

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

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Sermon manuscript

Sermon Series: SING A SONG OF CHRISTMAS

Hark! The Herald Angels Sing

Study #2

(Matthew 1, 2; Luke 1, 2)

Introduction: Angels all around...

Have you noticed that there are angels all around?

In the fictional world, angels play roles in some of our favorite Christmas movies (“It’s a Wonderful Life” and others) and they make appearances in more than a few television shows (most notably, “Touched by an Angel”).

Angels are the subject of lots of very popular books, some *more* and some *way less* biblically oriented. (Angels by Robert Morgan; Truth About Angels by Terry Law; Angels: God’s Secret Agents by Billy Graham; lots of books by Frank Peretti).

I’ve even read what I would call credible reports from missions organizations of angels, at times, protecting courageous missionaries who are serving in dangerous places.

According to the Bible, angels are active in our world. One time, they shut the mouths of lions (Daniel) and on another occasion they opened the doors of a prison (for Peter in Acts).

The New Testament letter to the Hebrews (1:14) tells us that angels are ministering spirits, sent to give aid to believers. And Jesus said that the angels in heaven rejoice when one sinner turns to God in repentance. (Luke 15)

Much of what we hear and read today about angels is pure nonsense, of course, silly and totally unbiblical. But, according to the Bible, angels are real, and there is no denying that people are talking about angels.

Well, today, we’re going to talk about angels, too.

The template we’re following this year as we turn our focus to Christmas is to use a Christmas carol as the launch pad for our exploration of Christmas themes.

The hymn of choice today is the song we just sang: “Hark, the Herald Angels Sing”.

An all-star cast was involved in bringing the song we sing to its present form.

In 1739, Charles Wesley, the great hymn-writer, wrote the words. His friend, the great preacher George Whitefield, edited and improved them.

Then, the somber music to which Wesley fit the original words was adapted to the festive tune we sing today by Felix Mendelssohn. (The song can just as easily be sung to the same tune as “Christ the Lord is Ris’n Today”, and still appears in some hymnals set to that music.)

The song is both a musical gem and a theological masterpiece. It describes Jesus’ entrance into the world He created, the welcome He received, and the announcers of His arrival: angels!

As the opening line says, angels played a huge role in announcing His arrival.

Out of all human history, if there has even been one season during which angels were particularly active, it was in the months and days surrounding Jesus’ birth. And so, this morning we’ll look at three major appearances of angels in the birth narratives of Jesus.

Today, we’ll probably all learn something about angels. I’m hoping and praying, too, that we’ll all learn something about the lives God would have us lead as we look at these short stories.

We'll take the appearances chronologically, which means that we'll begin with the first story recorded in Luke's Gospel, focusing on a mature couple (elderly?), the priest, Zacharias, a priest, and his wife, Elizabeth (also of the priestly line).

The Angel (Gabriel) Appears to Zacharias (Luke 1:5-25)

Herod, Nothing More Than a Bookmark (v. 1a)

Like any good story-teller, Luke gives us the historical context of the events he is about to describe. It's not, "*Once upon a time...*" but **[1:5a] In the days of Herod, king of Judea...**

This is Herod the Great, the granddaddy of all the other Herods we read about in the New Testament. This Herod was a constant source of embarrassment to the Jews. He was a violent, immoral, unjust man whose family life was a joke and whose personal life was a wreck.¹

In short, he was a monster. But in the big picture of both secular and biblical history, Herod's really not that big of a deal.² He is just a bookmark to help us place the events and people who are important in the big story.

Among the really important people is this older couple who loved the Lord. They were sad because they had no children.

The Barrenness of Elizabeth (vv. 5-7)

[5] In the days of Herod, king of Judea, there was a certain priest named Zacharias, of the division of Abijah; and he had a wife from the daughters of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth.

¹ A proverb of those days was that it was "better to be Herod's pig than his "son," Herod having had two of his sons put to death for fear that they were trying to usurp his throne.

² Significantly, after this one reference, Herod the Great is never mentioned again in Luke's Gospel. (He is mentioned in Matthew's but only as the madman who tried to kill the babies in and around Bethlehem, so as to do away with any potential threat to his throne!)

[6] They were both righteous in the sight of God, walking blamelessly in all the commandments and requirements of the Lord. [7] But they had no child, because Elizabeth was barren, and they were both advanced in years.³

Zacharias and Elizabeth have served the Lord all their lives. They love God. They love each other. But they have always wanted children, and they don't have any children.

Luke covers their barrenness in one phrase, but a book could be written about that one phrase. Some of you here today know precisely how they must have felt, because you have been - or are - in their shoes.

