

THE SUPERNATURAL WITNESSES

LUKE 2:8-14

I first came to the Columbus area back in 1984 to pastor a new mission congregation in the Dublin-Powell area. As is true of many start up churches, finances were a real adventure. Just having enough income from week to week to keep operating was a challenge. One particular Sunday morning I noticed a new couple visiting our little church for the first time. That was exciting in and of itself! But I can still distinctly remember how the faces of that couple just shone with a kind of unearthly glow as they worshipped with us. I remember greeting them after the service. They were visiting from out of town. I also remember learning after their visit that they had put a check for \$3000 in the offering plate that morning – an enormous and much needed financial encouragement for that little church. I never saw that couple again. I've often wondered since then if we were visited that Sunday morning by two angels who simply appeared to us as human beings. I'll probably never know this side of Heaven, but I wonder....

Have you ever seen an angel? Have you ever had a unique, but wonderful encounter with something or someone that seemed – upon reflection later on – to be unusual or even supernatural? If you believe the Bible is God's Word, you can't just dismiss angels as so much superstition. Angels had a pivotal role during the birth of Jesus. An angel named Gabriel announced Jesus' birth to Mary. An angel appeared to Joseph in a vision to tell him what was about to happen. After Jesus' birth, another angel warned Joseph and Mary to flee to Egypt. This Advent season we're considering several witnesses to the wonder. What wonder? The birth of Jesus. Jesus' birth is called the Incarnation. God took upon Himself human flesh, bone and personhood and that is incredibly wonderful. Today, I want you to think with me about the supernatural witnesses.

Let's read why angels turn out to be prominent witnesses to the wonder of Jesus' birth. Try to imagine that scene with me. Imagine sitting out there in the Palestinian countryside when the dark night is pierced with a sudden and blinding light. Imagine seeing and hearing some majestic, incredible creature before you. Imagine the sky filling up with thousands upon thousands of angelic beings praising God and chanting, "Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace to men on whom his favor rests." Here are a few truths about these supernatural witnesses to the wonder of Jesus' birth. First of all, angels are...

INVOLVED IN GOD'S PRAISE.

What does the Bible tell us about angels? Here's a quick summary. Angels are beings God created. They are extraordinarily beautiful in appearance. There are lots and lots of angels. We aren't told if they are spirit beings like God Himself or have physical bodies like we do, but they can take on human form if the situation requires it. Apparently, angels are not a race of beings descended from an original pair like human beings are all descended from Adam and Eve. Instead, they appear to be a company of beings God created – not necessarily either

male or female. They apparently do not marry nor have children. The Bible suggests that they have supernatural intelligence, but they don't know everything. They have supernatural powers, but they aren't all powerful. Angels live forever, but they had a definite beginning whenever God created them.

The Bible suggests that angels are deeply involved in God's praise. The prophet Isaiah had this incredible vision of God in Heaven. He saw creatures with six wings calling out to one another, "... 'Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of Heaven's Armies! The whole earth is filled with his glory!'" (Is 6:3 NLT) In the book of Revelation, we read, "Then I looked again, and I heard the voices of thousands and millions of angels around the throne and of the living beings and the elders. And they sang in a mighty chorus.... And all the angels... fell before the throne with their faces to the ground and worshiped God. They sang, 'Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and strength belong to our God forever and ever! Amen.'" (Rev 5:11-12, 7:11-12 NLT)

It's safe to conclude that one of the primary activities of angels is the endless and continual praise and worship of God. Of course, you see that in the passage we read when angels announced Jesus' birth. It was apparently customary in Jesus' day and time to have local musicians congregate in the home of a new born baby and greet the child with simple music. I don't know if that happened for Jesus or not. But we do know that an angelic choir sang songs that earthly singers could never have sung in praise and worship of God for Jesus' birth.

Angels are involved in God's praise. So are you. The Bible makes it just as clear that one of the primary reasons you are alive is to offer praise and glory to God. You can never be the complete person God made you to be until and unless you live a life of praise. The Bible says, "But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light." (2 Pt 2:9 NIV) There are, of course, many ways to praise God. One very important way to praise God is being a part of a worship experience like this one. As you sing, pray, give money, hear the message and partake of communion, you can be praising God. But praising God must be more than a one or two hour a week event in your life. After all, the Bible says, "Therefore, let us offer through Jesus a continual sacrifice of praise to God, proclaiming our allegiance to his name." (Heb 13:11 NLT) You might squirm a bit and say, "But, Rick, I'm just not the mystical or meditative type." My friend, learn to praise God regularly in your own way. Figure out how to bring God's majesty and magnificence into every area of your life. Find ways to recognize His presence and celebrate His love throughout everyday of your life in your own way. You are made to praise God.

