

THE ANGEL AND ZECHARIAH**LUKE 1:5-25**

Have you ever had an encounter with an angel? As far as I know, I have not. There was one occasion, however, that left me wondering. Over 30 years ago now, I was in my first year of pastoring a new, mission church over in the Dublin and Powell area of the city – a church this congregation helped to get started. Money was tight which is pretty normal for start-up churches. One Sunday morning we had a new couple visit the church. I don't recall meeting them either before or after the service, but I can still remember the face of the man. He had this wonderful smile throughout the service and his face literally glowed like the sun. I also remember that mysterious couple put a check for \$3,000 in the offering plate that day. What an encouragement! They never visited again and they left no means of contacting them. Were they angels? I don't know, but I wonder....

People continue to find angels very interesting. Many books and articles tell stories of encounters with angels. TV shows and movies about angels abound. The majority of Americans believe in their existence as does an even larger majority of Christians. The Bible takes their existence for granted. Did you know there are over 300 references to one or more angels in Scripture? Now, angels show up everywhere in our culture during the Christmas season. We make them in snowdrifts, hang them as ornaments from trees, bake them as cookies, and play them in pageants. You'll probably see a few at tonight's presentation, "Christmas is Jesus"! Our culture gets a whole lot wrong about Christmas, but this emphasis on angels might actually be appropriate.

Did you know the largest concentration of references to angels in the Bible occurs in the chapters that tell us about the first Christmas? Angels are everywhere during the birth of Jesus! It's been observed that other than the Holy Spirit, angels are the most pivotal players in the Christmas story. We find angels proclaiming, rebuking, informing, encouraging, guiding, protecting, advising, and, also, worshiping God. It's from angels that we learn all that's significant for us to know about Jesus' birth. So, this Advent season I thought it might be both inspiring and informative to put together a message series about the angelic appearances that first Christmas. The impact of the angels and their message was life-changing for an over the hill priest named Zechariah, a baffled young virgin named Mary, a confused fiancé named Joseph, and common shepherds out in the fields surrounding the town of Bethlehem.

Let's read about the first angelic appearance just now. It occurred to me that the main characters in this first story share one thing in common. They all served God. Yes, they served God very differently, but the common thread that connects them was how they served God. We can learn much from their example.

HOW THE ANGELS SERVE GOD.

It's wise to clear the air when it comes to what the Bible teaches us about angels, so here's just a few observations. Science fiction lovers often speculate whether there are intelligent creatures other than human beings elsewhere in the universe. The Bible's

answer is a resounding “Yes!” Angels are spiritual beings inhabiting our universe. God created them probably before He created human beings. Their primary home appears to be Heaven - where God Himself dwells - but they can apparently move between that reality and our reality at will. Angels are immortal, but not eternal. In other words, they had a definite beginning, but they apparently live forever. By the way, so do you and I, but we forget that fact. Yes, we all die physically, but the Bible teaches that our spirit – the essential you and me – lives forever either with God in Heaven or separated from God in Hell. So, like the angels, human beings are immortal, but not eternal.

Angels are a distinct creation of God. Despite how Hollywood likes to present it, we don't become angels after we die and they never turn into actual human beings either. Scripture implies angels are supernaturally strong, powerful, and beautiful creatures, but they neither desire nor deserve our worship. Unlike God, angels aren't all-powerful. They don't know everything. They can't be every place at the same time. Again, contrary to Hollywood's assumptions, encounters with angels are never comforting or heart-warming. Instead, encounters with angels in the Bible were always overwhelming as was true when Zechariah encountered the angel, Gabriel, in our Scripture passage today. Nobody in the Bible ever had a pleasant chat with an angel. Instead, you were much more likely to be on your face quaking in fear and dread.

Despite our curiosity, the Bible is far more concerned to tell us what angels do rather than who they are. But here and there we get fascinating hints. Apparently they don't marry, procreate, or reproduce; nevertheless, there's a vast number of them. There are different kinds of angels organized into different classes, orders, or types. In Scripture, they're referred to as angels, but also seraphim, cherubim, morning stars, thrones, powers, rulers, and authorities. Apparently, at some point, they were endowed with free will, because the Bible tells us that some angels sinned, rebelled against God, and are now His greatest enemies. One of those was a particularly mighty angel named Lucifer who the Bible refers to as Satan.

