

A Melody of Rejoicing

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Isaiah 12:2-6; Luke 2: 8-14; Philippians 4: 4-7

Even though we have spoken our Prayer of Confession, I have two personal confessions to make. The first is that I hate those inflatable Santa Clauses, elves and snowmen that appear on many front lawns at this time of year. I admit that I rejoice whenever I see them deflated on the ground. I apologize if this offends you; I am trying to react in a more positive way by reminding myself of the joy that these decorations must bring to the people who live there. That said, if I ever see an inflatable nativity, I can't promise that I won't lose my cool.

I also confess that I love angels, angels of God that appear in Scripture and move human history in unexpected and wondrous directions, carols and songs about angels, paintings and sculptures of angels. Several angels decorate my house all year long, and their numbers greatly increase during Advent and Christmas—angels made of wood, ceramic, paper, fabric; traditional and whimsical angels, even one gently frowning mama angel with hands on her hip who reminds me when I need to get my act together! I know that I am not alone in my love of angels, and also in my need of angels, long before mass-produced guardian angels hit the marketplace.

The first two Sundays of Advent, we heard the songs that angels inspired first Zechariah, and then Mary to sing. Their melodies urge us to repent and to hope, to remember and to bless, to praise and give thanks to God. In these stories, the angels appear in private places, to Zechariah in the holy of holies inside the temple and to Mary most likely in her own home. We are told that Zechariah is terrified, with fear overwhelming, while Mary deals with any fear by focusing her attention on the angel's perplexing greeting. Both angels bring comfort and astounding news. *Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard. Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God.*

This morning, the setting expands, moving outside into the fields, where an angel appears to shepherds at night, and "the glory of the Lord shone around them." The shepherds too are understandably terrified. But the angel says to them: *Do not be afraid: for see, I am bringing you good news of great joy for all people!*

*It came upon the midnight clear, that glorious song of old
From angels bending near the earth to touch their harps of gold.
"Peace on the earth, good will to all, great news of joy we bring."
The world in solemn stillness lay to hear the angels sing.*

Through this angel of God, we hear a melody of rejoicing, accompanied, as angelic songs often are, by notes of reassurance in the midst of fear and trembling, doubt and disruption.

Angelic messengers are in our midst, through Scripture and different art forms, through dreams and visions, through personal experiences and public events, through the words of friends and the actions of strangers. God can use us as angelic messengers too! Angels serve as powerful reminders of the presence of the holy, the beautiful, and the glorious among us, throughout the created world that we can see, and in the realm of mystery, of all that is invisible and unknowable. Angels reflect our yearning for goodness, joy and purity of heart. The image of angels watching over us and the belief in angels guiding us bring hope to many in a troubled and troubling world.

In interfaith dialogue, Abraham is often lifted up as the founding father that Judaism, Christianity and Islam hold in common. What if we also lifted up the songs and messages of angels in sacred stories? As far as I know, no one has proclaimed the potential of angels to bring people together, people of different faiths and people with no religious affiliation.

Of course, Western culture has tried to domesticate angels by turning guardian angels into familiar merchandise that we see everywhere. But no matter how familiar angels become, I believe that they still reveal the holy in the midst of our everyday lives, including our deepest and most sacred longings for hope and peace, for joy and love. The Spirit is alive and well, seeking to comfort people and awaken their spirits through every angel that they see or hear, no matter who they are, where they live, or what they believe.

Maybe, just maybe, angels can also teach us in today's world to recognize the divine in each and every one of us, no matter how distorted or blurred the image of God may have become. We say to someone who has been very kind or generous to us: *you're an angel* or *I see the halo above your head* or *you certainly have earned your wings!* With the help of God, can't we seek to bring out the angel in everyone? Can't we point out the angels to those who do not recognize them? We certainly can seek to bring out the angel within ourselves!

The shepherds are not terrorized by human destruction; they are **terrified in awe** before the sacredness of life and the mystery of God, who cannot be fully known by any human being. Yes, we as people of faith, we as the Christian church have a significant call and role to play in reawakening reverence in human hearts for both Creator and creation.

Like angels of God, both the prophet Isaiah and the apostle Paul give voice to melodies that have the power to lift up souls. Writing from prison in Rome, the apostle Paul astounds us: *Rejoice in the Lord always, again I say, Rejoice! Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God.* You hear the music, don't you?

Like the prophet Isaiah, we can shout aloud and give voice to joy and reassurance for all to hear. *Surely God is my salvation; I will trust and will not be afraid. With*

joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation! Sing praises to the Lord, who has done gloriously. Shout aloud and sing for joy! And we will as we sing our closing hymn: "With Joy Draw Water."

After the shepherds hear the angel's great news for all people, a multitude of the heavenly host suddenly appears, praising God: *Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace!* In response, the shepherds hurry to Bethlehem to see these things that have come to pass. And as they return to their fields, these shepherds will be singing their own song of joy, glorifying God for all that they have heard and seen. The song of the angels and the shepherds becomes our melody of rejoicing. Where are you finding glory in your own life? How will you share it?

Now, again, I don't want to offend anyone, but the inflatable Santas and snowmen just don't represent or inspire the kind of holy joy that transforms our world. I mean, just one gust of wind or one tiny pin prick--and *pop!* Whereas angels, well, they are always here among us, for those who have eyes to see the glory of God, for those who have ears to hear the soothing refrains, for those who have tongues to sing a song of Emmanuel, God with us, now and forever.

*"For lo, the days are hastening on, by prophets seen of old.
When with the ever-circling years shall come the time foretold.
When peace and joy o'er all the earth their awesome splendors fling,
and all the world send back the song which now the angels sing."*

Here's to our echoing back the melodies that the angels sing. Thanks be to God!
Amen.