

## **AN ANGEL REVEALS GOD'S SAVING PLAN**

"The Angels of Christmas" Sermon Series, week 2

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

Luke 1:26-38

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Luke 1:39-45, 56

Last Sunday, as I kicked off our four-week Advent sermon series, "The Angels of Christmas," I shared with you some biblical background about angels. For those of you who may have missed that background, I think a quick review of might be a good idea. First of all, the word "angel" in the Bible means "messenger," so an angel is a messenger from God. You probably knew this. However, something that surprised at least some of you last week was when I told you that angels do not have wings. Scripturally, angels are described as looking like humans and clearly, we do not have wings. The biblical creatures described as having wings are Cherubim and Seraphim, but they are only found around the throne of God and are not sent by God to humans. Another point I made last week was that biblical angels are not deceased humans. Angels are a completely different category of creature that was specifically created by God to be angels. So, when we die, we do not become angels, we become heavenly saints.

Another significant biblical point about angels is that some are clearly heavenly beings sent from the presence of God while others are understood to be human beings. But whether divine or human, God is always the One at work in and through angels. These sent by God messengers offer guidance, protection, comfort, good news, and they reassure us humans that God not only knows our struggles, but comes to us, walks with us, and encourages us. A wonderful as well as challenging thing about this biblical point is that each one of us by listening to God's voice and responding to God's call, can be God's angel – a messenger of God's hope, peace, joy and love.

It is with this background about angels in mind that we are moving through our four Christmas angel stories. As I mentioned last week, all four of our Christmas angels are identified as heavenly beings, sent directly from the presence of God. Last Sunday, it was the angel Gabriel who appeared to Zechariah, the father of John the Baptist. Gabriel shared the good news that his long-time prayer, his wife, Elizabeth's long-time prayer, had been heard by God and they were going to have a baby. Last Sunday's angel encounter assured us that God not only hears our prayers but can be counted on to address the deepest yearnings of our hearts.

Today, about six months have passed since Gabriel was sent by God to the big, significant city of Jerusalem to deliver an important message to aging Zechariah while he was performing his important priestly duties in the holy Temple. This time, God sends Gabriel to a small, insignificant town about 90 miles north of Jerusalem to deliver an important message to a young teenager, named Mary, a girl thought to be about 14 years old. Archaeological findings estimate that only about 100-200 people lived in Nazareth at that time.

Nazareth was located about three miles outside the city of "Sepphoris." Sepphoris was a major Jewish and Roman center of commerce and education. It was known as the "Jewel of the Galilee." Nazareth is where some of Sepphoris' poor workers lived. It was a town of very simple homes and part of those homes were simply caves. Clearly, Mary and her family were towards the bottom rung of the socio-economic ladder. About thirty years later Nathanael, a man invited by his friend Philip to come meet Jesus, said, "*Can anything good come out of Nazareth?*" (John 1:46). That is how most people in that day thought of Nazareth.

Unlike Zechariah, who we know was engaged in important priestly duties when Gabriel showed up, we don't know what Mary was doing. We can only assume she was doing what most girls her age would have likely been doing – things like cleaning, cooking, caring for a younger sibling, perhaps mending worn clothes. "*Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you*" (Luke 1:28), said Gabriel. The Greek word translated here as "Greetings" is a word that was sometimes used as a simple "hello," but it was also regularly translated as "Rejoice." Clearly, Mary is living in difficult life circumstances, and yet, an angel's message to her begins with a warm greeting and an invitation to rejoice. It's certainly not because of her difficult circumstances that Mary is invited to rejoice, but because the Lord is with her that she is invited to rejoice. Similarly, she is favored because God has chosen her. And like angels typically do and Gabriel is no different, he offers Mary the assurance that God is with her.

Understandably, Mary "*was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be*" (Luke 1:29). "*Don't be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God*" (Luke 1:30). Each of the four times our Christmas angels appear with a message from God they say, "Do not be afraid." Why? Well, unexpected angel appearances are startling, and fear is a typical human response. But I think it's more than that. I think angels telling us not to be afraid reflects the fact that we humans tend to be fearful creatures. But if we are going to respond in faith to God, we need to overcome our inner fears, the fears that give rise to excuses and cause us to back away.