Then, be sure to expand your definition of praise. Praise goes beyond your lips and includes how you live out your life, too. Jesus said, "In the same way, let your good deeds shine out for all to see, so that everyone will praise your heavenly Father." (Matt 5:16 NLT) On another occasion, Jesus compared your

life to a fruit-bearing grape vine. He said, “When you produce much fruit, you are my true disciples. This brings great glory to my Father.” (John 15:8 NLT) Your attitude towards the difficult circumstances you might find yourself in today either brings praise to God or detracts from His glory. The way you act towards and treat other people – particularly those who are in need of some kind be it physical, financial, emotional or spiritual - glorifies your Father or reflects negatively on Him. Your mouth can be used to bless God and build up other people or, instead, to blaspheme God and tear other people down. Every day presents you with multiple opportunities to praise and worship God continually just like the angels. Are you giving Him that praise? Secondly, angels are...

INVESTED WITH GOD'S MESSAGE.

Both the Hebrew and Greek languages’ – the original languages of the Old and New Testaments – words for “angel” were also widely used for a person who is a messenger of some kind. There are many examples in the Bible of how God used angels as messengers to human beings. In the Old Testament, an angel prevented Abraham from killing his son, Isaac. An angel revealed to Moses what was going on at the burning bush. An angel announced the birth of Samson, one of Israel’s leaders. In the New Testament, an angel announced the birth of John the Baptist. There are other examples in the New Testament of God using angels as messengers of some kind and in some way.

Perhaps the best example of that fact is the passage we read earlier this morning. A single angel and then a huge number of angelic beings bring God’s message to those amazed shepherds that first Christmas night. The angels’ message that night was a mighty proclamation not only to the shepherds but to everyone who read or heard Luke’s Gospel. Jesus is the Savior of the world and the true source of world peace – not the Roman Caesar. Jesus is the Messiah or the Christ – the promised One prophesied in the Old Testament who would come to save Israel. Jesus is also the Lord – God clothed in human flesh who both demands and deserves everyone’s love, obedience and service.

The angels already announced that night what Jesus’ followers would only fully recognize years later: “For God loved the world so much that he gave his one and only Son, so that everyone who believes in him will not perish but have eternal life.” (John 3:16 NLT) Can you hear the same essential message in what the angels said, chanted or sung that first Christmas night? “...‘I bring you good news that will bring great joy to all people. The Savior—yes, the Messiah, the Lord—has been born today in Bethlehem.... Glory to God in highest heaven, and peace on earth to those with whom God is pleased.’” (Luke 2:10-11,14 NLT)

Angels are invested with God’s message. So are you. And it’s not just pastors, missionaries or full time evangelistic speakers who are called to share that message. It’s anyone and everyone who has been born again by the Spirit of God and considers himself or herself a follower of the Lord Jesus Christ. How do

you share God's message with others? You share it in much the same way as you praise God. You share His message with your lips and your life. Like the angels, you give witness to the fact that Jesus is your personal Savior. Like the angels, you give witness to the fact that Jesus is your Messiah – the promised One who died on the cross and rose again from the dead that you might have eternal life now and forever. Like the angels, you give witness to the fact the Jesus is your Lord. Your knee has bowed before Him and your tongue has confessed that He is Lord of all to the glory of God.

You share that message with both your lips and your life. Don't ever make it one or the other! One the one hand, I've known a few Christians who can talk all day about Jesus, faith and being born again but their everyday life – their character, how they treat people, what they value – denies what they say they believe. On the other hand, I've known a far greater number of Christians who like to convince themselves that the witness of their everyday lives is so outstanding that lost people will somehow just find God without any sort of verbal witness being needed. I like the old saying, "People are saved by Jesus' death not my life." In other words, people need to hear the story of what Jesus did from you.

You are invested with God's message. That means you look for opportunities to share verbally with other people what God has done for you personally. That means you learn how to tell what God has done through Jesus in a simple, effective way. That's a tool you put in your Christian tool box and you pull it out whenever God gives you the opportunity to use it. I love this observation: "[People] who want milk should not seat themselves on a stool in the middle of a field in hope that the cow will back up to them." (Elbert Hubbard) My friend, you can't hide inside Karl Road Baptist Church, or your Sunday School class or your small group and expect lost people in your neighborhood or in this community to come to you. We must find ways to reach out to people in the community where they are and share the good news of Jesus with them. Just like the angels, you are invested with God's message. Are you sharing it? Thirdly, angels are...

IGNORANT OF GOD'S SALVATION.

No doubt you recognize that there's a world of difference between knowing about something and the kind of knowledge that comes only through experience. You can know about roller-coasters, but that's different than going up to Cedar Point and riding a few of them! You can know that childbirth is painful, but only a mother can fully know what that means. (Thank God!) You can know that parents love their children, but you can't really know that kind of love until you raise a kid of your own. Knowing about romantic love and actually being in love with someone are two different levels of knowledge.

