

“Unexpected Angels”
Text: Luke 1:26-38; Hebrews 13:1-2
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Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it. Hebrews 13:2

Today the church officially begins its annual Advent journey toward Bethlehem’s manger. It doesn't matter that the stores have had Christmas ornaments wedged into their shelves along with Halloween masks and Thanksgiving favors. It doesn't matter that “Rockin’ Around the Christmas Tree” became standard Muzak music weeks ago. Christmas is not here yet. Advent, that time before Christmas, when the Church prepares itself to receive the Christ child, begins today. The paraments on the pulpit and the lectern and the communion table are purple, evoking feelings of longing in expectation; the music is laced with alternating strands of yearning and hope. You cannot get to Christmas quickly. Preparations must be made, distances traveled. Joseph and Mary, great with child, would have to journey from Nazareth to Bethlehem where their baby would be born in a stable, because there was no room for them at the inn. The Magi will have to travel from the East following an unknown path. With anxiety and expectation, they are guided by a strange star that sets their path and fires their imaginations. It takes a while to get to the manger in Bethlehem. It's too important to hop right there.

Soon you and I will, in our own personal lives and homes, begin our preparations. We'll decorate the mantle and search for the perfect gift, which we will not find. We will certainly eat too much! We will send cards or festive e-mails to friends far and near. I always like receiving Christmas cards, especially those that have tucked inside a note or a letter bringing you up-to-date on the events of the last year. Of course, some people go a little overboard in those letters. I read one once that was sort of like this:

Dear friends,

It's been a great year for the Smiths. Our youngest grandchild graduated *magna cum laude* from kindergarten. Her teenage brother rode his bicycle across Australia with Lance Armstrong; Lance came in second. This fall our older daughter received the Nobel Prize for Physics. She also won the Pillsbury Bake-off and gave birth to triplets. As for ourselves we are blessed with great teeth, flat stomachs and wrinkle-free complexions. We especially enjoyed our interview on the Oprah Show last spring.

Sometimes letters can go overboard. Though I read only a brief snatch of verses from the Letter to the Hebrews, I will tell you that there is probably no more “overboard” book in the Bible than the Letter to the Hebrews. The writer does not

carry on about himself or his loved ones. He carries on about Jesus Christ, God's Son, who according to the writer of the Letter of Hebrews, was appointed by God to be "heir of all things," the one through whom "God created all the worlds that are. Jesus is the reflection of God's glory - the exact imprint of God's very being. He sustains all things by his powerful word, and when he had purified us of our sins, he went and sat at the right hand of Majesty on High, having become superior even to the angels, as the name he has inherited on earth is more excellent than theirs." That's just two verses in the first chapter.

To whom was he writing? He was writing to early Christian communities, or one specific community, whose members were worn out and about to give up on God. Precisely who they were, we do not know, any more than we know the writer's identity. There is one other little weird thing about the Letter to the Hebrews - it is not even a letter. It is decidedly unletter-like and much more sermon-like. If you read the whole sermon or even parts of it, you get the strong sense that the writer is trying to encourage his readers as they face doubt and deprivation, even persecution. But the oddest thing about Hebrews is that the writer's method of encouragement is not pastoral in the sense of pastoral platitudes: *I feel your pain. I know it must be hard. God loves you and so do I.* None of that.

The preacher dishes up the most complex theology you can imagine about the nature and meaning of Jesus Christ. When he finally gets to the point of winding it down a little bit, when the congregation has become no doubt cross-eyed with confusion, he lightens up and brings the message home. No more talk about the great high priest who has passed through the heavens. No, he directs his attention to the down to earth aspects of life in the congregation. He says, "Don't forget to keep up the prison visitation program." He offers a little advice on how to have a happy marriage. He encourages people to love one another and to give generously. Then he says, "Remember, you should be gracious, not only to your friends, but also to those whom you do not yet know. Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing so some have entertained angels without knowing it." As one excellent commentator has put it, "It's almost as if the preacher is saying because Jesus Christ, firstborn of all creation, heir of all things, is the great high priest who offered the great and perfect lasting sacrifice, and now sits in Majesty at the right hand of God, you need to go polish the silver," set the table, and put out the welcome mat in case company comes." (1)

The allusion to entertaining angels sounds odd to us, but it would not have sounded odd to those early Christians. They bore with them memories of stories from the Hebrew Scriptures in which angels often appeared unexpectedly and in the guise of visitors. Perhaps the most memorable story in that regard is that of Abraham and Sarah, who were visited by three strangers bearing the astonishing news that Sarah would conceive and bear a son. Since both Abraham and Sarah were advanced in age, it seemed a biological impossibility. But surprise, surprise! The first surprise - the strangers show up at the tent flap. The writer of Genesis

says, *The Lord appeared to Abraham in the guise of these three strangers*. And then they share the incredible news, the second surprise: *Your whole lives are about to be turned upside down; a baby will soon be on the way*.

