

Angels: From Heaven to Earth

Luke 1:26-38; Matthew 1:20-21; Luke 2:8-16

Some jobs are both very boring and very exciting. Paratroopers sit around for days waiting for the call to fly and to jump. Waiting can be dull; jumping can be exhilarating. Firefighters may be doing a very routine task one minute and answering a life-threatening alarm the next minute. Paramedics might be parked in a fast food parking lot chatting casually for hours and suddenly be thrust into a life-and-death intervention.

Add angels to the list. Their only job is to do whatever God wants them to do. They are messengers. It seems to me their lives in heaven can be rather routine, sitting and waiting for God to call them to action.

One of the most famous angels of heaven is Gabriel. He is one of only two angels in the Bible whose names are told. Gabriel means “man of God” in Hebrew. His usual assignment was to stand near the throne of God and wait for orders. Those orders came during the sixth century BC when he was sent to interpret a dream for the prophet Daniel. While I’m sure he enjoyed the trip, dream interpretation probably isn’t all that hard an assignment for your average angel.

Gabriel disappeared from the pages of the Bible for the next six hundred years. That’s a long time to wait for your boss to send you on your next assignment. But when the time came God gave him the biggest, most important assignment of any angel in all of history. Gabriel became the first angel of the Christmas story. In Jesus’ biography in Luke 1:26-38 we are told:

In the sixth month, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin’s name was Mary. The angel went to her and said, “Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you.”

Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be. But the angel said to her, “Do not be afraid, Mary, you have found favor with God.”

Gabriel got one of the best assignments ever offered to a member of the heavenly host of angels—to deliver the astonishing news that God was coming to earth. It was the hottest news ever, and it was delivered to a somewhat unlikely person.

Mary was pretty much a “nobody”. She was very young in a society that respected age. She was very poor in a place where poverty was rampant. And she was a woman in a culture that typically demeaned women. She seemed a least likely recipient of an angelic visit.

I like the fact that Mary was first. I like the way God thinks and treats people. He honors those we might ignore. He gives preference to those we might slight. At the top of his list was a poor, unknown teenage girl.

But he scared her. It figures. Gabriel would probably scare most of us. Straight from heaven and still glowing with the glory of the presence of God he begins with formal greetings from God himself: “Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord

is with you.” Obviously, Gabriel didn’t know how to get started in a conversation with a woman!

He could tell that she was frightened. Perhaps her lip quivered. Maybe her whole body trembled. He might have seen the look of fear in her eyes. If nothing else, Gabriel looked into her soul and saw that she was greatly troubled, so with a much softer voice he said what any of us might have said: “Don’t be afraid!” Except, he must have said it with a supernatural authority that actually started to settle her soul. More slowly and completely he began to explain what was going to happen. She would become pregnant with the Son of God him-

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self. He would grow up to become the monarch seated on King David's throne.

Mary was not sophisticated or highly educated. She probably couldn't read or write. But she wasn't stupid; she knew pregnancy didn't just happen. It made no sense. She was a virgin!

But Gabriel seemed to have an answer for everything. He told her that the Holy Spirit of God would overshadow her and she would become pregnant while staying a virgin. As Gabriel put it, "*Nothing is impossible with God.*"

I've tried to imagine the emotions and thoughts of this magnificent angel. He must have been full of excitement at what God was about to do and thrilled to be delivering the message. And he must have been surprised that Mary had virtually no idea what he was talking about.

Mary didn't understand virgin birth any more than we do. She didn't know much if anything about the Son of God. She couldn't begin to imagine what a divine-human baby would look like. She could not have anticipated the journey to Bethlehem, the stable delivery room, the raising of a supernatural child, the miracles, the crucifixion, the resurrection. She had no idea!

What must have impressed Gabriel the most was Mary's response: "*I am the Lord's servant. May it be to me as you have said.*" Gabriel knew stories about humans who argued and rebelled against God. He knew about those who fought hard to disobey God's will. He knew about those who heard God's news and refused to accept it. But this teenage girl responded with such trust, such acceptance and such faith.

Angels don't usually deliver God's news. Sometimes they wait centuries between assignments. Instead, God's will comes through a doctor's prognosis, an author's book, a pastor's sermon, a sudden accident or an unexpected opportunity. No matter how we hear it, when God sends his message to us our response should always be like Mary's: "*I am the Lord's servant! May it be to me as you have said.*" Let us accept and submit to God's will even before we can figure out all that is involved. Impress the angels of heaven the way Mary did!

The second Christmas angel showed up several months later. He came, not to Mary, but to her

fiancé, Joseph. That story is told in Matthew 1:18-21:

This is how the birth of Jesus Christ came about: His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be with child through the Holy Spirit. Because Joseph her husband was a righteous man and did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly.

But after he had considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins.

Joseph was a good guy. He was a righteous man, the kind of person who wanted to do everything right. He proposed and was engaged. Engagements were considered to be legally binding, so if a couple wanted to break an engagement they legally had to get a divorce. If a man was engaged and died, his wife (who was not his wife yet) was called a widow. For Joseph there was no pre-marital sex. He wanted to save sex for marriage. He wanted to do everything right.

