

To Hear the Angels Sing

the Rev. Lisa Doege

December 23, 2018

Nora UU Church, Hanska, MN

Angels we have heard on high.... The first nowell the angels did say.... The whole world in solemn stillness lay to hear the angels sing....

I'm interested in the angels of Christmas this week, their messages, and how those messages were received. But I should be clear right from the start, I'm not a big fan of angels. I think many popular portrayals of angels in stories, television shows and the movies give these mythical creatures credit for admirable qualities and actions that ordinary human beings demonstrate and undertake day after day. Beyond that, I've seen the plot-devise of a bell ringing as an angels gets its wings—remember Clarence and Zuzu and 'Teacher says every time a bell rings an angel gets his wings'—I've seen that fiction become horribly twisted up with reality. When I was chaplain in a large hospital I was paged late one night with the request that I bring a bell and ring it outside a recently deceased person's room, so that a grandchild would be comforted, knowing that the grandparent had gone to heaven, become an angel, and received wings. The troublesome theological, pastoral, psychological and pedagogical issues in that incident beg to fill another sermon at another time. For now, suffice it to say, no, I'm not very fond of angels in as they appear in popular culture in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century. But angels are an inescapable part of the Christmas story, and they're on my mind.

I've been thinking, first of all, that the angels of the Christmas story are very different than Clarence in *It's a Wonderful Life*, any of dozens of other pop culture angels. They aren't divine but slightly bumbling helpers sent from above with a mission but not quite enough time to fulfill it. A mission to straighten out an unhappy human who only needs a push in the right direction for life to be transformed from misery and depression to joy and elation by midnight on Christmas Eve. Nor are the angels of the Christmas story like Michael Landon's character in *Highway to Heaven*, Roma Downey's on *Touched by an Angel*—slightly less bumbling but still interfering in a well-meaning but patronizing

angel-knows-best kind of way. No, this season's angels simply show up, deliver messages from God and scare a few shepherds along the way. That's what biblical angels are—messengers of God.

The angels were messengers from God, and Mary and Joseph and the shepherds in the fields may have been a bit dazed by their appearance and their messages but they accepted them (so we are told). Mary visited her cousin Elizabeth and then prepared for the birth of her baby, and Joseph, discouraged from doing so by his visiting angel, did not quietly divorce her, as he had originally planned upon learning of her pregnancy. The shepherds, for their part, left their flocks and went to Bethlehem to see the child the angel told them of. All except one. For his story you'll have to come to church tomorrow night.

My second line of thought about angels recently has been about how Mary and Joseph and the shepherds recognized them for what they were and why they obeyed them. I wonder, were messages from God such common things that there was never any doubt about who or what they were seeing and hearing? Or were the angels so amazing, dazzling, beyond description extraordinary (all eyes and wings, Lynn Ungar suggests), that they could only be one thing—messengers of God? Luke tells us that the shepherds at least were terrified, and the angels had to calm them—fear not—before announcing their tidings of great joy. So my guess is that direct messages from God weren't everyday occurrences in the fields around Bethlehem. It was perhaps the very extraordinariness of the situation that led to the obedience.

Next I've been pondering the angels' specific message to the shepherds, the end of it. I'm curious about that message, the part the heavenly host joins in on. *Glory to God in the highest and on earth, peace good will toward all*. Our hymn this morning says, *the whole world in solemn stillness lay to hear the angels* sing those words, but the biblical account says nothing like that. No mention of solemn stillness; no mention of the whole world. Only that *suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God, and saying 'glory to God in the highest and on earth, peace toward*. I wonder about those words: *and on earth peace goodwill toward all, or toward men*, or perhaps more accurately *among those whom He favors*. What did they mean? Were the angel and the multitude of the host saying that **God** was bestowing peace on earth, goodwill toward among those God favors? It seems unlikely, given the unfolding of the

rest of the story. Was the message rather that the birth of a savior should all forth such behavior as would result in peace on earth, good will toward all? Perhaps, though that didn't happen either (or hasn't yet). Was the message God's prayer? Knowing as God does that humans beings have free will, was the message God's prayer that humanity behave itself now that God's child had been born into a human family?

Biblical scholars will say none of these is the meaning of that angelic, heavenly message. They will speak of allusions to the prophet Isaiah and the title given Jesus as Prince of Peace. Probably it doesn't matter what the message to those shepherds was meant to be in the story of the first Christmas. The presence of that phrase alone has made peace a major theme of the holiday. And we need a holiday that celebrates peace, even if it tends to get lost among the presents and the tree and the cookies, now and then. But I like the possibility that it might have been God's prayer for us, might still be God's prayer for us, every time we it.

All this aside—the nature of the biblical angels, the how the cast of characters recognized them and why they obeyed, and what their message meant—all this aside, I ponder most this week a giant game of *what if*? What if we really at times hear the angels sing? What if messengers of the divine—however you choose to define that—speak to us here in the early years of the 21st century, just as they did to the shepherds in the field around Bethlehem at the time of Jesus' birth?

Now, some of you are dismissing my *what if* premise altogether, but I believe it isn't quite as crazy as it may sound. Unitarian Universalists have long argued that revelation is not sealed. That the divine did not stop revealing itself when the Hebrew and Christian scriptures came to be set in their final form. Rather we have believed that God, whatever that word may mean (and it has meant many things to many Unitarians and Universalists over the years) we have believed that God continues to reveal God's nature through the world around us, through our experiences of the world and through the words and deeds of great thinkers, teachers, poets, artists, philosophers. Why not angels as yet another way of revealing divinity? Why not messengers of the divine with the express purpose of waking us up?