You could say angels have three primary roles according to the Bible. First, they exist to worship God. In the book of Revelation, we get a vision of Heaven, “And all the angels were standing around the throne and around the elders and the four living beings. And they 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.’” (Rv. 5:11-12 NLT) Later this month, we'll focus on these verses, “Suddenly, the angel was joined by a vast host of others—the armies of heaven—praising God and saying, ‘Glory to God in highest heaven, and peace on earth to those with whom God is pleased.’” (Lk. 2:13-14 NLT) Worship. It occurs to me that's one area where angels and human beings are very much alike. We were both created and exist to worship God. When the Bible says, “‘You must love the LORD your God with all your heart, all your soul, and all your mind.’ This is the first and greatest commandment.” (Mt. 22:37-38 NLT), it applies to angels and human beings alike. Like the angels, you and I exist to worship God.

Second, angels exist to fulfill God's tasks. The angel, Gabriel, said as much in our passage today: "I am Gabriel! I stand in the very presence of God." (Lk. 1:19 NLT) That means more than what it sounds like. It's not just an elegant way of saying he spent time hanging out with the Almighty! Instead, it was another way of saying, "I exist to fulfill every task or mission God gives to me. I live to serve Almighty God." Gabriel is only one of three angels mentioned in Scripture with a specific name: Lucifer, Michael, and Gabriel. If you flip back to the Old Testament, you will see there how God sent Gabriel to the prophet, Daniel, living in exile in Babylon some 600 years before God sent him to Zechariah in the passage we read today. In both places, Gabriel is on a mission for God and from God. He's fulfilling a task God had given him to do.

In the Bible, angels are helpers, protectors, guides, and guardians. Scripture never uses the term "guardian angels," but the idea is biblical. It says, "If you make the LORD your refuge, if you make the Most High your shelter, no evil will conquer you; no plague will come near your home. For he will order his angels to protect you wherever you go." (Ps. 91:9-11 NLT) The Bible also says, "Therefore, angels are only servants—spirits sent to care for people who will inherit salvation." (Heb. 1:14 NLT) Fulfill God's tasks. Don't we also exist to serve God, to fulfill His tasks, and to help accomplish His mission? Indeed, we do! Have you noticed how God loves to delegate His work to His creatures and have them participate fully in what He's doing? God doesn't actually need angels to do His work for Him. No doubt He could do it better Himself. But He gets angels involved in His work. By the same token, God doesn't actually need you or me to accomplish anything on His behalf either. He could accomplish whatever He wants done in this world Himself effortlessly and it would be done perfectly. But God clearly prefers to work in and through His creatures to accomplish His will.

I get together with a close friend for breakfast once a month or so. He attends another church and leads a small group. He was telling me that he's become aware that hardly anybody in his group actually serves the Lord in any intentional way. It's not because no one has asked them. Oh, they attend worship services and the small group meetings, but that's it. They just don't want to be involved in any ministry tasks either inside or outside the church. They resist doing anything intentionally or regularly to build up God's Kingdom. The whole concept of actually serving the Lord seems alien to them. I hope you're not like that. I hope you can point to several activities you do regularly and intentionally and say about them, "I do that because I love Jesus. I serve there because I love Jesus." Like the angels, you and I exist to fulfill God's tasks.

Thirdly, angels exist to proclaim God's good news. Gabriel said that explicitly in our text today. "I am Gabriel! I stand in the very presence of God. It was he who sent me to bring you this good news!" (Lk. 5:19 NLT) Christian people often use the word "gospel" to refer to the story of what God has done for us through His Son, Jesus – His death and resurrection. The linguistic roots for the word "gospel" reveal it simply means "good news." The angels are all about proclaiming the gospel – good news from God Himself. Couldn't God have done a better job Himself of proclaiming His good news to Zechariah? Of course. But, as we observed, He loves to use His creatures. So, He used Gabriel, an angel, to proclaim good news. Couldn't God do a better job than you

and me in proclaiming Himself what He's done through Jesus? Of course! Nevertheless, God prefers to use His creatures – sinful, broken, very imperfect human beings who have become forgiven followers of Jesus – to proclaim the good news of what He's done to other human beings who have yet to put their trust in Him and become His children. That's God's plan A and He hasn't provided a plan B. Like the angels, you and I exist to proclaim God's good news.

