

AN ANGEL SHARES GOD'S ANSWER TO PRAYER

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Luke 1:5-20, 21-25, 57-66

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As we enter the season of Advent and Christmas, this time more than any other time during the year is when angels tend to be on our mind. We sing about them in some of our favorite Christmas carols like "Angels We Have Heard on High," and "Hark! The Herald Angels Sing." We see them depicted on Christmas cards, tree ornaments, tree toppers, wall decorations, and manger displays. Throughout the Bible, there are over 300 references to angels, so clearly angels are not exclusive to this season and the birth of Jesus. However, the fact that angels are present in so many of the stories that make up the Christmas story is probably why we think about angels so much at this time of the year, and it's why I decided to share with you a sermon series titled "The Angels of Christmas."

Before I jump into our first angel story, I think it might be helpful if I give you some biblical background about angels. The word for angel in the Old Testament is the Hebrew word "Malakh" and the word in the New Testament is the Greek word "Angelos." Both words mean "messenger," so an angel is a messenger from God. Perhaps many of you already knew this about angels. However, something that may shock you is this next tidbit of information. According to the Bible, angels do not have wings.

It's true that Christian artwork dating back to the fourth century and throughout the centuries including our sermon series artwork graphic depict angels as having wings, but scripturally, angels look like human beings. Whether it's been art's influence or for other reasons, many over the centuries have come to think of angels as having wings. But do you happen to remember the old TV series, "Highway to Heaven," or "Touched by an Angel"? The angels in those shows were sent by God to humans with specific missions, but they looked like regular people. That is how biblical angels are described. There are, however, creatures with wings in the Bible but they are Cherubim and Seraphim. Cherubim and Seraphim are only found around the throne of God; they are not the angels that God sends to humans.

I think another important thing to understand is that biblical angels are not deceased humans. They are a completely different category of creature who were specifically created by God. Since they are created beings, like us although different from us, angels are not to be prayed to or worshiped and should never be the focus of our faith. When we die, we will live in heaven as saints, not as angels. Now I completely believe there are times when God allows us to sense the presence of someone who has died because by doing so, we experience comfort and peace and that is exactly what God wants for us. But that's not the same as that loved-one being an angel.

Another important biblical point is that sometimes the angels sent by God are very clearly heavenly beings. But at other times, the angels sent by God are human beings. In other words, all angels are sent by God, but some are from heaven, and some are understood to be human beings. Often, angels are

described as strangers, especially in the Old Testament. It's like those stories of strangers who appear at the time of a car accident or in a hospital, who offer encouragement and help but then are nowhere to be found afterwards. Angels appear in our lives in such a way and with such an impact that it's sometimes difficult for us to tell if they are a human angel or a heavenly angel. But one thing is certain: whether the angels are of human or divine origin, God is always at work in and through these messengers to offer guidance, protection, comfort, and good news to God's children. God's angelic messengers come alongside us to let us know that God hears and sees us. They reassure us that God not only knows our struggles, but God comes to us, walks with us, and encourages us. A wonderful as well as challenging thing about this biblical understanding of angels is that each one of us by listening to God's voice and responding to God's call, can potentially be God's angel, God's messenger of hope, peace, joy and love.

However, when it comes to our Christmas angels over these four weeks of Advent there is no question as to whether they are a human or a heavenly angel. All four angels are clearly sent from God's heavenly presence. Today's first angel appears to a man named Zechariah who is married to a woman named Elizabeth. These two are very easy to overlook as we move towards Bethlehem and the birth of a Savior. But according to the Gospel of Luke, the story of Jesus begins with Zechariah and Elizabeth, the parents of John the Baptist, the one who would announce the coming of God's Messiah. They are introduced to us as a childless older couple who are both descendants of Aaron, which means they were raised in priestly families and taught since birth about service to the temple in Jerusalem. We are told that they were both righteous, and they lived *"blamelessly according to all the commandments and regulations of the Lord"* (Luke 1:6). In other words, they were very good people who took seriously the living and practicing of their faith.

As a priest, Zechariah was a member of one of 24 divisions of priests which made him one of approximately 18,000 priests. When it was time for Zechariah's group of priests to report for duty in Jerusalem, they would have cast lots to see who the one and only priest would be to enter holiest of areas in the Temple. Zechariah was the big winner; he would enter the inner sanctuary of the temple to burn incense on the holy altar, while all the other priests and the assembled people prayed outside. The burning of incense was an act of worship in which the produced smoke would carry to God the people's prayers seeking forgiveness of their sin. After the burning of the incense and the offering of the prayers, Zechariah alone would then emerge from the inner sanctuary to pronounce God's forgiveness of and blessing upon the people. So as Zechariah had represented the people to God in the sanctuary, he would then emerge and represent God's presence to the people. It was a great honor and a great responsibility. It was a job no priest could do twice in his lifetime and many never got to do it even once.

