



## “Singing with Angels”

Christmas Day  
Monday, December 25, 2017

10:00 am Service

The Reverend John H. Brock  
Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church  
Camp Hill, Pennsylvania

Hebrews 1:1-12; John 1:1-14

Grace to you and peace, from God who is, who was, and who is to come. Amen.

We humans seem to have a fascination with . . . Angels. Look at our television shows: *Touched by an Angel*; *Supernatural*; *Joan of Arcadia*; or the latest one, *Kevin (Probably) Saves the World*. We've had movies about angels, ranging from comedies, like *Heaven Can Wait* or *Michael*, to 'end of days' style movies like *Legion* or *Dogma*. And let's not forget that Christmas time classic, *It's a Wonderful Life*. Angels turn up as characters in movies and TV even when they're not the primary focus, as in my personal favorite, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*.

We really seem to be *captivated* by angels, even though we don't really know what, exactly, angels are. Some say angels are dead humans who get wings. News flash: they're not. They are heavenly beings, we know that much.

Angels show up in scripture. In Isaiah we get this description of seraphs, a kind of angel:

<sup>2</sup> *Seraphs were in attendance above (the Lord); each had six wings: with two they covered their faces, and with two they covered their feet, and with two they flew.*  
(Isaiah 6:2 NRSV)

Yeah, that's gives us a weird kind of mental picture.

Sometimes, angels are there to help a person, Like in Genesis 22, when an angel appeared to Abraham and Isaac on the mountain. As Abraham was supposed to sacrifice Isaac, an angel provided a ram to replace the boy as the sacrifice.

There are other times when angels are sent to *prevent* something from happening, like in Numbers 22, when the seer Balaam was hired to curse an enemy, without realizing the enemy he had been hired to curse was in reality the people of Israel. So, when an angel of The Lord attempted to “divert” Balaam (that is, try to kill him) from his cursing gig, it was Balaam's donkey that saw the angel and was able to prevent Balaam's immediate demise.

There are instances when angels actually *cause* death & destruction. There is the time in Genesis 19, when a couple of angels showed up in Sodom, and Abraham's nephew Lot gave them a place to sleep, except the other townsmen had more nefarious things on their minds. So, to prevent Lot and family from becoming ash, the angles grabbed the family and hauled them out of town before literal fire and brimstone rained down upon

the place.

It really seems that, in general, angels do **not** want to cause a commotion, yet a commotion is usually almost exactly what happens. Especially when angels deal with every day, common folks. Because when angels appear to everyday, common folk, those same people . . . are terrified. Apparently, like in Isaiah, angels are pretty scary.

Last night we heard in our reading from Luke's gospel:

*8 In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. 9 Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. (Luke 2:8-9 NRSV)*

What is it that the angel says to the shepherds? **Do not be afraid.** Yet, what were the shepherds? *Terrified.* The Greek word there is *phobon*, the root of our English word for *phobia*. It can be translated as: *causing fear; source of fear;* or the one I really liked: *'feeling of need to escape from or avoid a threat'*

What DO we know about angels? They are celestial beings. They are **not** of this earth. And, they are beyond humans. In encounters with ordinary, everyday people, who aren't expecting visitations, angels can be frightening. Again and again throughout scripture we read of encounters with angels; and again and again, humans are prompted to "not be afraid", when in actuality, those very same humans are scared down to their very core. Which goes to show that, in practically every case, angels are scary beings.

So why all this talk about angels? Because in trying to figure out this Christ child, whose birth we celebrate today, it is sometimes easier to define what he is **not**, rather than what he **is**. That, I think, is what the author Hebrews is trying to do. To help us understand who and what Jesus **is**, in part by helping us understand who and what Jesus is **not**. Because who Jesus is, is something humans struggle with. Even today we struggle to understand who and what Jesus is. This Trinity, this "three in one, and one in three." We want to get a handle on **what does scripture mean** when it says, as we heard in John's gospel:

*the Word became flesh, and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth. (John 1:14)*

We get a little better understanding when we look at the Greek and get a literal translation of that passage:

*and the Word became flesh, and tented among us,*

or

*tabernacled among us*

or as **The Message** translation says:

*The Word became flesh and blood, and moved into the neighborhood*

The author is trying to tell us, very simply, that this Christ Child is **not** part of the creation. Which is what angels are: part of the creation, that is, *created*. Angels are created to proclaim the glory of God, to bring the message of the Word.

But *Who, What,* is Jesus? Is he Human? Divine? Created? Creator? These are Big, Theological issues, that have consequences. If we say Jesus is only *human*, then does that

mean that ANY human can become sinless, can become like God? (Which is, to the best of my understanding, Mormon theology).

If Jesus is totally *divine*, then was he ever really human? Could he die? What good was his "death" if he really didn't "die"? Because if he's not actually "human," how then could he shed his blood for our sins? (that line of thinking is also a heresy).

Was Jesus created by God? Because if he was, that would make him subservient to Gd. But he can't be *both* **created by** and **equal to** Gd.

These are some of the issues with which we wrestle. And the author of Hebrews tries to help us comprehend this by using an example of what the people can understand: Angels.

Angels **are** part of the creation. But as we heard in the opening verses of John's gospel, Jesus was there, at creation, at the beginning; Jesus is not *part of* the creation, but part of the *creating process*:

*In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was God, and the Word was with Gd. He was in the beginning with Gd. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being <sup>4</sup> in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. <sup>5</sup> The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.*

This is also why we get the language in our creed:

*We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the only Son of God, eternally begotten of the Father, God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, of one Being with the Father. Through him all things were made.*

So, what **are** angels supposed to do? What we heard them do in Luke: sing God's praise. give glory to God in all they do. Bring the glory of God to we humans.

You know, there is one rather notable exception to that "do not be afraid" phrase from an angel, and it comes from, of all people, a young, betrothed, girl, who rather than being terrified,

*"she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be." Luke 1:29*

That is, of course, Mary. *Theotokos*, Θεοτόκος "God bearer" Mary, mother of Jesus.

Which is what I'm asking us to take away this Christmas morning: that in all aspects of our lives, the joyous and calm and cheerful, as well as the dark and scary and fear-filled, we need to remember always: God with us; Immanuel.

Let us **humans** be like the angels that we might go forth, singing God's praise; that we might be surrounded by God's angels, filled with the light of Christ, proclaiming The One who is above all beings, both human **and** angel, Jesus, the Christ Child, born this blessed day.

Amen.

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