

December 2, 2018 (First Sunday of Advent)

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Luke 1:11-14, 18-19, 23-24a

Angels Among Us: #DoNotBeAfraid

Flying in the Face of Fear at Advent

“Make Ready a People: #morehope”

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Today, we begin Advent (the four-weeks we get ready for the birth of Jesus). Throughout Christian history and tradition, it has always been portrayed as a time of waiting: waiting for the Christ child to be born anew in our hearts, for God to create a “new heaven and earth” and for Christ to come again and the reign of God to come to this world.

Yet, waiting can be a problem! Rhonda Britten in her book, Fearless Living shares with us, the dilemma waiting creates, “When we passively wait, we are living in fear.” What she is referring to is that when we wait for circumstances outside of ourselves to change in order to feel hope, peace, joy, love or to live our lives fully, we rob ourselves of the chance to have those things right now. Cultivating those things means we move freely into the future no matter the circumstances of our lives or the world around us. And when we do that, we are living fully into who God calls us to be because we have the power to make a difference—to help shift circumstances—rather than live in fear of them.

Therefore, the “waiting” in Advent cannot be a passive waiting—the kind of waiting that believes that God doesn’t need us in order to make the world a safer, better place for all people. This is the message that the angels who appear to Zechariah, Mary, Joseph and the shepherds bring to us in this Advent worship series.

They bring news, yes. But they also invite participation in the story. The message is “God is doing thus-and-such” and “you are a part of it.” Get over your fear because God is in need of you. And in order for all this to happen, we are going to need more hope, more peace, more joy, more love and more life all around. God needs you to spread the word.

The second challenge in Advent, is not just regarding waiting, but also angels, for using the stories of angels can also be dangerous. We can easily fall into the Hallmark card version (which is really the Medieval Christian version when cherubs became the cutest thing since sliced bread—oh wait—sliced bread wasn’t invented yet).

Angels in the scriptures, to the contrary, seemed to elicit anything but cute reactions. There was a reason why angels always said, “Do not be afraid,” because their appearance “surprised-the-you-know-what” out of those who crossed their path. They were a wake-up call and came with life-altering messages. For “do not be afraid” was both immanent (“don’t be afraid” right now while you are quaking in your boots because I’m here) and prophetic (“don’t be afraid” as you set out to fulfill what God is calling you to do and be).

The English word “Angel” comes from the Latin *angelus* derived from the Greek translation. The term initially only pointed to a function—that of a messenger. But gradually “angel” came to signify a name for a class of “beings” existing between God and humanity and thus began a whole lot of “angelology” and theological speculation through the ages and certainly continues in popular notions about angels today.

But this series “harkens” (pun intended) back to the original meaning—simply one who has a message, an envoy or one that “announces.” Angels are the symbols of messages that we need

to hear—that we need to wake up to. We use the words that have come to be associated with the four Sundays of Advent (hope, peace, joy, love) and a fifth the Sunday after Christmas (life). The idea is that by taking in and taking on the message, we become the “angels among us” getting this message out to multiply it in our spheres of influence.

We live in a time when we are exposed to much information which, if we are not alert, intentional and active, leaves us with nothing but fear, anxiety and paralysis. “Flying in the face of fear” (flying being an apt metaphor for angels) means putting out information to counteract the pervasive messages of fear.

Zechariah is in the temple, doing his inherited responsibility given he was from one of the family lines descended and appointed by King David. The gospel of Luke states that during his given week of once a year service, Zechariah drew the lot to perform the incense offering.

The 18 “ x 36” altar of incense in the temple was located in the holiest of holies, and it there, they would continually burn incense comprised of frankincense. It would fill the most sacred part of the Temple, and then with the breezes help would go with the wind out into the courtyard, where all, others than the priests came to worship. It was a symbol and metaphor of prayers being continually offered to God.

Zechariah while ministering at the altar of incense; is visited by the angel Gabriel. The message is the announcing that Zechariah and his wife would give birth to a son, who they were to name John, and that he would be a forerunner to the Lord, the Messiah, the One who would be called Jesus.

In the midst of that announcement, Zechariah freaks out and replies emphatically, "but I'm old". To which, Gabriel emphatically counters, "but I am Gabriel!" (Who can argue with

that?) Perhaps Zechariah's "but..." is an analogy to what must be God's frustration with our cynical and often emphatic responses to God's call... "but... I'm not good enough" or "what can one person do?"

I can imagine Gabriel thinking to himself, "and this guy thinks the process and the end result solely lies with him. I had to remind him, that God was in it! Humans can be like that underestimating themselves and the God that is with them and in them.

The angel appearance is the breaking in of the divine into ordinary life, a theme throughout the entire gospel of Luke. The appearance of an angel in the first chapter of the gospel of Luke, signals that this is an extraordinary story of divine events and yet it is set in the midst of very ordinary people. The message here is that one person can, and does, make a difference no matter how insignificant our contribution seems. God is calling us to become a people ready to be messengers.

So, like Zechariah, we may find ourselves amidst a family obligation, or at work, or volunteering given we are now retired, when you get the call to be a messenger. For God is compelling us to not wait and do nothing, but rather to listen to the call and respond, to let the angels give the message, and then go and be the messenger of the message.

Yes, yes, there are angels among us and you are one of them. God is counting on you! #DoNotBeAfraid.