As Zechariah entered the inner sanctuary of the Temple, he set about doing his priestly duty. While he was accomplishing that duty something truly unexpected and extraordinary happened – an angel suddenly appeared. We are told it was the Angel Gabriel. Gabriel is one of only two heavenly angels mentioned by name in the Bible. The other angel being Michael. Gabriel

immediately said, *"Do not be afraid, Zechariah..."* (Luke 1:13). This is a very common thing for a heaven-sent angel to say, because apparently, the sudden appearance of an angel is both a startling and fearful experience. Gabriel continued, *"...for your prayer has been heard"* (Luke 1:13). So what prayer is the angel referring to? After all, he was offering all kinds of prayers for the people of Israel that day. But Gabriel was not referring to those prayers, but instead referring to the long-term personal prayer of a childless couple who were both "getting on in years" (Luke 1:7) and who had been desperately wanting a child for many years. *"Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you will name him John. You will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, for he will be great in the sight of the Lord"* (Luke 1:13-14). Gabriel was sent by God to Zechariah to tell him that his and Elizabeth's prayer, the request they had been making to God for years was going to happen.

Perhaps it sounded too good to be true, because questions started to pop into Zechariah's head, questions filled with doubt. Zechariah's immediate focus was on the obstacle of age rather than the sovereignty of God. We do the same thing. We look at what we consider to be the "realities" of a situation, and we draw our own conclusions as to what God can or cannot do, and what is or is not God's will. But God is not limited by our expectations. Zechariah's failure is easily our failure – a failure of imagination, a fear of disappointment, perhaps even a habit of hopelessness.

The angel's good news was for Zechariah and Elizabeth, but it wasn't only for them. The good news was also about a time of restoration and hope for the entire nation. But Zechariah had stopped expecting the unexpected. He was unprepared to believe and embrace the entirety of the good news, and so he was silenced by the angel. I imagine it was embarrassing for Zechariah to emerge from the sanctuary on that once-in-a-lifetime day and not be able to complete his job of pronouncing God's blessing on the people gathered outside. All those people who had waited in anticipation to receive the blessing of forgiveness went home without it, while Zechariah played a game of charades on the steps of the Temple.

Whereas Zechariah's muteness appears to be punishment for his doubt, his silence becomes a time of blessing as his faith and trust in God are deepened. During those nine months of silence and a miraculous pregnancy, Zechariah and Elizabeth learned the value of listening to and trusting in God, and they accepted the reality that God does not always answer prayer when or how we expect. They learned that instead of being doubtful when God shows up differently and answers come differently, it's best to be receptive and thankful.

When their son was born nine months later and as the eighth day, the child naming day, arrived, both Elizabeth and Zechariah were unquestionably obedient to the Gabriel's instructions, *"You will name him John"* (Luke 1:13). They went against the cultural norm of naming the first male child after his father, and instead named him "John," meaning "Gift of God" or "God is gracious." At that moment of hope-filled obedience Zechariah's mouth was opened and his speech was restored. The one who had received God's message that his prayer had been answered and there was hope for his future is now able to share a message

of hope with others, and that's exactly what he does. Zechariah becomes God's messenger as he shares with the people that God has also heard their prayers and was raising up for them a Savior.

Zechariah learned that God's answer to prayer may not come when or how he expected it to come, but nonetheless, God hears, God shows up, and God's presence brings the light of hope. Zechariah learned that faith is about expecting the unexpected, believing in the unimaginable, and trusting God's way. By the time Zechariah spoke, his faith had become so much more than a serious commitment to duty, it had become a deep and passionate faith that was firmly grounded in hope. As the light of God broke into the darkness of Zechariah and Elizabeth's lives, it was also clear that the same light was beginning to break into the lives of others living in darkness.

Like Zechariah and Elizabeth, each one of us certainly experience our own personal struggles with darkness. Perhaps for us it's the darkness of worry for the health and security of our children, parents, family members and dear friends. Perhaps it's the darkness of our own addictions, financial insecurities, failing health and relationships, or the darkness of our own physical or spiritual barrenness. Perhaps it's the darkness of current political tensions, and the fear of looming wars. But like Elizabeth and Zechariah, might we experience a light shining in our darkness, a glimmer of hope and peace for us, our nation, and our world? Like them, might the angel's good news that God hears and responds to prayer allow our initial fear and disbelief to be replaced with the boldness of bearing witness to One who is doing a new and unexpected thing not only in our individual lives but also in the world.

As we enter the season of Advent, we do so knowing that this time of the year is busy, noisy and stressful. We are so easily driven by our schedules as we get caught up in the routines of our long-established traditions. If honest, most of us may not be expecting things to be much different this year than they were last year or the year before that. We don't really expect God to come to us with an unexpected message, and we don't expect the birth of a Savior to impact our lives any differently than it did last year. And mostly, we want it that way or at least we are comfortable with it that way. But this year, might it be different for you? Might you enter this Advent season not only confident that God hears your prayers but also ready to receive an unexpected message from God?

Today's first angel of Christmas assures us that God can be counted on to show up and to address the deepest yearnings of our hearts. If we are open to receive an unexpected answer to our prayers and a message of hope from God this year, then perhaps our time of Advent preparation can be more than our typical holiday routine. Like Zechariah, may this be the year we not only receive good news from God, but also the year we find our voices and proclaim the good news that God is bringing the light of hope into our dark times and places. So, whatever our personal experiences of struggle and darkness, may we know both the blessing of God's Light in our lives and the blessing of being God's light in the lives of others. Amen.