Please remember this Christmas season – and every other time of the year, for that matter – that if you're a follower of Jesus today, you exist to proclaim God's good news. Remember that as you pray for specific people God has put into your life who need to hear and respond to God's good news. Remember that so you'll always be ready to take the initiative and intentionally reach out to spiritually lost people. Remember that as you invite people to our Christmas events like Saturday's "Believe in Christmas" concert and the Christmas Eve service. Take some of these postcards with you today and spread them around this week! God has chosen to need you to proclaim His good news. You're plan A. There's no plan B. Angels exist to serve God. So do human beings. We see that truth in the story of Zechariah and Elizabeth as well.

HOW ZECHARIAH AND ELIZABETH SERVED GOD.

Zechariah was a priest, a member of the Jewish tribe of Levi. In addition to three great religious festivals each year – Passover, Pentecost, and the Feast of Tabernacles – most Levites served one week every six months at the temple in Jerusalem helping with all the rituals of Jewish worship like the twice a day animal sacrifices for the people's sins. But probably only once in his lifetime did a Jewish priest have the high and holy privilege of actually entering the temple itself and offering incense on the altar of incense which stood in the center of the temple's interior. It was likely the highlight of a priest's entire life to have that opportunity. And it was on this occasion in Zechariah's life that God sent the angel, Gabriel, with some very special news. Despite being "over the hill" in years, he and his wife, Elizabeth, were going to have a son and this boy was going to grow up and have a very unusual, unique ministry.

He would grow up to be John the Baptist. The rest of Luke 1 reveals that Elizabeth and Mary, Jesus' mother, were relatives. They were pregnant at the same time and Mary came to live with Elizabeth for part of her own pregnancy. So it was that Zechariah, Elizabeth, and even their unborn son, John, became part of the story of Jesus' birth. When he became a man, John prepared the people of that day and time spiritually for Jesus' ministry. He knew he was the fulfillment of the Scripture we heard earlier today when the first candle of the Advent season was lit. John said, "I am a voice shouting in the wilderness, "Clear the way for the LORD's coming!"'" (Jo 1:23 NLT) And he did.

When I think about how Zechariah and Elizabeth served God, two thoughts emerge. First of all, they continued to live godly lives despite great sorrow. Our text today made it plain they were godly, good people. But godly people don't always have life go their way. Sometimes even godly people suffer the consequences of living in a fallen, sinful world. One consequence is that sometimes our bodies don't work the way they were

designed to work. We learn that Elizabeth was unable to have children. It was a great, profound heartache for both she and Zechariah. Back then, people considered children to be the supreme blessing of God. That was certainly appropriate. But many of them came to a false conclusion about the absence of kids. They assumed infertility was a judgment or punishment from God. A couple without children was thought to have displeased God in some way. Childlessness was even considered a valid reason for a man to divorce his wife. I imagine Zechariah and Elizabeth had endured painful gossip over the years. “Why can’t she get pregnant? What did they do to offend God? Tsk, tsk. It’s very sad, yes, but they must have done something to upset God.”

Here’s what I appreciate about these two people. They just kept on honoring God despite their own deep sorrow. They just kept on serving God despite other people’s unfair innuendos and gossipy whispers. They’re a reminder that when God chooses people for some task He wants done, the result can be a cross of sorrow rather than a crown of joy – at least at first. Do you remember what Jesus said about a man’s blindness before he healed him? “It was not because of his sins or his parents’ sins. This happened so the power of God could be seen in him.” (Jo. 9:3 NLT) I think much the same could be said about Zechariah and Elizabeth. God doesn’t display His glory and greatness by giving you and me lives of endless ease and comfort. Instead, He often glorifies Himself best through great difficulties and trials in our lives. How we respond to life’s heartaches and setbacks can be a powerful way God uses us to encourage others and to give honor to Him.