Actually, all of us can put ourselves in their shoes, because, to some degree and in some way, we have all dealt with disappointment. We all know what it is to not have that one thing in life that we believe we need for life to be L-I-F-E!

Luke has already told us that Zacharias was a priest. We pick up the action as he was performing his priestly duties in Jerusalem's Temple.⁴

Zacharias Hears GOOD NEWS from Gabriel! (1:8-17)

Zacharias, in his priestly role... (vv. 8-10)

While Zacharias was inside the Holy Place of the Temple, offering the normal, daily sacrifice, **[10] the whole multitude of the people were in prayer outside...**

³ And just how elderly were they? For years I envisioned Zacharias being what we would call today a "senior citizen." Certainly active, not feeble. But well into his sixties, maybe his seventies or beyond. Then I got to thinking... Luke tells us that Zacharias was active as a priest. And in the Old Testament Moses wrote that a man could work as an active priest ONLY until he was fifty, at which time he had to retire because the work was too strenuous. This means that Zacharias, this OLD MAN, "*advanced in years,*" was in his FORTIES. I find that disturbing.

⁴ In those days, there were more priests than priestly duties. So, the priests would draw straws (no really, but that is essentially what "casting lots" was) and rotate their responsibilities among themselves. On this particular day, it was Zacharias' "turn" to offer the daily burning of incense.

This was customary. A crowd of people would gather outside the Temple to pray that God would accept the priest's sacrifice AND that God would protect the priest from harm while he was in The Presence.

Priests offered sacrifices every day - several times every day in fact. Nothing ever happened during the priest's service. Something happened on THIS day!

"Zacharias, meet Gabriel!" (vv. 11-12)

[11] And an angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing to the right of the altar of incense. [12] Zacharias was troubled when he saw the angel, and fear gripped him.

This was no vision or dream. Just as *really* as you and I appear to each other right now an angel *really* showed up in the Temple and appeared to Zacharias.

And all of a sudden, old Zacharias felt FEAR grip him like a vice. He was troubled, like a body of water is troubled and all stirred up on a stormy day.

I find it fascinating that throughout the Bible, this - FEAR! - is the characteristic response of people who come in contact with angels.

ABRAHAM bowed low in reverence before the Angel of the Lord.
BALAAM, the false prophet, bowed in reverence when he saw an angel.
ISAIAH, the prophet, fell on his face in the presence of angels.

Angels are glorious beings of a different order than we are, so we're not surprised that Zacharias is frightened in the presence of God's angel.

The first words out of the angel's mouth include the expected assurance, ***[13] "Do not be afraid, Zacharias!"***

Then, the angel gave the Good News message he had been sent by God to bring. We should listen carefully to the angel's words. I'm sure Zacharias was listening carefully!

Gabriel has GOOD NEWS for Zacharias! (vv. 13-17)

[13]...“your petition has been heard, and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you will give him the name John.⁵ [14] You will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth. [15] For he will be great in the sight of the Lord, and he will drink no wine or liquor; and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit, while yet in his mother's womb. [16] And he will turn back many of the sons of Israel back to the Lord their God. [17] It is he who will go as a forerunner before Him in the spirit and power of Elijah, TO TURN THE HEARTS OF THE FATHERS BACK TO THE CHILDREN⁶, and the disobedient to the attitude of the righteous, so as to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.”

You'll note that there is nothing unclear about the angel's message. It is crystal clear and unambiguous. No big words. No complicated concepts. He is articulate. No stuttering.

So, put yourself in Zacharias' shoes.

You have prayed for years (maybe decades?) for a child. You're serving God in the Temple, when an angel appears out of nowhere and promises you that your prayers have been answered.

You and your wife are going to have a baby! The angel has even detailed the life of your soon-to-be-born little boy. His will be a life filled with God.

With all of that in mind, listen to what Zacharias has to say.

⁵ In the Old Testament, the nation of Israel was frequently referred to as God's "Dove" - a term of endearment. The word that we translate "dove" is the Hebrew word "Jonah." Thus, Jonah, the man, was given a ministry of reaching out to the surrounding nations (specifically Nineveh) with God's message of salvation. And, this is what the nation should have been doing all along! Given that "John" was the Greek equivalent to the Hebrew "Jonah", Zacharias would have understood that his son's career would involve calling Israel to repentance.

⁶ This would be a direct fulfillment of a prophecy about Elijah, whose return is predicted before the coming of the Messiah. Jesus said that John was - not the original come back to earth - THAT Elijah. (See Malachi 4.)