Now we could be getting dangerously close to those angels I don't believe in. The ones I actively dislike. The TV movie angels. The ones who appear disguised as human beings and then disappear at the end of the episode. Sort of like the Lone Ranger—who was

that masked human? I know that others of you will disagree with this specific part of my *what if*, but I believe that if there are such creatures as angels and if they are messengers of the divine, then they probably exist in a form utterly unlike ours and probably unlike anything we can imagine. Maybe they take the human form—like Clarence. But I imagine them much grander or much more miniscule, certainly totally other.

Angels, I believe, are not like Angel Pig appearing in our form but with wings, ready to guide us through our problems, step by step, with easy to follow hints. I don't believe they try to guide us through our individual problems at all. No, I imagine them more the way Lynn Ungar does in Annunciation to the Shepherds—delivering their message but leaving us to interpret or misinterpret it to the best of our ability. Leaving us, probably a bit confused about the details. But, as Howard Thurman suggests, trying nevertheless to grow into that crown placed over our heads by their song.

I wonder, could the environmental movement be a messenger of God? Could we have been heeding the angel's song when we erected the wind tower? Could the fair trade movement be a messenger of God? Are Jeanie and her board and dedicated volunteers singing the angel's song in New Ulm's Own every Thursday, Friday, Saturday, and at board meetings and work days in between? Could justice movements be messengers of the divine? Do we hear the angel's song of peace, good will when people of faith go to the border to provide witness, when a handful of citizens stand on a street corner in Mankato evening after evening, holding signs and calling us to our better selves, when attorneys general sue to keep the ACA providing health care to millions of American? Did we hear the angel's song—almost unbelievably—when Congress enacted criminal justice reform this week?

That all sounds good, but if it's possible that we're answering a divine message when we capture wind energy, then, some would argue, it's just as possible that others are listening to the angel's song when they decide to take actions we don't like. *They would be wrong*, my colleague said, when I discussed this part of my sermon with her. That might be true, but it's still a big flaw in my *what if*.

How **do** we know when we're really hearing the angels sing? How do we distinguish their voices against the din of the world? How do we ever recognize the divine in the world?

My friend suggested in her recent newsletter column on the subject that we know it's an angel when it's simply too amazing, outrageous, out of the ordinary to be anything else. That may be true. It may have been angels that called a couple I know to leave their comfortable life in Dallas and spend ten years in a missionary hospital in Haiti. But most of us never hear such extraordinary messages. What about us? Does that mean we never hear the angels sing outside of Christmas hymns?

I think there are two ways to recognize the angels' song. First we recognize the message; and second we recognize the way we hear it. I think the angels', God's messengers' most common message is the one sung over the hills to the shepherds and the sheep that long ago night. *Peace on earth, good will toward all*. Why wouldn't that be the most common message when it is the thing we need most desperately, long for most fervently? Be it decree or promise or prayer or challenge, when we hear peace on earth, good will toward we can be fairly certain it is the message of angels.

And if we hear that message with the ears of our hearts, not the ears of our minds, then we can be doubly sure the origin of the message is divine. Our hearts hear differently than our ears. We're often as confused as the shepherds in Lynn Ungar's poem. We're often left to wonder, "OK, but what does that have to do with me?" "Sounds good, but what am I supposed to do about it?" The central message loud and clear, but the details are fuzzy.

to you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, who is the Messiah, the Lord.*
12This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.

A who? Wrapped in what?

If the message we receive when (not the whole world, just we) in solemn still lay long enough to hear is on *earth, peace, goodwill toward all*, and if the details are left up to us, then we're in luck. There must be a million and one ways to obey that decree, answer that prayer, live into that promise, accept that challenge. All we have to do is choose the ones that fit our particular circumstances. Once we're fortunate to hear the song, the breathlessly beautiful song that throws *all the rest of life into a new and creative relatedness*, once the crown has been placed above our heads, then we're set on a life path of trying to grow tall enough to wear it, of seeking our way of working toward peace

on earth, good will toward all. And the ways we might do so will become ever more readily apparent as our new sense of relatedness deepens and clarifies.

Will it be stepping forward to coordinate a single community dinner in Hanska, one month in 2019? Will it be volunteering to serve on the NUMAS Haus board or the Brown County Public Health Advisory Committee—both of which need faith community representation; neither of which need that representation to be ordained?! Will it be writing a letter to the editor once a month for a year? Perhaps at this time in your life the way you can most easily answer the angels' song with your financial support. Or maybe hearing the angels sing will change what you read, where you shop, what you wear, how you vote, what you eat, how often you come to church.

It is easy to imagine that life was never the same again for the shepherds once the angels had come and gone from their lives. Nor will it ever be the same again for you or me if ever we are fortunate enough to lie in solemn stillness and hear the angels sing.

Encounters with the divine aren't easily shaken off. We can't control when or where or how angels might come into our lives, but Christmastide is a good time to practice an air of expectation, a willingness not just to hear, but to listen and to obey, as did Mary and Joseph and the shepherds in their separate encounters with angels.

Howard Thurman says life is saved by the singing of angels. May it be so for you, this season and always.

Amen.