

First Presbyterian Church, Spartanburg SC
Dr. David Renwick
Christmas Eve, December 24, 2008

TOUCHED BY AN ANGEL
Isaiah 6:1-8; Matthew 1:18-25

On this Christmas Eve, I would like to share with you some thoughts that the Scriptures bring to our attention about angels. Angels are everywhere at this time of the year, not only in the religious world but in the secular world.

- You look at the streets and the decorations that are around and you see angels.
- Perhaps you have angels on your mantelpiece at home, or elsewhere in your home if you've decorated for Christmas -- or on your Christmas trees
- and in the stories that we have read in Scripture, we have heard about angels, and they are there also in some of the Christmas stories that we have *not* read!

Angels are 'in the air' when it comes to celebrating the birth of Christ, so I would like to take a few moments to 'take us up to heaven' where the angels are, and then to 'bring us back down to earth,' where I trust the angels also are, and maybe along the way we'll find those same angels lifting us up to heaven again.

So what do we know about angels from the pages of Holy Scripture? Well, if we were to look at the biblical story surrounding Christmas, we would learn first of all that they are *messengers* – messengers of *good news*. The word 'angel' in Greek (*angellos*) means 'messenger'.

- The angels come to the shepherds. They are outside the city of Bethlehem. First, one angel, and then a whole choir of angels, announcing the message, the good news that in the city of Bethlehem, a baby has been born who is going to be the Christ, the Messiah, the King – and they need to go to Bethlehem at once to receive this good news, to see and touch it for themselves.
- An angel comes to Mary. An angel comes to Joseph telling them that a child is going to be born and that they are going to be the parents of a child who is unlike any other child on the face of the earth. Good news. Messengers of good news to people like you and me.

Some of you here this evening are desperate to receive good news. We've had too much bad news, too much hard news. Angels come to people in need of good news and share that message with them.

They are also messengers not just of good news but of *encouragement*. Almost always when angels appear, there is a phrase that they use, spoken to those they meet, and once I mention it, I know that many of you will remember that you've heard it before. The angels come and they say, "*Fear not!*" again and again. When they approach the shepherds or Mary or Joseph, they speak and say, "Fear not!"

Some of this fear comes from *the environment of the world* in which the people they came to see lived in. A fearful world filled with uncertainty, much like our world, especially in the past few months – filled with uncertainty: at the very moment when we

think we've got a handle on what's going on everything seems to break loose. Everything is uncertain. We're not sure what the future will bring. There is plenty of reason for fear. The angels spoke to those to whom they came, as they would speak to you and me with a word of encouragement: saying "Fear not."

They say "Fear not," not just because of the environment into which they come, but they also say it, I think, because *they themselves in some sense were perceived as fearful creatures*. We often think of angels as cute and little; well, we say angelic creatures, but the creatures, who come to the shepherds and to Mary and to Joseph, are not cute little creatures! They are members of the armies of the living God, and their appearance was fearful – or, at least 'awesome.' So, quite naturally, when they meet normal human beings they need to say "Don't be afraid" – because of the presence, the awesome appearance of the angels.

- We see that powerful appearance most clearly in our reading in Isaiah 6. The scripture speaks about Isaiah seeing "seraphs" in the year that King Uzziah died. Seraphs are an ancient classification of angels, just like cherubs. Both were classifications of angels in ancient Israel, and these seraphs had, not just one pair of wings, but if you remember, six wings, three pairs, all fluttering everywhere.
- If you think of a movie like *The Birds* and birds flying everywhere, there is fearsomeness: when they flutter, everything seems out of control. The angels are there in the temple in the presence of God and they are fearful and so Isaiah bows down, falls down before them and lies down on the ground fearful of what he sees.

To such a one as this, the message is "Fear not!" But that's not all! It's not just a message of encouragement, "*Don't be afraid*" – nor is the rest of the angel's message to Isaiah, in any normal sense, '*good news*' – rather the message that comes through the angel to Isaiah is about *God's call*. The angel appearing to Isaiah in the temple acts as a herald, preparing the way for the voice of God, declaring that "God has something for you to do, Isaiah, a call for you to pursue within which you will find your purpose." The call of God, coming through the angels – that, too, is one of their roles: messengers of the call of the living God.

