

“Angels: God’s Faithful Messengers”

Luke 1-2; Matt. 1-2

As believers in Christ if we were to ask ourselves in the context of the Christmas narrative around the birth of Jesus, ‘Christmas isn’t Christmas without . . .’ we would definitely include Joseph, Mary, shepherds, wise men and someone will eventually say angels or at least Gabriel. Last week we saw that John the Baptist is a significant part of the coming of Jesus to earth, yet none of our manger sets include him. There’s a couple of other people that our manger sets don’t include that we will talk about next week but many manger sets do include an angel at the manger. Even though there were no angels at the manger itself. Angels (Gabriel) spoke to Zechariah and Mary. An angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a few of his dreams (possibly Gabriel but we’re not told).

The angel of the Lord showed himself to shepherds the night Jesus was born but in the fields along with a host of angels. And the wise men were warned in a dream to go home another route, most likely by an angel similar to Joseph’s dreams.

So lots of angelic activity surrounding the birth of Jesus. Seven scenes that I counted. Why? What’s their purpose and how does it impact us? Most of don’t think about them a whole lot but when we see why God sent them we’ll actually understand how much God cares about you and me.

What are angels? Spiritual beings created by God to be His messengers. The Greek word ‘angelos’ means ‘a messenger’. Do they have wings? Except for the strange cherubim and seraphim we are not told in the Bible that angels have wings. So why do artists often depict angels with wings? Possibly because of a misreading of Psalm 104:3-4

- ¹ *Praise the LORD, O my soul. O LORD my God, you are very great; you are clothed with splendor and majesty.*
- ² *He wraps himself in light as with a garment; he stretches out the heavens like a tent*
- ³ *and lays the beams of his upper chambers on their waters. He makes the clouds his chariot and rides on the wings of the wind. 4 He makes winds his messengers, flames of fire his servants.*

Since the word ‘messenger’ is the Hebrew word for angel and because the author of Heb. 1:7 says this verse refers to angels, we can safely see how God uses angels as His messengers. The clouds supposedly have wings not angels. And when they appear before humans they take on human appearance; so no wings.

But why does God send angels around the time of Jesus’ birth? If you skim over a concordance to see how often angels appear to people in the Bible you get a few occasions in Genesis, Judges, a couple of times in Daniel, a lot of visions involving angels in Zechariah but overall they just don’t make that many appearances, except in the Book of Revelation. And here, at Jesus’ birth. So, angels are a significant part of both comings of Christ. Their central function is to be God’s messengers. Messengers of what? His Word. The appearance of angels at the birth of Jesus reminds us how special the Word of God is. And here’s what we can take comfort from by the appearance of angels at Jesus’ birth:

Assure Us that Every Word from God is True

We need to be reminded of this because we are to live by faith in the words of God. How do you know that faith in Jesus saves you from eternal punishment? Because the Word of God says so. How do we know Jesus will return to this world and rule from it? Because the Word of God says so. And since the Word of God was perfectly accurate regarding Jesus' first coming and all prophecies fulfilled so far, we can rest assured that all God's future promises will come true.

Scripture will come true (Luke 1:16-17, 32-33)

We see this in Gabriel's first visit to Zechariah.

Luke 1:11 Then an angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing at the right side of the altar of incense. ¹² When Zechariah saw him, he was startled and was gripped with fear. ¹³ But the angel said to him: "Do not be afraid, Zechariah; your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you are to give him the name John.

Since we don't pray to angels, Gabriel has been made aware by God as we'll see that God hears prayer and answers prayer, in particular this prayer because as it turns out its directly related to Jesus' incarnation. When Zechariah questions Gabriel, Gabriel responds in v.19,

"I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to tell you this good news.

God sent a special angel to tell Zechariah directly this good news that relates to the Messiah's coming. And not surprisingly Gabriel refers to Scripture in vv.16-17 basically quoting Malachi 4:5-6, and 'a people prepared for the Lord' is a reference to the forerunner of the Messiah prophesied by Isaiah 40:3 and Malachi 3:1.

When Gabriel appears to Mary again he refers to Scripture about to be fulfilled at the birth of Jesus. His message from God stated,

³¹ You will be with child and give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus. ³² He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, ³³ and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever; his kingdom will never end."

