

Angels All Around

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Luke 2:8-20

Sermon Series:
Songs of the Messiah

Because these angels are the real live, real deal angels! They are truly the closest to God and to God's outrageous heavenly world.

Let's spend some moments looking at these angels. Do you notice how, whenever an angel shows up, fear and terror strike? This isn't just your run-of-the-mill fear, either (what the shepherds encounter here is scarier than bungee jumping off the North Rim of the Grand Canyon, or a grizzly bear outside your tent, or jumping out a plane at 14,000 feet somewhere over the Hawaiian Islands!). No, the Greek word here is intentionally redundant. When the Angel appears, the Shepherds are "being afraid with a great fear!" Why? Because these angels are the real live, real deal angels! They are truly the closest to God and to God's outrageous heavenly world. These "Messengers," they are fierce and magnificent. They are seraph-angels with 6 wings on them, who overwhelm and anoint the prophet Isaiah. They are those wild-winged creatures ("full of eyes inside and all around them!") in John's book of Revelation. In Luke's gospel they are beyond electrifying. They are in no way, shape, or form the angels that we seem to imagine and obsess over. You know the ones: the Raphael angels – the dimpled, plump, cupcake-like angels.

Luke's angels are NOT the Precious Moment angels; they are NOT the Barbie angels. When God's angels show up, watch out! Right away, though, they re-assure us not to be afraid, and they call us to take Joy.

Here's the scene: In the fields outside the tiny village of Bethlehem, the shepherds are huddled around the fire. It's late at night. They pull up their woolen overalls to keep warm. All around them, their sheep are lying on the ground. Up on the hill there's a shepherd on guard against any encroaching, nocturnal predators. The moon is out and the brilliant stars; the sky is crystal clear. It looks like any other night.

But suddenly a light appears; it's more intense than any light they've ever seen. The shepherds have to cover their eyes. The light is too bright, too blinding. They are seeing what the Bible calls *doxa*—an overwhelming brightness, a radiance that burns like fire. The angel of the Lord appears to the shepherds. Remember, these shepherds, they're just ordinary, hard-working guys. They're your regular, don't have-it-all-together kind of people. They

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are like the folks working the night shift at Target restocking the shelves. An angel appears to them in the Home Entertainment section. The *doxa*, the Glory of God, appears, and for a moment, the curtain between heaven and earth opens. The curtain opens announcing the Good News of the Heaven-to-Earth Child, the God-in-the-Flesh baby! It's an outrageous moment!

It's such a mind-blowing scene that we and the shepherds need those first comforting words from the angel, "Don't be afraid." Then the angel goes on to tell them Good News of a Great Joy (and get this) for all people. It is good news of great joy for ALL people. Not just for the holy and religious people in the Temple (or at VPC); not just for kings and queens and political rulers; not just for people in high places. This Good News of Great Joy is for ALL people. Imagine that: this good news is for the retail clerk or the flight attendant having to work on Christmas Day. It's for the ER nurse or police officer or cab driver on-call today. This Good News of Great Joy is for ALL people. For the homeless at the Lamb Center this morning; for your neighbor, perhaps, who hasn't ever met Jesus; or your neighbor who is alone without any family. This news of a Savior-Messiah is for ALL people.

This is the other beautifully stunning thing. This Child, Jesus, who is born to a teenage

mother and common husband, this child is the new "Savior and Lord." These titles, "savior and lord," they're not uncommon in Luke's time. They were familiar in Luke's 1st-century world. "Savior and Lord," actually, were titles given to the Emperor Augustus, the mighty emperor over all the Roman Empire. In fact, Emperor Augustus was the one who ordered the census that brought Joseph and Mary on a donkey to the Little Town of Bethlehem in the first place.

Augustus was "savior and lord." They were the titles ONLY to be used for the king. These titles weren't to be taken lightly in Imperial Rome, unless you were willing to face the death penalty, like being locked up or fed to lions.

The really powerful thing about today—God thought that these sacred titles, Savior and Lord, really belonged to someone, well, sacred. These titles belong to God's own Son, the Messiah, and no one else. Today there is only One deserving of these titles: Light of the World, Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Prince of Peace—Jesus the Christ, Savior and Lord.

These angels, do you know this, their sole purpose in life is to go around praising God continually and for all eternity? "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom God favors!" This is their single-focus: praising God continually

The other sole purpose of God's angels?

To watch over God's people.

To protect God's people.

and for all eternity! What a purpose. What a life! Praising God always and forever!

The other sole purpose of God's angels? To watch over God's people. To protect God's people. God appoints angels to guard those whom God loves. Angels visit Abraham to encourage him and his aging wife, Sarah, promising them a son. Angels come to surround Daniel in the Lion's Den. At the beginning of his ministry, angels come to sooth and strengthen Jesus in the wilderness. At the end of his ministry, Jesus is comforted by an angel, in those anxious moments, in the Garden of Gethsemane. The Psalmist says that "the Lord will command His angels to guard you in all your ways" (Psalm 91:11). God sends God's angels to guard the ones whom Jesus Christ has come to save — to watch over and protect the poor, the ordinary, the insignificant and the weak. Jesus is Savior and Lord for them. God's love is for them. God's charge for us, then, is to be angels to them and to bring them Good News of Great Joy.

You may have heard this story on NPR's Morning Edition not too long ago. Last month, one cold night, two women were stranded in their car on an isolated Wisconsin highway, when a Good Samaritan, an angel — a man shows up. He stopped to change their flat tire. Driving off, this 61-year-old man said, "Someone up above put me in

the right place at the right time [to help out]." Moments later, driving along, that man had a heart attack. The women spotted his car down the road and they then pulled over (to help him!). The women told the Star Tribune later that one of them called for help, while the other, who just happened to be a nurse's assistant, used CPR to save the man's life.

Here's our charge for Christmas Day, into the Christmas Season, into the New Year. Let us be like those angels and "save a life." By God's grace, let's proclaim the Good News with Great Joy, number one. And, number two, let us be angels to the ones, most of all, whom Jesus came to save—the poor, weak, ordinary, and insignificant. This IS the Glorious Good News. Jesus Christ is born today! Jesus Christ has come to make life new for you and for me, for all people! Be joyful; praise God and proclaim it. Announce it, like the angel. Be an angel for the Savior. Be an angel who changes a flat tire, or an angel who gives CPR and saves a life, or anything else in between! Be an angel who "pays it forward." Be an angel who proclaims it and who pays it forward, who pays God's greatest gift of Love forward!

"Unto *you*, this very day, a Savior, the Messiah, is born; unto you a son, Jesus Christ our Lord, is given"—for you and all God's people! This is THE most beautifully, stunning

GIFT of LOVE. So, be an angel, will you? Proclaim this LOVE, and pay it forward.

Let Us Pray:

*Proclaim this
LOVE, and
pay it
forward.*

Immanuel, Savior of the World, Good Shepherd, change us as we consider the message of Your angels, we pray. How would you have us respond to Your Good News of glad tidings? On this Christmas morning, we say we have faith to believe; do we also have the faith to act? Where will our faith take us? Will our faith be only private and personal, or will it motivate us to communicate and live out the Good News of salvation through Christ? We may feel ordinary and inadequate, like the shepherds; but we would trust, by Your Spirit's power and grace, that You have extraordinary things for us to do. Prepare us for our Christmas mission, and empower us by Your Spirit. And may we, like the angels, glorify and praise You, this season and beyond.