Think back to Mary and Joseph. The announcement of good news to them was also a call to be the ones who would be the parents of this child, to be the ones who would be the parents as it were of the Son of God. What an awesome responsibility, one that anybody would run away from.

The angels come to people calling them very often to do what they would not do by themselves, delivering the message of a 'call' in which, nevertheless, they will find their fulfillment, their purpose.

- Some of us may have heard God's call coming to us from one source or another and it is not just a call into the ministry, it could be the call to a particular line of work, or to deal with relationships in specific ways, and we avoid that call because we don't want it.
- Isaiah was called to speak the truth to the nation of Israel who did not want to hear the word of God. Fortunately, he listened and in listening fulfilled God's purpose for him. He found the meaning, the existence for his life here on earth.

The angels are messengers, bearing the *call of God*.

The angels come with *the encouragement of God*.
The angels come bearing *good news from God . . .*
not just for those in the past, but for people like you and me.

At times, it seems in Scripture that they are *fearful creatures*.
But there are *other times* in Scripture where they are not fearful in the same way at all (not that they are ever cute, cuddly creatures): but that they actually appear to be like you and me. They appear to be very human indeed.

Angels in Human Form. We go back to Genesis 18 and to the story of Abraham the forefather of Christians, Jews and Muslims, and you find Abraham one day minding his own business when three strangers turn up and enter into a conversation with him, and he entertains them. He shows them hospitality, and as the conversation goes on, we begin to be told that these strangers who appear to be very human are, in fact, angels. In the New Testament, the writer of the letter to the Hebrews picks up on this and he says, “*Be careful to show hospitality to strangers for by so doing, you may be entertaining angels unawares*” (Heb. 13:14)

The writer of the letter of the Hebrews realizes that we can never in fact know when we are in the presence of an angel. Oh yes, sometimes they may flutter by with their wings, but at other times, they may have no wings at all. In fact, we have in the end no clue as to who is an angel or who is not! And that realization surely brings the whole matter of angels down to earth. Angels could in fact be anybody whom God brings into our lives: any bearer of good news, any bearer of encouragement, anyone who calls us into God’s service (especially if we don’t want to do it!), and, in the fourth place, an angel could be anyone who suddenly *appears to us in our moment of need and helps us when there is nobody around to help us*.

In fact, that is perhaps one of the most common ways of thinking about angels and thinking about angels in human terms. Don’t we say, “Oh, you were such an angel to me? You turned up just in my moment of need. I don’t know what I would’ve done if you had not been here. Thank you for being my angel.”? There is in fact a biblical legitimacy to thinking of people like that – in terms of angels turning up in our moment of need.

Many of you, I hope all of you, were given a little card with your bulletin. On that little card, you’ll find some questions which have to do with your life, both with the possibility that you might be an angel to somebody else, and that somebody else may have been an angel to you – a messenger of good news, or a word of encouragement, or a calling to God’s service, or turning up to help in your moment of need. All of these are images of the ways angels work in the pages of scripture.

Let’s think just for a moment or two about how you and I might be angels to others, or how others have been angels to us.

When I think of angels and people acting as it were as God’s angels on earth, my mind goes back to September 11, 2001 and the image of the firefighters in the Twin Towers as they were burning. Some of those who went into the fire were surely like angels to those who received them, following not just a vocation in terms of a job that

they did, but surely *carrying a sense of call*, perhaps from God, so that they were willing even to give their lives *to help others*; and though they may have died, and in that there is sadness, yet in that, they may have felt that they were fulfilling their purpose – sadly but gladly. Further, as they did so, they surely were *bearers of good news* to people who were utterly confused and at times, they were the source of encouragement to those who thought that all was lost: “Come follow me. I will lead you out of this mess;” giving help where no help seemed to be possible at all.