But everything seemed to go terribly wrong. The woman he loved was pregnant. It was obvious to him that she was not equally committed to God and certainly not so committed to doing everything right. She had loved some other man. His dreams were shattered. His idealism was destroyed. His love was betrayed. His life was wrecked.

Joseph faced what many people face doing everything right and becoming the victim of someone else's choices. But, this very good man was determined to do what was right even if Mary had done what was wrong. He would do right by her before God even if she had done wrong by him. Rather than try to get even, he would end the engagement as quietly and respectfully as possible. He did his best by her.

I imagine Joseph was in something of a daze. His heart was broken. He was filled with grief,

feeling no hope. In the midst of his misery an angel appeared to him. This angel is unnamed and remains anonymous. His name was unimportant; it was the message that mattered.

Angel's must be very sensitive to human fear because this one said the same words that Gabriel had said to Mary: "*Do not be afraid.*" Angels know that when they represent God their first job is to settle the human heart. They are vendors of supernatural peace.

The message was stunning. Joseph was to marry Mary and raise this baby as a gift from God. Joseph was told that her conception was divine, but he was not told that Mary was still a virgin. His mind had plenty of opportunity to doubt. Then God asked him to raise this child to whom he was not biologically related. He was asked to be a father for God's sake and for the child's sake, not because he was the natural father.

I wonder if the angel realized what he was asking of Joseph. I wonder if he realized how inadequate the explanation sounded. I wonder if he knew how hard this could be. I wonder if he sensed that Joseph wondered if things had not gone from bad to worse.

Joseph did what God wanted him to do. He trusted God even when he could not fully understand. He trusted God enough to marry this woman about whom he had serious doubts. He sacrificed everything for a child with whom he shared no DNA. He loved the boy and was called Abba (father) by him. He not only did what God asked him to do, he did it very well.

Unlike Mary, Joseph did not live to see Jesus' miracles. He was not there when Jesus changed water to wine. He never witnessed the crowds that followed him. He missed out on the crucifixion and the resurrection. For a lifetime he faithfully fulfilled his mission based on one paragraph of words from an angel sent by God.

Maybe you understand because you have walked in Joseph's sandals. To you it seems that all of life has gone wrong—dreams shattered, pain

exaggerated, problems multiplied and hope stolen. All you have are promises from the Bible that God will be with you always, that he works all things together for good or that he will bring you

guaranteed victory in the end. Then you, like Joseph, live righteously for a lifetime convinced that everything that seems so wrong will turn out miraculously right because of the promises of God. The message for Joseph is

our Christmas message as well: Don't be afraid when everything seems to go wrong.

The third Christmas angel didn't show up at home or in a dream, but at work. It is recorded in Luke 2:8-16:

And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. 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. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord. This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger."

Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men on whom his favor rests."

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."

So they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby, who was lying in the manger.

This angel story could have been embarrassing. Angels at home and angels at church are disturbing enough. But, angels showing up at work—is that even legal?

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I had always pictured this scene with about ten shepherds and six sheep. However, I rethought my mental image while Charleen and I were visiting New Zealand, a country with about 3 million people and 60 million sheep. Maybe if there were ten shepherds there were more like 200 or more sheep. It was a lot of work. And a lot of routine—feeding, birthing, shearing, chasing, healing, helping and more.

A shepherd's job was not unlike our jobs. Whether flying planes, performing surgery, going to school or working at home, work fills much of our lives. It is very important to us—and it is mostly routine.

The shepherds' work was supernaturally interrupted by an angel, nearly scaring them to death! And if that was not enough, this angel brought a thousand friends who started singing and flashing their bright lights. It was no ordinary day at work. When they finally went home and their wives asked, "What happened today?" they probably didn't have words to explain it.

A great point needs to be made here. The good news of Jesus' birth is not limited to home or time off or weekends at church. It is a truth that breaks into every part of our lives. He is the Lord of life and that includes home, church, school, work—everywhere; everything.

But is it always with angels? No, angels are pretty rare. Today God is more likely to burst into the routine of our work with a promotion or a termination, with a challenge or a new co-worker, with an accident or with a bonus. But let it be clear that God is there, coming at us with the Christmas truth of the Christ wherever we are.

I believe in angels. I believe there are millions of them still delivering God's messages and doing God's work in our world today. But whether we see or hear an angel today is not what matters most. What matters most is that we get God's message. If God chooses you for something you do not understand, don't be afraid. Be like Mary and simply say, "*I am the Lord's servant. May it be to me as you have said.*"

If everything in life seems to be going terribly wrong, don't be afraid. Be like Joseph and do what is right even if everyone else seems to be doing what is wrong. Trust God for the final outcome even if you don't live to see God's results. And, if God bursts into your routine at work or anywhere else with sights and sounds and circumstances you never expected, don't be afraid. Be like the shepherds whose place of work became a place of worship.

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