I want us to remember that this morning and every morning. Are you going through a difficult time right now? Could life be a whole lot better than it is? Learn something from Zechariah and Elizabeth’s example. Trials and troubles in life are not a sign that God has abandoned you. Heartaches are not evidence that He’s punishing you. And the presence of painful challenges is certainly not a good reason for you to give up on God and say, in effect, “Well, if this is what I get for trying to follow Jesus, why even bother?” There’s no evidence Zechariah or Elizabeth became bitter against God despite their misfortune. I’m sure their childlessness provoked many tears and many prayers. But they just continued to serve the Lord the best way they knew how. Worshipping God. Serving God. Living lives of quiet integrity and godliness.

How else did these two people serve God? Secondly, they surrendered to God’s purposes despite their personal limitations and unanswered questions. How were they personally limited? Like Abraham and Sarah back in the Old Testament hundreds of years earlier, Zechariah and Elizabeth were too old physically to have children. If they were going to have a son, it was going to have to be a miracle. And a miracle is no big deal for God. After all, with God aren’t all things possible? In effect, they simply said, “Well, God, here we are. Do with us whatever You want. We’re completely available to You.” Are you truly and completely available to God and His purposes? If the Holy Spirit is nudging you to point someone to Jesus, to help someone in need, or to get personally involved in some ministry in the church or outside the church, are you prone to offer God your personal limitations as an excuse? “Lord, I’m too old to serve You. I’m too young. I don’t have enough time. I don’t have enough money. I don’t know

enough about the Bible. I just don't want to." So what? If God does good and great things through the likes of people like you and me, it just brings greater glory to Him!

Did Zechariah and Elizabeth have unanswered questions? Of course! Zechariah asked Gabriel, "How can I be sure this will happen? I'm an old man now, and my wife is also well along in years." (Lk. 1:18 NLT) Can you blame Zechariah for being just a bit skeptical? After all, Abraham had been skeptical. We'll be reminded next week that even Mary, the mother of Jesus, was skeptical when the angel informed her that she was going to give birth to Jesus. What's important is that Zechariah and Elizabeth got past their skepticism, got past their doubts, and got past their unanswered questions. They surrendered themselves to God's purposes. "OK, God, there is a whole lot about all of this we don't understand, but we're available to You just the same. Do with us and do in us whatever You desire." There will likely be times in your life and mine when God will ask You to keep on trusting Him and keep on serving Him despite a whole lot of unanswered questions. Let's learn from Zechariah and Elizabeth's example. On the one hand, God is not obligated to answer our questions. On the other hand, we are asked to keep on surrendering our lives to Him despite unanswered questions.

Years ago a promising young athlete was favored to win the one mile race at a high school track meet. The issue wasn't whether he'd win the race – that was a foregone conclusion – but whether he'd set a new record. In the same race, was another runner who was a last minute substitute for a teammate who'd become ill. His coach said to him, "Son, I don't expect you to win. I do expect you to finish." The favored runner won the mile run easily as expected. The substitute runner came in a distant last. In fact, they had to delay the start of the next event so he could cross the finish line. When he got to the finish line, he was so exhausted he fell over like a tree cut down by a power saw. His face was bloodied and scratched from the impact with the ground. A judge ran over to see if he was alright. He asked the runner, "Why didn't you drop out when you saw you were going to lose?" Gasping for air, the young man said, "Our best runner was sick. Coach told me to run in his place. "I know," the judge asked him again, "but why didn't you quit?" The young man said, "Coach didn't tell me to quit. He told me to finish. That's what I did."

Zechariah and Elizabeth didn't quit, did they? They kept on serving the Lord despite carrying around this huge ache in their hearts for years - despite feeling disgraced and humiliated. They just kept on living for God steadily. And even after Gabriel's visit they just kept on surrendering their lives and serving the Lord despite all their personal limitations and unanswered questions. At the end of the day, their trust in God was vindicated. He rewarded their faithful service. God blest them with a son who prepared the way for Jesus. My friend, I don't know what heartache you might be facing this Christmas season. But I do know - just like the angels – that you exist to worship the Lord, fulfill His tasks, and proclaim His good news. I know – just like Zechariah and Elizabeth - you're called to keep on living a godly life even in the face of great sorrow. I know you're called to keep on surrendering your lives to Him despite personal limitations and unanswered questions. You're not called to quit. You're called to finish.