Zacharias Disbelieves and is Disciplined (1:18-23)

Zacharias QUESTIONS Gabriel! (v. 18)

[18] Zacharias said to the angel, “How will I know this for certain? For I am an old man, and my wife is advanced in years.”

How does that question strike you? Considering all the facts that Zacharias KNEW, his question makes us just a little bit uncomfortable.

- He KNEW what was true about his own life - that he and Elizabeth had been childless for a long time, that Elizabeth was past the age at which she could normally be expected to bear children,⁷ and that he himself was an old man.
- He KNEW from his own nation’s history that babies could be born to parents considered too old to have them. (The story of Abraham and Sarah, parents to Isaac at ages 100 and 90, comes to mind.)
- He KNEW that his senses weren’t lying to him, and that he had received a promise from God’s angel.

These are the things he KNEW.

But, what he KNEW didn’t drive out his fear. His was the fear of news that was too good to be true. His fear led him to question the angel’s promise.

Now, I’m certain that **YOU** would have immediately believed the angel, had he appeared to **YOU** while you were ministering in the Temple. And I’m sure that **I** would have, too. (*Yeah, right*)

But not Zacharias. For him, this promise was like winning the \$400,000,000 Powerball, the Texas Lottery, AND hearing good news after the biopsy on the same day. Too good to be true.

So, he asked the question, “*How can I know ‘FER SURE’ that what you have told me will actually happen?*”

The angel was not amused by Zacharias’ question.

⁷ Actually, it is not exactly clear if she was post-menopausal. It is certainly clear that she was well past the age at which women normally had children.

Gabriel DISCIPLINES Zacharias! (vv. 19-20)

[19] The angel answered and said to him, “I am Gabriel⁸, who stands in the presence of God; and I have been sent to speak to you, and to bring you this good news. [20] And behold, you shall be silent and unable to speak until the day when these things take place, because you did not believe my words, which will be fulfilled in their proper time.”

Gabriel took offense at Zacharias’ lack of faith.⁹ He wasn’t offended that he, Gabriel, had not been believed, but that God’s message was not believed!

That is why he pronounced discipline against Zacharias - because he refused to believe the message of God.¹⁰

Now, with Zacharias taking far longer in the Holy Place than the priest normally required to finish a sacrifice, the people gathered outside knew something was up.

They may have believed him dead, because that was always a danger when the priest was serving God in the Temple.¹¹

Thankfully, Zacharias had just been struck dumb, not dead, and that, because of his refusal to believe God’s word, delivered by Gabriel.

⁸ His name means, “*God is great!*”

⁹ It is not that Gabriel is boasting about who he is. He boasts about the One in whose Presence he is privileged to stand!

¹⁰ Does it surprise you that the angel appears to be acting unilaterally in this discipline? Clearly, he had been sent with a message from God to deliver to Zacharias. But, unless we assume that Gabriel had been told that he was to make Zacharias mute if he didn’t believe, we come to the conclusion that the angel had the authority to act with a pretty personal discretion in his dealings with Zacharias. An interesting sidelight to the authority of angels in the affairs of people.

¹¹ The book of Exodus tells us that the High Priest’s robe had bells tied to the bottom of his robe, so that the people could hear the sound of him moving around in the Holy of Holies as he was offering sacrifice and making atonement for the people. If they didn’t hear the sound of the bells, they would know that he had been struck dead, and that the Lord had been displeased with the sacrifice.

Now, the great news, of course, was that about nine months after Gabriel's message, Zacharias and Elizabeth welcomed a little bundle of joy into their home. They named him "John" - and he grew up to be the man we know as John the Baptist.

The message of God came true. The message of God always comes true. Zacharias should have trusted it. You and I can trust it, today.

Call this our first angel snapshot of the day. From it, we learn a few things about the world of angels.

- Angels are glorious beings who prompt fear in those they meet.
- Angels have the authority to act unilaterally, as Gabriel did when he struck Zacharias dumb for his disbelief.
- Angels deliver the always trustworthy, always faithful message of God.

That's the first event. Next comes snapshot number two.

Some six months after his visit to Zacharias, Gabriel was commissioned by God to make another announcement of a special "Coming Attraction" to someone else.

The message was again given to someone who had never been a parent. This time, though, he went not to an elderly couple but to a young woman. And this time he went, not to the Hill Country of Judea, but to the northern part of Israel, to the region of Galilee.