Gabriel is making references to Is. 7:14, 9:7; Jer. 33:17, Ps. 89:3-4; Daniel 2:44; 7:4; Micah 4:7. God is assuring us that His Word will come true. And even sends angels to make sure it's going to happen exactly as He says. But not just that Scripture will come true in the future but even that

Scripture is being fulfilled [now] (Luke 1:36; 2:8-15; Matt. 2:15, 23)

When Gabriel is speaking to Mary it's months after he appeared to Zechariah. He tells her to affirm that this future Word from God is true that unbeknownst to her God is already fulfilling His promise about the forerunner John when Gabriel says,

³⁶ Even Elizabeth your relative is going to have a child in her old age, and she who was said to be barren is in her sixth month. ³⁷ For nothing is impossible with God."

And when the angel of the Lord appears (we're not told if its Gabriel or not) he tells the shepherds Scripture is being fulfilled now!

¹⁰ But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. ¹¹ Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord. ¹² This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger."

'You will find' is a hint to go find Him. And v.15 we read,

When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let's go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about."

Notice the unlearned shepherds equate the angel's message with God's words. God sends angels to speak Scripture and affirm that God's promises are true in real time and space and will come true exactly as He stated.

And notice what Matthew emphasizes a few times after the angel of the Lord warned Joseph in a few dreams. First in warning him to go to Egypt in Matt. 2:13,

¹³ *When they had gone, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream. "Get up," he said, "take the child and his mother and escape to Egypt. Stay there until I tell you, for Herod is going to search for the child to kill him."*

¹⁴ *So he got up, took the child and his mother during the night and left for Egypt, ¹⁵ where he stayed until the death of Herod. And so was fulfilled what the Lord had said through the prophet: "Out of Egypt I called my son."*

And then in vv.22-23,

But when he heard that Archelaus was reigning in Judea in place of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there. Having been warned in a dream, he withdrew to the district of Galilee, ²³ and he went and lived in a town called Nazareth. So was fulfilled what was said through the prophets: "He will be called a Nazarene."

"And so was fulfilled", twice. So angels were used by God to assure us that God's words are always true. Past promises, future promises and have present application.

There's another important reason why God sent angels at the time of Jesus' birth. Angels came at Jesus' birth to

Comfort Us to Know that God's Will Won't be Thwarted

There are good angels who carry out the will of God to assure the Word of God comes true. But there are also fallen angels, in particularly Lucifer, who led a rebellion against God and was cast out of heaven along with 1/3 of the angels. Lucifer/Satan must know of God's plan to redeem the world through Jesus, so there are attempts to kill Him before He can reach adulthood. God sends angels to ensure the will of God is accomplished and that

Jesus doesn't die before God's time (Matt. 2:9-23)

In Matt. 2 we read about the wise men coming to Jerusalem to enquire about the newborn King of Israel's birth. Unaware of Herod's treachery, they agree to let Herod know when they have found the Messiah. However in Matt. 2:12

¹² *And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route.*

While the text does not directly say an angel warned them, the very next verse says an angel warns Joseph in a dream to flee to Egypt to escape Herod. After Herod dies Joseph receives another message from an angel in a dream saying it is safe to return *“for those trying to take the child’s like are dead”* (2:20). But on returning he’s warned in another dream to avoid Judah because Herod’s son Archelaus is now in power and he’s no better.

God’s will cannot be thwarted. The wise men, Joseph and Mary needed divine assistance delivered from God to angels so that the will of God won’t be thwarted. And as well through the angelic warnings we are also assured that

Witnesses survive to share Jesus with others (2:2, 9-12)

Next to the shepherds, the wise men are the other evangelists to share the good news of Jesus’ birth. Their statement in 2:2 ‘Where is the One who has been born king of the Jews’ is a clear statement of Jesus being the Messiah. The angel’s direct intervention in the lives and events of people on earth assure that Jesus survives and that the message of the good news goes out. The angelic warning in a dream to the wise men to return home another way also affirms their findings as they followed His star and eventually Bethlehem. If their arrival caused a stir, what about their return trip? And how did we get this account at all? Someone shared this to someone else so that it was made known and Matthew was able by the Holy Spirit to give witness to its record. Angels were sent by God directly to ensure the will of God was accomplished. The birth of Jesus was too important to leave it up to humans alone.

