ultimate victory belongs to God.

So suddenly, God's massive force of celestial beings showed up, and they could not contain their excitement. Their shouts of praise filled the air – God's ultimate victory had arrived not in the form of an army of fighters, but in the form of a baby's birth. This seems like as good a time as any to throw in one more of those biblical angel facts. Nowhere in the Bible does it say that angels sing – not here, not anywhere. Of course, for us we can hardly imagine praise without singing – it is so much a part of our worship experience of praising God. So even though our passage does not actually say the heavenly host was singing, I think we all imagine their praise expressed by way of singing.

When I think of the shepherd's angelic experience, I can't help but think that if I had had such an experience, I would have needed some time to digest it – time to ponder and talk with others so I could better understand what it meant. I would need time to plan my trip into Bethlehem. But the shepherds were not pondering kind of guys. They were not ones to hesitate and discuss all the options when the situation called for action. The amazing news of a Savior's birth deserved an immediate response, and that's exactly what the shepherds did as they headed straight for town. Today's passage doesn't say, but I imagine it took some searching to find the baby. After all, the angel did not give a specific house address or the property owner's name. There would have been lots of mangers in Bethlehem, because most homes had some type of animal stable either attached to the house or close by like in a cave.

Did those shepherds knock on doors and wake up those sleeping inside? I don't imagine homeowners being happy about that. Did those shepherds peer in windows and quietly open barn doors to see if a baby might be lying in one of the mangers? Most people might have been concerned about being caught sneaking