No one ever said it was convenient for angels to drop by or that their messages would be easy to take. But when it is God who is delivering the message, God who is bringing about the great reversal, you can be sure that grace will be released into your life and into the world as never before.

In both the Old and New Testaments, angels serve primarily as messengers. That is what the word *angelos* means – “messenger”. In the most ancient of times, if you read for example, the first chapter of Genesis, you will see that God was believed to be presiding in heaven over a heavenly court. The court consisted of angels, archangels, and various other beings. Encounters between angels and humans took place under the direction of God. In other words, God was sort of sending out angelic carrier pigeons: Here’s a message; you take it to so-and-so. Sometimes angels were dispatched to heal illnesses; sometimes they were guardians; often they announced births: Isaac’s, Ishmael’s, Samson’s, for instance. In the New Testament Scriptures only two angels are named: Michael, the warrior in Revelation, and Gabriel, the unexpected visitor – first appearing to Zechariah, to tell him about Elizabeth’s giving birth to John the Baptist, and then, the visit to Mary’s house in Nazareth.

There are many unnamed angels in the Christmas story. An angel of the Lord advises Joseph not to be afraid to marry Mary. Another angel assures the shepherds in the field that there is nothing to fear, and then suddenly with that one angel, a multitude of the heavenly host filled the sky and burst forth with praise. “Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace among all people, and good will.” An angel advises Joseph to take Mary and the baby and flee from murderous Herod and go to Egypt. And after Herod’s death, an angel says, “Now it’s safe to go back home again.”

I hope you will not get hung up this morning on whether or not you ought to believe in angels. If you do believe in them, fine; if you don’t, that’s fine too. I collect Christmas angels. I love them, but I don’t believe in angels in the sense of their being verifiable beings who can be summoned to land on your shoulder and whisper directions in your ear, or hold out an arm or a wing, I guess, and stop an oncoming car from hitting yours. Angels come from a pre-Enlightenment, pre-scientific world view, the world in which Scriptures were written. People clearly believed in angels. They believed in God’s heavenly court. They believed that when God wanted to say something, an angel would descend. The point about angels is not whether they are real or not. The point is what they do, and what they do is real. They indicate to us that God is not only the Holy God of Israel, but that God is interested in being involved in our life on earth. God is not separated from us for all eternity; mediation is going on. God communicates with the world. God guides the world and the individuals in it.

No one in the Bible - none of the characters in the Bible have much to say about angels, and none of the writers of the Bible say much about angels either. They only tell us what they do. They tell us that God is not only our Creator, God is also our friend. Maybe you get comfort from the thought of angels sitting up in the sky somewhere plucking away on harp strings. I do not, but I take great comfort in the thought that God crosses the distance between time and eternity, that there is an unbreakable communication link, that God is neither deaf nor indifferent to our needs.

When our needs became extreme, and God realized that the angels were not doing the trick, God decided to take another approach, using an angel – Gabriel. The announcement came to Mary that she would conceive and bear a son. His name would be Jesus. This is what I call an interventionist God. Thank God, Mary was hospitable, first to the angel and then to the Holy Spirit, and then to the baby who would grow in her womb.

Now, you may or may not believe literally in the virgin birth, but the entirety of the Christian faith rises and falls upon the meaning of the virgin birth. What the virgin birth means is that in one unique human being, God was fully present: Jesus Christ fully God and fully human. *God became flesh and dwelt among us.* Unlike the angels that came down and went away, Jesus came and came to stay. Of course, the world failed to offer him hospitality. “No room at the inn” was just the beginning of it. Unlike any angel, he was willing to suffer and die. (2) He died on a cross outside of town. His body was buried in a borrowed tomb. But as John's Gospel puts it so eloquently “To all who received him, to all who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God.”

The main thing about angels is that they tell us God cares, wants to help us, wants to be with us. The birth of Jesus tells us that God was willing to take it to a whole new level.