Yet there’s one more important factor that’s very relevant to you and I regarding God’s sending His angels to ensure John’s miraculous conception and birth, Jesus’ miraculous conception and birth as well as the protection of Jesus and His family to eventually make their way back to Israel and settle in Nazareth.

God sent His angelic messengers to everyday people, in real time with genuine concerns. I think the angelic visits should

Encourage Us that God is Personally Involved in our Lives

Zechariah and Elizabeth were real people who loved God but we’re hurting. They were childless and beyond child bearing years. They continued serving God, however, and one day God assures them that He heard their prayers. We know God wants us to pray and hears our prayers but isn’t it amazing that God actually tells someone through an angel ‘I hear you’. Be encouraged in your own setbacks and disappointments, that in spite of feeling that God doesn’t seem to be with us,

He is with us and hears our prayers (Luke 1:13, 28)

I wonder how many times Elizabeth and Zechariah mouthed words of praise to God yet few realized the pain they held in their hearts. Gabriel says ‘God has heard your prayers’ and later assures Zechariah ‘I stand in the presence of God’! If God heard their prayers does He not hear yours? In spite of the pain you might be holding within. What prayers have we prayed for a long time that God seems to not be listening to? God hears every one. He’s concerned about us more than we think. He is working His plan and His timing in our life that He has not revealed to us but we need to trust Him in the meantime.

When Gabriel appears to Mary, he greets her with 'Greetings you who are highly favoured, the Lord is with you.' The root word for 'favoured' is grace. You who are graced by God. Does God see the unknown, quiet godly lives of people who live in small villages? Absolutely. Gabriel calls her by her name, Mary. He says the word 'you' seven times, telling her all the things that will happen to her but he does mention God seven times and Jesus twelve times and the Holy Spirit once. So yes, God is personally involved in our lives, He's with us, He answers our prayers so that He will do a work in our lives. This is why God is with us when we've understood His saving grace in our lives. He's not with us so we can have material success, perfect health and no negative circumstances. He's with us so He can do a work in us that will also impact the world. Mary's bringing Jesus into the world would not result in material success, perfect health or no negative circumstances. Far from it. But God would be glorified through her as He used her to bring Jesus to the world.

God was personally involved in an elderly childless couple, some Gentile astronomers from Iraq, a bunch of un-known night shift workers thanklessly raising sheep so people could buy them, make sacrifices and be right with God. And a young man who needed an angelic message in a dream to convince him he was doing the right thing to marry Mary, even though his heart was initially shattered at the news of her pregnancy. God is with us, wants to be personally involved in our lives and hears our prayers. What should be our response to this?

Allow Him to use you for His glory (Luke 1:38; 2:15)

"I am the Lord's servant, may it be to me as you have said." Mary accepted this wonderful news about bringing Jesus to the world knowing people would not believe her and Joseph and that her family would probably not accept her. How often do those words come out of our mouths when we understand this situation God has brought into our lives is for His glory, not our comfort?

And the shepherds who received the angelic messenger and saw something no one had seen in almost a 1000 years? The angel did not command them to go and see Jesus. They gave them an invitation to respond to: "This will be a sign to you. You will find a baby wrapped in cloths [like a new born lamb] and lying in a manger [animal feed trough]." How did they respond?

"Let's go ... and see ... what has happened which the Lord has told us about."

"When they had seen him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child,

²⁰ The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen, which were just as they had been told.

Does God still send angels to be His messengers to see to it that the Word and will of God are accomplished? I'm sure He does in ways that we cannot see. We are told in Heb. 13:2 "to show hospitality to strangers, for by so doing some people have shown hospitality to angels without knowing it."

But the point of studying angels ministry isn't to look for them, it's to be reassured that God's Word is completely reliable and will happen the way God says it will happen. He is involved personally in your life. He sent His Son to come to earth to die personally for everyone's sins. That's where we first understand how much He cares about us. And if we accept Christ as our Saviour, God is with us. He never leaves us nor forsakes us. Even if His will involves hard things for us to do, they are for us to now bring Jesus to our world and let them know of the great things He has told us in His Word. And to allow Him to use us to bring Him glory. That is why He made you and saved you in the first place, to do His will where you live, work, study and play, with the mixed bag of wise people, hard-workers and young people who we're connected with, so others know of the great things He has

done and we glory Him for doing it.

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If you have any comments or questions about this message please
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