

*Swords Into Plowshares: The Angels' Song*

Luke 2:

I feel like I should be clear with you about something. I may have said this before, but just in case I haven't said it straightforwardly enough, I feel that now is the time that you should know this about your pastor. *I have never been visited by an angel.* I've never had the experience of a messenger from God coming to tell me something that God particularly wanted *me* to know. I so respect the people who have had that experience. I even envy it a little. But it hasn't happened to me.

I carry some worry about that, that maybe it's because I haven't done all the things I'm supposed to do, or that I've missed some appointment that other people got a reminder call about. I read something this week by a writer who said that all spiritual experiences are accidental, that the reason we do spiritual disciplines and practices is to make ourselves accident-prone. Maybe I have kept myself too safe, my feet too firmly planted in flat ground, to fall into the arms of an angel who was standing there with arms out, ready to catch me when I fall.

But I have from time to time had another experience, that has taken me by surprise every time. It's an internal peace, a feeling that in that moment I am doing what I'm supposed to do, that I'm where I am supposed to be. Like I've stumbled my way into a sweet spot in the universe, if only for a moment. I'd sometimes have that feeling years ago, long before I returned to faith, when my blended family was all together—my husband Terry, my stepsons, our young daughter—all in the same space, usually when we were having fun together, happy to be with one another. It didn't happen often in the busy-ness and complication of our lives, but I remember that feeling. It was delicious.

I remember a flash of the same sense once when I was on a mission trip, re-building houses on the Gulf Coast after Hurricane Katrina. I was conscious that every other responsibility in my life had dropped away, that I was in the only place I needed to be, doing the one thing the world needed me to be doing at that moment. Every time I've noticed that sense of well-being, it's come as a surprise to me, not something I set up or anticipated.

I wouldn't describe those moments as angelic visits, but they did feel like joy. The kind of deep down, all-is-right-with-the-world contentment that I wish I could live every day of my life with. And I wonder: is that what it feels like to hear an angel say, 'Do not be afraid; I bring you good news of great joy'?

In this Advent we've been immersing ourselves in the songs that Luke plays for us at the beginning of his story of Jesus. We come today to the angels' song. This piece that is such a familiar part of the Christmas story, about shepherds out in the field in the middle of the night. They're startled to see the sky suddenly bright, and to hear a voice reverberating in the cold air. They feel a presence that was not there a moment ago. 'Do not be afraid,' a voice says. 'I bring you good news, great joy, for all people. The One who has come to save your life is born today, in Bethlehem. This is how you will know him: look for a baby, lying in a manger.' And then a whole choir of angels arrive and they launch into a chorus, a great crescendo of song: 'Glory to God, and on earth peace, among all people.'

I could be wrong, but I'm guessing those shepherds had not been thinking about the coming of the Messiah that night while they were on sheep duty. I'm guessing they were thinking, likely worrying, about all the things we humans worry about.

The wolves that might be lurking right outside the edges of this place where they hoped their family of sheep was safe;

Their precarious jobs, whether there would be enough money to pay their bills next month;

Their darn erratic government and its inhumane policies;

About this world that seems to be getting worse instead of better, and whether their children could live good lives in it;

Whether their hopes for something better could be real, or if their whole lives would feel as insignificant and purpose-less as they did on this night.

And no doubt—that stupid argument they'd had with their spouse on the way out the door this morning.

Pretty much the same things everybody worries about, then or now. The matters of our agitation, our discontent.

God too was discontented. Things had not worked out the way God intended at creation. It was such a good plan: make a beautiful and diverse earth, put human beings—little replicas of the creator—in charge of taking care of it. But almost immediately, things began to go wrong. Sometimes the situation felt—still feels—almost irretrievable. I think we might look at Jesus' birth, the incarnation of God into human life that we celebrate at Christmas, as an *intervention*. A pull-out-all-the-stops movement on God's part that said, 'All is not well down there. We've got to do something different.'

Kind of like what ancient people imagined God thinking when a flood came and destroyed everything. Only this time, the message wasn't, 'Build an ark; save yourself and your family. Keep all the animals; everything else can go.' This time, the angel brought a different message from God. 'Good news. Great joy. For *all* people.'

And after those words were spoken, for just a moment, a split second I imagine, the whole universe hung in silence. Would these shepherds lift their heads? Would they look for the source of this news in a landscape they thought they already knew every inch of? There was a choir of angels just offstage, waiting for their response.

Those shepherds fell to their knees. Even their terror signaled: they heard. They were listening. They recognized joy when it was offered to them. Which, as you know, is not always what we do.

Who were these people who let their discontent to be interrupted by a voice they didn't know?

And who is this God that expresses divine discontent not with anger or punishment, but with an announcement of good news?

This is a God who has learned, over centuries of watching and worrying over human beings, that the way to turn them toward goodness is to love them harder.

This is a God whose solution to our discontent is not to remove us from this messy, worrisome life, but to climb into it right next to us, as if there were no better place to be.

If this is the way the universe works, then I think I can let my worries recede a little. Surely my calamities are more manageable than the global crises God sees and is attending to. Certainly ‘good news for all people’ is big enough to envelope my discontent, all the topics of my worrying. Yours too. It’s like someone big enough to lean on comes along and says, ‘Don’t worry; I’ve got this’. I don’t know about you, but these days I desperately need to hear someone strong and trustworthy, someone as absolute as the Creator of the universe, say ‘Don’t worry; I’ve got this’. I feel like hearing that could save our lives right now.

If that’s what the Christmas birth announcement signals, no wonder a whole chorus of angels showed up. No wonder a song poured out of them: *Glory to God in the highest! Peace on earth!* This song says: God’s glory and earth’s peace, God’s contentment and yours, are bound up together. In the words of Irenaeus, who lived in the second century, ‘God’s glory is human beings fully alive.’

So today, I hear this story of good news that came to ordinary, worried people doing their everyday jobs in the middle of a dark night, and I think it is possible that some great truth of the universe, some necessary message, is held in it.

I think it is possible that the sound of God’s presence will always interrupt our regular routine of fear and worry. It will vanish again, like angels who appear and then are gone; but we will know it in that deep down feeling of well-being that is so hard to hold onto.

I think it is possible that angelic voices will always point us toward the people and things in our lives that have been here all along, places where we had not thought to look for joy before.

I think it is possible that salvation—the realization that your life is bound up in something bigger than your worries—will always be marked by a truth that is simple and common. The birth of a baby. Not even your baby necessarily. A baby born in the next town over. Think how often that happens.

I think it is possible—no, this one I know—that God’s coming among us will always sound like good news, news of joy for *all* people, not just for a few of us. To me it may feel like that fleeting feeling of well-being when my family is gathered together safe and sound, or when I’m doing the work I’m called to do. For you it may come while you’re doing something else. But God’s good news is for all of us, not ever one person over another, one country preferred over the rest, one side winning.

I bring you good news of great joy for *all* people, the angel said.

This catches my attention. No matter how ephemeral the feeling might be, I don't want to miss it. It makes me want to put my head up, lift my eyes from all those things I've been trying to fix by worrying about them.

It makes me want to sing. You too?