Some of you know that on that particular day, I was not in New York City, but I *was* in an airplane. I was flying across the Atlantic Ocean back from my home in Scotland to this side of the ocean when we received news that we could not land in the United States: so I spent a week on the island of Newfoundland in Canada with twelve to fifteen thousand other people who had been diverted. Four thousand of us landed in the city of St. Johns, a city of less than two hundred thousand people, and for a week, that city took care of us. We were only allowed to take one tiny little bag off the plane, and nothing else. They fed us. They clothed us. They housed us. They loved us. They were organized in such a way to be angels to us. Some angels were there to touch us, but, without a whole host of ‘administrative angels’ doing their work (perhaps coldly and efficiently) in the background, there would have been no angels on the front line to touch our lives as hundreds, literally hundreds, of volunteers did through that week.

How can you be an angel? In what area of life can you be

- the messenger of good news to people who are hungry for it?
- The bearer of encouragement to those who are down with a word spoken, a touch given?
- How can you be the source of call to somebody who does not know what they want to do with their lives but you can see clearly what their gifts are?
- How can you be that person who turns up to help at the right time or behind the scenes making sure that people get the help that they need?

And who has played that role in your life for you?

One final word: the image that we have of angels in the Scripture is very often an active image of ‘doing something,’ but I also think that there are some people in this world who may function as God’s angels for us, who in a sense ‘do nothing,’ – but they, nevertheless, are the source of God’s message coming into our lives, and the source of God’s call to us to be the people God wants us to be. Let me draw things to a close by sharing with you just such a vision of an angel that comes from one of my favorite movies: it’s called *Marvin’s Room*. Some of you may have seen it. It’s ten or fifteen years old now. It is an early Leonardo DiCaprio movie (with Meryl Streep and Diane Keaton).

The story is of two sisters. One sister by the name of Bessie is stuck at home. She lives in Florida. She’s caring for her father Marvin who is confined to his room, and caring for her Aunt Ruth who is ‘not-all-together-there’. That’s her life. She is caught up in their lives, and it seems as if there is no escape. Her sister, Leigh, though, has escaped: she’s moved to the big city; she’s moved to New York City, and there she is up in New York City trying to find her life.

Leigh is married but her marriage hasn't worked out. She has two boys (one is Leonardo!). They are teenagers and they are completely out of control.

Back down in Florida, Bessie discovers as she cares for Marvin and Aunt Ruth that she has leukemia. She needs help. She needs it seriously. There is nobody who is a match for her. She calls up her sister, Leigh, and says, "Leigh, I need you. I need you and the boys. I need somebody who can help." Leigh is not good with all of this intimate stuff. She wants to run away from anything which smacks of illness or death or failure, and she doesn't want to come down to Florida. But in the end, she comes, and she and boys are tested. Nobody, it turns out, is a match.

On the day that they receive this news, the two sisters, who have never really got on with each other, are in the kitchen together. They are actually down on the floor because Bessie has inadvertently knocked over one box of the many pills that Marvin, their father, needs. They are picking up the pills and Bessie, the one who has looked after her father, looks into the eye of Leigh, the one who is trying to find life somewhere else, and says "I'm so fortunate. I'm so blessed. I've had so much love in my life." Leigh doesn't know what to do with this kind of emotional statement. She looks up at Bessie and says, "Well, yes, you are fortunate; you are fortunate that there are so many people who love you." But Bessie doesn't mean that at all! She turns to Leigh and says, "No. You don't understand. I've been so fortunate that I've been able to give love to others."

And Leigh suddenly realizes that Bessie looks upon Marvin and on Ruth, not as people who are holding her back, but as the very sources of life through which she discovers how to love. To Bessie, Marvin and Ruth are angels, the source of her call from God, the source of her becoming who she could not otherwise have been the source of encouragement, the source of good news.

We may not see it that way, but let me suggest tonight that as you go out into this world, there are some people out there who may not seem to be angels to you at all. In fact, they may seem to be the very opposite of angels to you, but . . . could it not be, that they are in fact the very people God has sent you? The angels God has sent you? Through whom you will learn to be followers of Christ? Finding a love within your life that you never knew was possible? A call within your life that you never knew was possible?

Who knows who is an angel in this mysterious world that God has made? Somebody is an angel for you . . . and perhaps you are an angel for someone else too.