The Angel (Gabriel) Appears to Mary (Luke 1:26-38)

Gabriel Greets Mary! (vv. 26-29)

[26] Now in the sixth month (i.e. – the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy) *the angel Gabriel was sent from God to a city in Galilee, called Nazareth, [27] to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the descendants of David; and the virgin's name was Mary. [28] And coming in, he said to her, "Hail, favored one! The Lord is with you."* *[29] But she was very perplexed at this statement, and kept pondering what kind of salutation this was.*

By referring to Mary as a virgin, Gabriel means to say what we mean when we use the word "virgin." Mary had never been intimate with a man. She was engaged to a man named Joseph, but they weren't married and hadn't consummated their relationship.

This Mary was troubled by the angel's greeting, probably in much the same way that Zacharias had been troubled.

So, the angel Gabriel spoke to Mary's fear, bringing a message of good news to her, just as he had to Zacharias.

Gabriel's Announcement to Mary (vv. 30-34)

A clear message (vv. 30-33)

[30] The angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary; for you have found favor with God. [31] "And behold, you will conceive in your womb, and bear a son, and you shall name Him Jesus."

The baby's name, *Jesus*, (Yeshua) means Savior. Gabriel goes on to further describe the future career of Mary's Baby.

[32] "He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High; and the Lord God will give Him the throne of His father David; [33] and He will reign over the house of Jacob forever; and His kingdom will have no end."

Any expectant mother would be thrilled to hear the kind of news about her yet-to-be-born child that Mary is getting from Gabriel. But you can see a question mark forming in Mary's mind because she's not expecting.

The angel seems to be speaking about an imminent conception. And Mary knew enough biology to know that she, being a virgin, was not about to conceive (she was inconceivable?).

So, Mary is about to ask a question. And we want to warn her. Be careful, Mary! Zacharias found out that it can be very dangerous to question Gabriel.

But Mary is not going to question Gabriel. She's just got a question.

Zacharias blew it by asking an "if" question. Mary expressed her confusion and asked a "how" question. It was a good question.

A confused young lady! (v. 34)

[34] Mary said to the angel, "How can this be, since I am a virgin?"¹²

Well, Gabriel responded to Mary's honest question with an honest, patient answer. He explained the Good News to her.

Gabriel Explains the Good News to Mary (vv. 35-38)

A clarifying word (vv. 35-37)

[35] The angel answered and said to her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; and for that reason the holy Child shall be called the Son of God. [36] And behold, even your relative Elizabeth has also conceived a son in her old age; and she who was called barren is now in her sixth month. [37] For nothing will be impossible with God."

With that explanation the question mark was erased. Mary accepted - even if she couldn't have completely understood - the mystery of the virgin birth.

And the virgin birth IS a mystery, on so many levels. This is how Charles Wesley put it in today's song:

*Christ by highest heav'n adored
Christ the everlasting Lord!
Late in time behold Him come
Offspring of a Virgin's womb*

¹² There is some thought that Mary's confusion might be due to the fact that she was pre-pubescent. Her question, then, "**How can this be?**" had less to do with her sexual purity, and more with her physical inability to conceive. This seems to me to be less likely

*Veiled in flesh the Godhead see
Hail the incarnate Deity
Pleased as man with man to dwell
Jesus, our Emmanuel!*

Can you even imagine the thoughts swirling around in Mary's mind?

"OK. The Child I will bear will be conceived uniquely. Somehow, what my mother told me about the birds and the bees won't apply here. Without a man, without sexual experience, I will become pregnant by the agency of the Almighty."

Those (or something like them) may have been Mary's thoughts as she processed the angel's message. We don't really know. What we do know are her words.

When we hear the words that came out of Mary's mouth, we are listening to FAITH and to FAITHFULNESS. Friends, this is as good as it gets.

For twenty centuries Mary has been honored as a model of great faith because of what she revealed of her heart by these words.

A receptive heart (v. 38)

[38] "Behold, the bondsman of the Lord; may it be done to me according to your word."

For a long time, I have believed that the most frightening - yet the most liberating and among the most spiritual - words to come out of any human mouth are these: "*My life is in God's hands. Anything He wants to do with me is fine with me.*"

Zacharias warns us against disbelieving God's message because it seems to be "*too good to be true.*", and so much of the Gospel message in Jesus is of that variety. If it wasn't the message of God, there is no way we would believe it

Mary invites us to a submissive, receptive welcome of God's message, even if it is disruptive, even if it is hard to accept.

And some of God's message is exactly that, to all of us. But the path to Jesus' abundant life is the path of faithful submission to His word.

Notice. When God wanted to let the father of the Forerunner, John the Baptist, know of His plan to give him and Elizabeth a son, he sent an angel.

