

Rumors of Angels

sermon digest

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Luke 2:8-14

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The third canticle in Luke's birth narrative appears after the birth of Jesus within the announcement of good news to the shepherds in the field. The canticles of Mary, Zechariah, and Simeon are human songs that reflect a rich Jewish heritage. The "*Gloria*" erupts from heavenly hosts praising God and announcing the gospel of the birth of Messiah. The song contains no verbs, no elaborate prophecy or commentary on the event; it is a simple doxology of praise to God and peace to earth. Raymond Brown detected overtures of Isaiah in the revelation to shepherds, especially the anticipation of Isaiah 52:7 "How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of the messenger who announces peace, who brings good news, who announces salvation, who says to Zion, 'Your God reigns.'" Yet, the message was a direct challenge to Rome. At the birth of an emperor, the Roman custom was for poets and orators to announce the birth in the palace halls with a declaration of peace and prosperity for the Empire. Luke's proclamation from heaven comes to common shepherds in the field and announces the birth of "a Savior, Christ the Lord." The announcement to shepherds is consistent with the songs of the Anawim; the poor have good news preached to them.

Heaven sings. The age of electronics has desensitized our ears. We have grown accustomed to the music of Christmas piped into the malls and parking lots intended to infect us with a spirit of extravagant generosity. The music can be both ubiquitous and annoying. I would dare suggest that modern shepherds would hardly notice the sound of a chorus in the air. A few years ago one of my neighbors had a problem with skunks nesting in a hole at the corner of his patio. I passed on a suggestion from The Varmint Busters that skunks will leave if there is too much noise around. Lincoln followed my suggestion by setting up a stereo sound system on his patio and playing music all day. There was a problem. Lincoln only played classical music, and the skunks found the noise more attractive than repelling. I noticed that music in the air did not strike anyone in the neighborhood as a heavenly event; it simply reminded us of Lincoln's war.

To appreciate Luke's message, we need to lay aside the idea of a Ken Burns documentary and think of musical drama. The stories surrounding the birth of Jesus are intended to inspire, perhaps even to entertain, as well as to inform. We should not be surprised at an offstage chorus or a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and singing. The scene in Luke is not far from the moment in theater, especially in opera, when the whole company bursts out in a common chorus.

For generations Christians have puzzled over the wild imagery in the final book of our New Testament, Revelation. Jim Blevins wrote a commentary in 1984 *Revelation as Drama* in which he attempted to make sense of the imagery in Revelation by structuring the book as a stage play designed for performance in the Ephesian theater near the Isle of Patmos where John was imprisoned. The birth narratives in Luke and Matthew share common ground with John's visions. The visions rise as a challenge to "the powers that be" in the oppressive rule of Rome, and they work the fringes of history. The literalist distortion of Revelation, as if it were a roadmap to future events, has repeatedly led to a dead end when the events of history do not conform to the Revelation imagery or the creativity of the interpreter. A similar distortion occurs when the truth of the gospel is limited to historical fact.

Angels mediate the message. The angelic revelations in the birth narratives are a sign "unto us" that we are dancing at the edges of history here. In Matthew, an unnamed angel appears in dreams to Joseph to identify the source of Mary's pregnancy and, after the birth, to warn of Herod's threat. The revelation through sleep certainly implies a subconscious twilight zone as the meeting place. In Luke, the Angel Gabriel (also named in the Book of Daniel) brings the message to Zechariah of the conception of John and to Mary the revelation of the virginal conception of Jesus. Raymond Brown suggests that the naming of Gabriel in Luke is a link to the liturgical angel of Daniel who appears at the hours of prayer and sacrifice. Gabriel may also be a connection to the common political situation of Daniel and Luke.

The Apocalyptic hope of divine intervention grew out of the special need of desperate political moments in history. An angel of the Lord appeared at the birth of Jesus to the shepherds in the field

to announce "good tidings of great joy" accompanied by "a multitude of the heavenly host" singing the "*Gloria*." In general, biblical angels appear at the intersection of heaven and earth, at the point of the divine-human encounter to extraordinary persons and events. What point in history is more exceptional and more clearly the meeting of God with humanity than the Incarnation of the Son of God?

We should not confuse biblical angels with the 1990's obsession with angels. In the early 1970's Billy Graham decided to preach a sermon on angels. When he could not locate current resources on the subject, he decided to write a book *Angels: God's Secret Agents*, a descriptive study of biblical angels. It was an immediate best-seller and became his most popular publication, but it also seemed to be the beginning of a bandwagon. By 1995, Gannett News Service reported 200 angel books in print. Angels not only crowded the shelves in bookstores, they spilled over into family TV programs and dominated religious features in popular magazines. The pop angels fit better with New Age spirituality than with biblical messengers of God. Seminary president Malcolm Warford viewed the trend as less than Christian: "When you don't believe in God, you believe in every god that comes along—a tame domesticated one with a small 'g.'" The guardian angels complemented the "meism" of the time and New Age spirituality. Having a personal angel to run errands, to protect **me** from harm, and to advance **my** ambitions is attractive in a culture of economic uncertainty, social threat, and fierce competition. The shortsighted view of life obsessed with immediate success and knee-jerk reaction to economic trends creates a market for a religion which serves private, selfish desires. The trend toward tailoring religion to the vision of the people is as old as religion. Even Christian religion needs to be challenged by the holiness of God in every generation. We must not forget that human nature ever drifts toward idolatry.

Protecting the idea of God from the trend toward idolatry was behind the denial of biblical scholar Claus Westermann. He declared, "No! There are no angels!" That is, angels have no independent existence or identity. Biblical angels are always messengers from God providing a buffer between the glory of God and human mortality. In the Gospels, angels are significant at the birth and the resurrection of Christ and except for a couple of vague references in Acts do not appear again until the Apocalypse of John. Biblical angels never occupy center stage as the subject on which worship should focus or from whom help comes. Angels come from God and point to God. The Greek *angelos* like it's Hebrew counterpart means "messenger" and has a variety of applications sometimes referring to human rather than supra-human beings. On the other extreme, the Old Testament "Angel of Yahweh" may well refer to the immediate presence of God.

What is the message to the Shepherds in the fields and to the worshiper in the pew? Christ is one sent from God. Advent, the coming of God, and Christmas, the sending of the Christ, are close encounters with the eternal God. Take off your shoes with Moses before the burning bush. You are on holy ground. This is a place of worship.

Glory belongs to God. The descendants of Israel were led out of Egypt by the pillar of cloud by day and fire by night. Moses came down from the mountain with the Ten Commandments and with his face radiating the presence of God. We are reminded by John, "God is light and in him there is no darkness at all (1 John 1:5) ." In the darkness of night the glory of God enveloped the shepherds with light. In the darkness of life, the glory of God envelopes the worshipers with light transcending all of the fears and threats of the political and economic situation of our time.

The Greek word for glory is *doxa*—a doxology of light, a call to worship. The glory of God appears again in Christ on the mountaintop of transfiguration and again in his resurrection. Historically Christian art has employed the halo of light as a sign of the special presence of God over characters deserving our reverence, and we light the candles of Advent as a sign that the message, like the light, is from God.

"Glory to God in the highest heaven,
and on earth peace."