Angels know a great deal about God's salvation, but they've never experienced it personally. Apparently, angels can sin. There's good biblical evidence suggesting that Satan and his demons are angels who sinned and disobeyed

God. But, as far as we know, God has never offered salvation to any angelic being who has defied Him. The Bible says angels are aware of God's salvation and are, in fact, very involved in all that God is doing in bringing lost people to Himself. It says, "Therefore, angels are only servants—spirits sent to care for people who will inherit salvation." (Heb 1:14 NLT) Angels were very active in the life of Jesus the Savior. You may recall that they served Him after his forty days of temptation and trial in the desert. They comforted Him in the Garden of Gethsemane the night before He died on the cross. They rolled away the stone in front of the tomb on Easter morning. They know all about God's salvation without experiencing it themselves.

The Bible says something very interesting about this fact. In mentioning the ministry of the Old Testament prophets, it says, "... they spoke of the things that have now been told you by those who have preached the gospel to you by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven. Even angels long to look into these things." (1 Peter 1:12 NLT) It's like the man who was having a really hard time understanding that Jesus died and rose again for his sins. He said, "I guess this salvation thing is a bit like falling in love. It's better 'felt' than 'telt'!" Angels have "telt" God's salvation for countless ages – the announcement of Jesus' birth being just one example – but they've never actually "felt" it for themselves.

No doubt, angels know much more about God's holiness, God's majesty and God's power than you and I do. But they don't know what it's like to be saved. They've never been saved. They've never been forgiven of their sins. They've never been adopted as sons and daughters of Almighty God. They've never known what it's like to have the Son of God die on a cross for them. They've never received grace. For all we know, we may be the only creatures in God's infinite universe that have ever experienced those aspects of God's grace and God's love. Angels are ignorant of God's salvation on an experiential level.

And yet it occurs to me today that there are many human beings out there that are still ignorant of God's salvation, too. You work, live next door or go to school with many of them. Some of you live with them everyday. Some are probably even here in this sanctuary this morning. Oh, you may know about God's love but you've never personally experienced it for yourself. Oh, you may have heard many times about Jesus dying on a cross and rising from the dead, but you've never received that demonstration of God's grace in a personal way. Angels have a good reason to be ignorant of God's salvation. But do you?

You might ask me, "Rick, how can I know that I've experienced God's salvation in a personal, experiential way?" It's really quite easy. You love Jesus. You want to follow Him, obey Him and serve Him. When you sin, you can't go very long without confessing it and asking for God's forgiveness. You love God's people. You just can't stay away from church even though it's a very imperfect place full of people who act like dopes on occasion. You also have this inexplicable love for lost people and you want to share Jesus with them with both your lips and

your life. And you're changing for the better. You can look back over the years and see God changing your behavior, your values, your attitudes and your priorities. You're by no means perfect, but you're moving in God's direction. Angels are ignorant of God's salvation. What about you?

Clarence Macartney, one of history's greatest preachers who lived in the 20th century, enjoyed telling the following story. The King was seated upon His throne. On either side of the throne were four great angels: Uriel, Raphael, Michael and Gabriel. Before the throne stood one more angel: the angel of the Book. By the side of this angel stood a human being. "Who is this that you have brought and what are his claims?" asked the King. "O King, this man was a great inventor. He shed light on the human pathway throughout the world." "Then," said the King, "send him up and let him stand there by Uriel, the angel of light." So he went up. And the angel of the Book brought another human before the throne. "Who is this and what are his claims?" "This man was a great philosopher, who thought your thoughts after You." And the King looked at him and said, "Send him up and let him stand here by the side of Raphael, the angel of reason." So he went up.

The angel of the Book brought a third human before the throne. "Who is this and what are his claims?" "This man was a great patriot. With his sword he delivered his people out of the hands of tyrants." The King said, "Then send him up and let him stand by the side of Michael, the angel of the sword." So he took his place as well. And a fourth human came before the throne. "Who is this and what are his claims?" "This man sang holy songs of praise to God, songs that still echo through the Church of the Living God." The King said, "Send him up and let him stand and sing here by Gabriel's side, the angel of holy song."

Then the angel of the Book brought yet another human before the throne. There was no note of greatness about him. There was no flash of genius in his eyes. The King said, "Who is this and what are his claims?" Then the angel looked in the Book and lifting his head, said, "This man brought a friend to Christ." And no one heard what the King said because all Heaven rang with a great shout. Angels and archangels, cherubim and seraphim and all the host of redeemed people rejoiced over the one who had been redeemed. Jesus said that all Heaven rejoiced when you experienced God's salvation personally. And when He uses you to bring a friend to Christ, there is no greater heavenly reward.

Angels are involved in God's praise. Are you giving God your praise continually? Angels are invested with God's message. Are you sharing that message with your lips and your life? Angels are ignorant of God's salvation. Are you ignorant of it as well? Only a human being can fully appreciate Christmas. Angels can't. But, it's also true that only a human being who is a follower of Jesus can fully appreciate Christmas. Only a born again child of God knows God's grace, God's love and God's salvation fully and personally as it is found in the Babe of Bethlehem – Jesus Christ the Lord.