When God wanted to communicate the enormity of His plan to the young woman who would bear His Son, He used an angel to deliver that message.

And there are other angelic appearances that occur around the time of Jesus' birth. A couple of them involve Joseph, Mary's husband.

When Joseph first learned of Mary's pregnancy, he wasn't buying the whole "virgin birth" story (perhaps understandably). He was finally convinced to not break up with Mary by an angel's message - delivered in a dream - that Mary was telling the truth. (Matthew 1:18-25)

Later, after he had taken Mary and Jesus to Egypt to avoid the madness of Herod who was killing babies in an attempt to kill Jesus, an angel told him that, since Herod himself had died, it was now safe to return to Israel, and that he should take Jesus to Nazareth. (Matthew 2:19-23)

However, the most famous of the angelic appearances and the one that comes to mind when we hear, "*Hark! The Herald Angels Sing!*" is the appearance they made on the night of Jesus' birth to a group of Jewish sheep herders, out watching their flocks.

An Angel - and a MULTITUDE of Angels! - Appear to Shepherds (Luke 2:8-20)

Shepherds of Israel

Tending sheep was a prominent career for many of Israel's greatest leaders. Abraham and Isaac, Jacob and his sons, Moses and David were all shepherds.

When God told priests and prophets how they were to lead the people into His ways, He told them to "shepherd" the people.

Shepherds provided a template of caring, protecting, and providing for their sheep that the leaders were to follow when leading people.¹³

So, the shepherds we meet in Luke, chapter 2, were carrying out a noble profession with a storied past.

Shepherds at the Time of Jesus' birth

Shepherds were critical for the nation...

They played a critical role in Israel, providing sheep for the sacrifices offered at the Temple in Jerusalem, just a few miles away. No shepherds, no sheep. No sheep, no sacrificial offerings. No offerings, no forgiveness.¹⁴

Shepherds were very valuable people.

But, by and large, shepherds weren't honored by the rank and file Jews who lived around the time of Jesus' birth.

...yet shepherds were disrespected

Because shepherds were forced to be around blood and uncleanness, they were considered **unclean**.

Because shepherds had to be out in the fields a good bit of the year, unable to take part in regular synagogue worship, they were considered **uncommitted** to God.

So...

God commissioned angels to come to earth to announce the birth of His Son on the night He was born. We aren't surprised that angels were sent to announce. You want to announce such an incredible event and sending angels followed a pattern set with Zacharias and Mary and Joseph who had already heard from angels.

¹³ On a number of occasions, God referred to Himself as "the Shepherd of Israel."

¹⁴ In fact, given their proximity to Jerusalem, these shepherds were likely watching over some of the flocks that were offered on the altar.

But, announce to shepherds? Yep. God told the angels to announce to shepherds.

Angels Give Shepherds the Good News! (vv. 10-20)

First, one angel suddenly appeared to them, late at night while they were protecting their sheep. The angel shone with the radiance of God's glory. Not surprisingly, the shepherds were scared out of their wits!

[10] But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid; for behold, I bring you good news of great joy which will be for all the people; [11] for today in the city of David there has been born for you a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. [12] "This will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger."

Then, a whole bunch of angels appeared praising God, and saying,

***[14] "Glory to God in the highest,
And on earth peace among men with whom He is pleased."***

With that, the angels disappeared. And after recovering from their shock and awe, the shepherds went as quickly as they could to Bethlehem to see for themselves what the angels had announced.

While the Bible doesn't actually say that they worshipped, we're probably not far off suggesting that they did, in fact, worship the Baby Jesus, there in the stables.

And they left worshiping and praising God for the glory that they - shepherds!! - had been given the privilege of being the first outside of Mary and Joseph (and sheep and cattle and donkeys) to see God's Son.

What they saw was a living, breathing miracle, the Incarnation. Charles Wesley's hymn puts it this way in the song's final stanza:

Hail the heav'n-born Prince of Peace!
Hail the Son of Righteousness!
Light and life to all He brings
Ris'n with healing in His wings
Mild He lays His glory by
Born that man no more may die

Born to raise the sons of earth
Born to give them second birth.
Hark! the herald angels sing
"Glory to the newborn King!"

And if they were honored to be allowed to see Jesus, we are just as honored today that God has revealed to us the "*too good to be true*" message of the Gospel.

Unlike Zacharias, we believe! And like Mary, we hear Jesus' call to follow and obey and say, "*Behold the bonds slave of the Lord. May it be done to me according to Your word.*"