

“Hear the Angels”
Isaiah 63:7-9; Matthew 2:13-15, 19-23
Sermon

The third grade Sunday School teacher told the class she would give a prize to the child that drew the best picture of any portion of the Christmas story. When the pictures were drawn, one stood out among the rest, not because it was superior in any way, but because the teacher did not know what it was. “Tell me about your picture Annie.” The answer speaks for itself. “This is the flight to Egypt. Here is the airplane. Here is Mary and Joseph. Here is the baby Jesus.” “I see. Tell me about the person in front of the airplane.” “That is Pontius the Pilot.” Annie had heard the story, or should I say, missed its meaning.

Annie was not unlike the young boy who attended a Vacation Bible School I led years ago. He lived in a very over crowded neighborhood, in a very crowded apartment. It was noisy morning, noon, and night. The kids often played in the street, dodging cars and buses. At the end of VBS, which ran for five days a week all through July and August, I asked the children what was their favorite part of the program. One youngster said the singing was his favorite. “Did you have a favorite song?” “Oh yes, we sang it every day. Can you guess the hymn?” “For all the Saints, who from their labors rest.” He too had heard the words, but had missed their meaning.

We are amused by these stories. Yet, isn't there a hint of recognition in these episodes? Haven't we all heard the stories of redemption, of God's actions in the world? Haven't we all heard them from our own perspectives and possibly missed their message?

For instance we have heard the story of Mary and Joseph, having been warned by an angel to do so, fleeing to Egypt with their baby, in order to protect him from the meanness and wrath of Herod.

In our day and time, the story doesn't add up. In this day of computer projections, we might more readily believe that Joseph knew the probability of his son being destroyed by Herod, who recognized that Jesus would be a threat to his power. But being warned by an angel? Come on now. No one really believes in angels, do they?

Indeed in our present moment we are far too sophisticated to hear such a tale and give it much credence. We recognize it as folklore from a bygone time and place.

Historically, it is simply no longer believable. The talk of angels visiting and speaking with human beings and giving them direction just does not make any sense.

But there we have a problem. At least we do, if we believe the Bible is uniquely the Word of God. Not that we have to take the stories literally, but we do have to stop and ask. "What is being said here? What is this talk of Angels? It is not as if today's scripture reading is the only one that speaks of Angels.

If you recall, it is an angel who tells Abraham that a substitute sacrifice for Isaac can be found in the thickets.

It is an angel who warns Jacob of Laban's attempt to cheat him of his wages.

It is an angel who tells Moses the meaning of the burning bush.

It is an angel who protects Jacob and leads the Israelites through the wilderness.

It is an angel who announces the coming birth of Jesus.

It is an angel that appears to the shepherds.

Angels are a part of our stories of faith. We are left in this very different age, long after the advent of these stories, with the question. What do we do with the tales of angels?

Perhaps, quite simply we pay attention to the message they bring. Perhaps, as in any good story or movie, we simply suspend judgment allowing the stories to speak to us. Perhaps we listen to what they say to us. Maybe we listen for a message from God.

The Christmas stories in the gospels offer an idea of what this means, of how we hear the message regardless the means by which it is delivered.

In recent weeks, angels have appeared in our Scriptures. One appears to Mary and Joseph. Both hear the same message. Mary, young and unprepared for a baby is frightened and confused when she hears an angel.

Joseph, angry, distraught and disappointed, is prepared to divorce Mary when he hears an angel.

Another angel appears to the shepherds.

The wise men seeking Jesus are warned to take a different route home, a safer route, by an angel.

So what do we do with all these tales of angels? We listen to their message. It is always the same. ***Fear not.***

Fear not Mary, God will see you through these tough days.

Fear not Joseph, what God has asked of you, God will make possible.

Fear not shepherds, the unknown always comes with fear, but God will always go with you.

Fear not wise men, you don't have to have all the answers, do as you are led to do, and you will be fine.

Fear not. That is the message of the angels. How or why we hear the message is less important than that we hear it.

Listen again to the message from Isaiah we heard read this morning. In it Isaiah sees his people's afflictions. The Israelites have returned to Jerusalem, their exile is over. But things are not as they hoped they would be. They are wondering if the long wait, as they clung to their stories of faith, has been worth it. In the midst of their questions Isaiah calls them to ***fear not***. He reminds them of their history and of how God has somehow always been in their midst and of the promise that God will always be there for them.

In all their affliction he was afflicted, and the angel of his presence saved them; in his love and in his pity he redeemed them; he lifted them up and carried them all the days of old.

The angel of his presence saved them.... There is no reason to fear. The Israelites needed to hear that. We need to hear that. We need the angels, to believe that Eternal Love, that God, always finds a voice.

Joseph and Mary heard the voice and arrived safely in Egypt.

The shepherds heard the voice and came to the manger to see Jesus.

The angels still speak. They call to us to give up control, to open ourselves for surprises, to embrace new possibilities, rather than fear them.

Hear the angels calling us to ***Fear not***, calling us to trust that somehow God's eternal love surrounds us and will never let us go.