

Messengers of Advent

sermon digest

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Luke 1:26-31, Matthew 1:18-21; Luke 2:8-14

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This is the season of angels. Angels decorate our homes, hang from the light poles in town, appear on magazine covers and Christmas cards, and nearly dominate the spirituality of our age. According to pollsters, with or without wings, angels are on the rise. A 2005 Fox News poll found that seventy-nine percent of Americans believe in angels, up ten percent from a December, 1993, cover page article in *Time* magazine. The phenomenal interest in the supra-normal is particularly strong among young people. George Barna's poll found that eighty-nine percent of teenagers believe in angels and thirty-five percent claim to have actually encountered an angel, demon, or some other supernatural being. Since the youth acceptance of angels is about double that of their parents, one has to wonder about the role of technology. Youth is characterized by relying more on electronic media for information and contact with the outside world than their parents.

Albert Winseman, religion and values editor with Gallup Polls, observes a strange paradox: an increased openness to the supernatural has grown alongside increased secularization, the rejection of traditional religion. Angels are particularly popular in New Age spirituality characterized by the distinctive statement, "I am spiritual but not religious." Just what are people seeking in the ethereal realm of angels that they do not find in religion?

Eileen Freeman, the director of Angelwatch Foundation and author of *Touched by Angels*, *Angelic Healing*, and *The Angel's Little Instruction Book* describes contemporary angels as nonthreatening, wise and loving beings who offer help regardless of whether they are asked. In Freeman's opinion, we do not experience angels because we mostly ignore their helpful presence. With a master's degree in theology from Notre Dame, Freeman's "angelwatch" is a product of exceptional encounters with angels from childhood into her adult life. According to her website, as a child she was comforted by an angel at the death of her grandmother; as an adult, she was prevented by an angel from entering a building where a woman was being stabbed to death by a drug dealer. The apparent difference between Freeman and some of us who have never experienced such intervention is simple trust in the supernatural.

Christian theologians do not tend to view the New Age spirituality in a particularly positive light. As President of Bangor Seminary, Malcolm Warford commented: "When you don't believe in God, you believe in every god that comes along—a tame domesticated one with a small 'g'." Ancient pagans wanted a god small enough to park on a pedestal or shelf. Modern pagans seek a genie in a bottle or a rabbit's foot. Notre Dame professor Lawrence Cunningham quipped: "If people want to get in touch with their angels, they'd be a lot better off working in a soup kitchen than attending a seminar." Servants of God *serve* rather than seeking ways to *be served*.

In the human struggle with evil—sickness, violence, depravation and death—people seek Emmanuel, "God with us." In the annunciation of the pregnancy of Mary and the birth of the child Jesus, Joseph meets an unnamed angel in a dream. In each of Matthew's angelic visitations with Joseph, the angelic revelation is through the medium of a dream. When the baby Jesus is threatened by Herod, Joseph is warned by an angel through a dream. When Herod dies and it is time to return home to Nazareth, Joseph is "suddenly" advised by an angel through a dream. This may be a play on the common name with the Old Testament patriarch Joseph, son of Jacob/Israel, who was known as a "dreamer" and interpreter of dreams. But the dream revelation also bridges the distance between God and the man Joseph. Rather than a direct confrontation and revelation from God, Joseph is insulated from the terrible presence of God by dreams and an angelic messenger of God. The Greek word *aggelos*, like the Hebrew counterpart *malak*, means "messenger, ambassador." The Jewish culture into which Jesus was born had long believed that God speaks through the spiritual presence of angels, and angelology was particularly significant in the period prior to Jesus' birth.

The angelic messenger in Matthew is "the angel of the Lord." When the "angel of JHWH" was revealed to Moses in the burning bush, the presence was the very being of God. Direct experience with the Almighty in the Old Testament was rare. Moses on Mount Sinai was warned that the immediate presence of God meant death, but he was allowed to view the back side of God in passing. The "why" of angels in the Old Testament seems to have been directly rooted in the Jewish view of

the God of creation. The God of the universe was beyond knowing, and the presence of God was feared.

I find something here in common with the modern explosion of interest in angels. The God of traditional religion speaks through institutions like the church and the clergy. God is often identified with the rules and regulations of religion and touches us with prohibitions, fear, and death and touches us with the cold structures of religion. An indelible tie between the Inquisition of the Middle Ages, the wars of religion, questionable moral prohibitions, the abuse of power and the God of religion has helped give birth not only to New Age spirituality but to the New Atheism that erupted after the attack on the World Trade Buildings in New York. The horrible decrees of Almighty God do not meet people at the point of their hunger for God. A benevolent angel that seems to be closer at hand, more loving, and compassionate is to be preferred. In times of crisis and great human distress people do not seek the “God up there” so much as the “God down here.”

But I am not so sure that our modern age is so different from the people of the antiquated religion of the Jews in the time of Jesus. Much of the theme in the ministry of Jesus was the tension between conventional religion and the word of Jesus, “but I say to you.” The Pharisees were pious, religious people whose theology had more in common with Jesus than their competitor Sadducees, but their institutions of religion seemed to have been more important than the value of persons, and their God seemed to be imprisoned in their rules and regulations.

But before the birth story is told in the Gospel of Matthew, the angelic revelation through Joseph’s dream is that the child will be named “Joshua/Jesus,” Savior. He will be Emmanuel, God with us.

Our need for worship reaches for the eternal God who transcends our scientific probes into the universe and our highest hopes for the future. Raymond Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah*, notes the unusual occurrence of a named angel appearing to Zechariah and to Mary in Luke. The angel Gabriel, appearing only in Daniel and Luke in the Bible, brings together the similar political crises under Persian-Greek domination in Daniel and under Roman oppression in Luke. The angelic refuge of the New Age spirituality seems directly related to the despair and fear that dogs our steps. Robert C. Smith in the *Presence of Angels* identifies our time as an era of transition, a gateway into a new period in history. Angels are hard-times messengers who bring comfort and understanding to events that not only threaten our lives but threaten the very foundations of human existence. You can hear the drumbeat of revolution in the oppression of the poor in the “Magnificat,” the song of Mary (Luke 2:50ff): “His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation. He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty.” Brown identifies the canticles in the birth narrative of Luke with the Jewish poor, who cry out to God for redemption from their bondage to the evil powers of their time.

The “powers” of economic and political oppression counter the angels revealing the message of God. Walter Wink ties the spiritual “powers” that dominate the corporations and political authorities of our time with the demons that seek to hold us in bondage. They are not supernatural beings, but institutional powers of dominance. Angels like demons seem to be a part of the ancient culture that reached out in the darkness of a primitive world for spiritual answers to material issues. A simple answer to the angel question is to note that we no longer attribute mental illness and epilepsy to demon possession. Why should we look to angels rather than to doctors and drugs for healing?

The angels in Matthew and Luke are book ends to the Gospels. They communicate the direct message of God only at the beginning, the birth narratives, and the end, the resurrection event—the moments in the gospel which most speak to the closeness of heaven to earth of God to humankind. The angels do not introduce a new religion to replace the old Judaism or the New Christianity or a new god to fix all of our problems with the God of creation. They do not serve as little gods to run errands, to protect “me” from harm, and to advance my ambitions. In this age of economic uncertainty, of political revolution, and international terror we do not need the little gods. The angelic messengers of Advent speak for the eternal God to our deepest need of God with us.