Here is where Mary comes in, not her submission so much but her courageous hospitality - first to the angel and then to the message the angel brought. I love the visual picture that Barbara Brown Taylor creates of Gabriel on his knees before Mary, anxiously looking at her face, waiting along with God, and along with the rest of the world to find out whether she will say yes. (3) She did, and in that way, she becomes our ultimate role model. We can be bearers of the spirit of Christ, bearers of his light.

I love this line from a poem by Rilke entitled “The Birth of Christ” –
Behold how God,
who thundered over the nations
so tenderly through you, enters the world.

In my years at Morningside, I have not ever seen an angel wing poking out of the

back of anybody's shirt, but I surely have seen many Marys, people who are hospitable to the Holy Spirit, people through whom the love of God enters the world. I just remember how it was after hurricane Katrina, that this church was the first church in Atlanta to open its heart and to provide a home for victims of Katrina coming up from New Orleans. I'll never forget calling Leslie Prince on the telephone and saying, "Leslie, I think some people from New Orleans are coming, and they are going to be at Grady."

And Leslie says, "I'll be headed right down there now."

We've got more than one Mary in our midst. Every year, a whole host of you are sleepers at the Shearith Israel Night Shelter, right in the middle of the busy seasons of Christmas and Advent. Those of you who climb ladders on the Habitat House, I see Mary in you.

There is a remarkable sense of harmony and mutual love here in this community; we put up with one another. We forgive one another, and most of the time, we love one another with a special tenderness, the likes of which I truly have never seen in a congregation before. We welcome the stranger, thinking, "That's what Christ wants us to do," but then it turns out that the stranger that we have welcomed blesses us a hundred fold!

I learned that in the humble homes of many of the early Christians, there would be a room set aside called "The Stranger's Room". The assumption was that Christ would come in the guise of the stranger, in every type of humanity that treads the earth. (4) Jesus comes to us through commonplace, ordinary humanity - that is how he came into the world in the first place.

Advent has begun, and it's time to move on from Thanksgiving, but I want to share just one Thanksgiving memory of perhaps the most memorable Thanksgiving our family ever had. We lived in a teeny house over on Coventry Road in Decatur. Our kids were in early elementary school. For some reason, we could not get with our extended family that year, and so when our church asked us if we would host a few guests for Thanksgiving dinner from Villa International, we said yes. It turned out that our three guests were health workers from three different countries, Pakistan, Indonesia, and an African country, the name of which I cannot recall. Our guests spoke very little English, and they were all Muslim, which made planning the Thanksgiving meal menu enough to give the cook (that would be me!) an Excedrin headache. There were turkey lovers, and there were vegetarians, and it was just a mess. But dinner was served, and we broke bread together. We did our best to communicate and be polite. After Thanksgiving dinner, they left our house, and when they left I said, "Whew!" But then the surprise. It turned out they never really left at all, because they have stayed in our hearts, Elizabeth's, and Sam's, and Al's and mine, all these years. Every Thanksgiving, we remember them: Mr. Osman, Mr. Albersan, Mr. Haroon. The gift they left us was the commitment never to reject, or demean, or

stereotype the stranger or the person who is different from us. I like to think that they returned to their home, able to be better healers, not only because of their work at the Centers for Disease Control, but because they broke bread around our table. I know, whatever else was on the menu, peace and goodwill were there on the table in abundance.

Listen, the writer of Hebrews can be as theological as he wants to be about Christ on the heavenly throne, but he knew that the practice of hospitality was the place where heaven and earth come together.

In the early spring of 2004, Al and I slipped into this sanctuary. We had just moved back to town, had no place to go to church, knew hardly a soul here. We came as strangers. We sat in the sanctuary. The service began. The music, oh the music was heavenly for us. It was awkward when the benediction was said because knew no one, but every single person around us extended a hand, and introduced himself or herself, and made us feel so welcome here. That simple experience became the hinge on which our future turned. Please, Morningside, keep offering hospitality to strangers. On this one simple thing, your future will turn and the kingdom will come among you. Amen.

(1) Thomas G. Long, *Hebrews*, John Knox Press, 1997.

(2) Susan R. Garrett, *No Ordinary Angel*, Yale University Press, 2008.

(3) Barbara Brown Taylor, *Gospel Medicine*, Cowley Publications, 1995.

(4) Dorothy Day, "Room for Christ," *Weavings*, September/October, 2003.