Gabriel's message to Mary is about a big, exciting, but also scary mission. She will need to remember in the days and years ahead that the Lord is with her. Gabriel clarifies for Mary what finding favor with God will mean for her. It means she will bear a son who "*will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end*" (Luke 1:32-33).

As Mary tries to make sense out of what made no sense to her, she asks, "*How can this be, since I am a virgin?*" (Luke 1:34). According to our passage, this was her only question. Perhaps amidst that stunning moment and shocking announcement, one question was all that came to her mind. However, I can't help but think there was more going on inside her. If I had been in Mary's shoes, I would have had a few more questions. Questions such as: Will Joseph, the man with whom I'm engaged, stick around? Will my parents believe me and still

love me? Will my friends stand by me? These are typical questions that any young woman might ask even today.

But there are some very big differences between first-century Jewish society and 21<sup>st</sup>-century American society. In the first century, a woman engaged or married to one man could be put to death if it was discovered she is carrying another man's baby. According to Old Testament Law, Mary could have been stoned to death, although stoning occurred only rarely in those days because the Roman government looked very unfavorably upon both the practice as well as those who took the law in their own hands. But the threat was still a possibility because there were and still are those people who dare to take the law into their own hands. But even if not death, Mary's reputation could have been in ruins for the rest of her life. She could have been considered an outcast which was a devastating verdict for anyone. It literally meant not living in proximity to or associating with those considered to be good and faithful. It meant being looked down upon and shunned. Mary may have only voiced one question in the moment, but I wonder if additional questions came to her mind not long after.

But she listened as the barest details about God's plan were laid out by Gabriel. Gabriel tried to answer her question and help her understand by telling her that she would not get pregnant in the same way others get pregnant, and by telling her that her child would not be like anyone else, because he will be "holy"; he will be the "Son of God" (Luke 1:35). I think the angel telling her about her relative Elizabeth was meant to reassure her that there were other participants in God's big saving plan. In Elizabeth, Mary would have someone with whom she could talk with and confide in – someone who was also experiencing a totally unexpected pregnancy.

Faith tells us that God is not only with Mary, but God is with us – God is working through us and others, both people we know and those we don't know, so that we might experience the support and encouragement we need to fulfill God's mission for us. Sometimes, those others are the human angels God sends to support us in whatever God has called us to do.

Mary's response to the angel's explanation and concluding words, "*For nothing will be impossible with God*" (Luke 1:37) is "*Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word*" (Luke 1:38). Mary may have still had questions and concerns, but her response to an angel's big, consequential message from God was "yes Lord, I'm in." Mary chose obedience, and there was great blessing in that choice – blessing for her and blessing for so many others. But don't forget, there was also great worry and even heartache for Mary as the years passed and God's plan continued to unfold. Time and again people of faith are called to both receive the blessing and accept the struggle of obedience. Mary was specifically chosen to carry, give birth to, nurse and raise the Son of God. And even though she was the only person in the history of the world to receive that exact message and take on that exact responsibility, I think there is an invitation and challenge to faithfulness in this Christmas story that includes each one of us.

Last week, an angel named Gabriel was sent by God to Zechariah with a

message that his prayer had been heard and that God was about to answer not only his prayer but also the prayers of others who were hoping for change, and longing for a Savior. Today, that same angel was sent to Mary with a message that even though she was clearly not favored by her society, she was favored by God and chosen to be a major player in God's saving plan. Gabriel's message to Mary reminds us that we are all bound up, as ordinary as we are, in the mysterious work of God in the world.

Like Mary, we are also invited to receive God's mission messages and to respond in faith. We are encouraged to participate in whatever new thing God wants to do in the world through us. And like Mary, may our prayerful response to God's message be, *"Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word."* As I end this message, I invite you to say Mary's prayer with me, either silently or out loud, *"Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word."* Amen.