

THE PROCLAIMERS – Part One
ANGELS

Sermon – Sunday, December 1, 2019

Do you remember the movie “Fiddler on the Roof”? It’s the story of Jews living in Russian territory during the decline of Imperial Russia in 1905. There were several lines in the movie that stood out to me. But one in particular seems appropriate to today’s topic. As the Russians were persecuting the Jews and forcing them to leave their homes, the people of the city asked their Rabbi, “Wouldn’t this be a good time for the Messiah to come?”

It was a good question to ask; a question full of hope by those seeking deliverance from their oppressors and relief from their bondage. A question asked centuries before by the Jews of Jesus’ day during the occupation of Israel by the forces of the Roman Empire.

The asking of this question was not without its merits. After all, God had promised He would send a Deliverer, a Messiah to save His people. The question was not “if”, it was “when”. “When will you send the Deliverer? Can’t you see we are oppressed? Can’t you see our hardship? Can’t you see how unfairly we are being treated? Wouldn’t this be a good time for the Messiah to come?” In “Fiddler on the Roof” the answer the rabbi gave as they were forced to leave their town of Anatevka was, “We’ll have to wait for him somewhere else.”

Since the Jews as a whole did not recognize Jesus as their Messiah, they have been looking for Him “somewhere else” for centuries as they have been forced out of villages, towns, cities and even entire nations. Today, as they are surrounded by people who wish to drive them out of their land and into the sea, they are still waiting for Him and still say, “Wouldn’t this be a good time for the Messiah to come?”

The promise has always been that there would be a time when the waiting would be over. No one knew when that would be. But those who believed the promise kept looking for it in their lifetime. Then, as the Scripture says, “*the fullness of time came*” and “*God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the law, so that He might redeem those who were under the Law, that we might receive the adoption as sons.*” (Galatians 4:4-5).

Over two thousand years ago God chose angels to make the pronouncement of the birth of the long-awaited Messiah. Luke tells us the story of an angel who appeared to some lowly shepherds and said, “*Do not be afraid; for behold, I bring you good news of great joy which will be for all people; for today in the city of David there has been born for you a Savior, who is Christ the Lord*” (Luke 2:10-11). This angel was then joined by a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying, “*Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among men with whom He is pleased.*”

Now we are all familiar with these words from the gospel of Luke. Most of us have heard the story of the angels and the shepherds every Christmas for decades. Though the good news is still relevant and important, as the years go by and our childhood wonder dissipates, we can find ourselves emotionally distant from the majesty of the story. So, my purpose over the next few weeks is to bring back some of that emotional connection, that miraculous wonder by explaining aspects of the story that might have been hidden from you as it was from me recently.

The story of the angels and the shepherds is not just a minor event sandwiched between the birth of Jesus and the visit of the wise men. The telling of the story by the angels to the shepherds has great

significance. Next week we'll look at the shepherds, but today we're going to look at the angels.

ANGELS

Angels are mentioned 273 times in the Bible. But who or what are angels? In what realm do they exist? What is their history with God and mankind? What is their purpose and what role do they play in the salvation of believers?

The name angel means "messenger". Psalm 103:20 says angels are God's servants - "*Bless the Lord, you His angels, mighty in strength, who perform His word, obeying the voice of his word*". The author of Hebrews says that "*angels are all ministering spirits sent out to serve for the sake of those who are to inherit salvation.*" (Hebrews 1:14).

In Colossians 1:16 where Paul says, "*For by Him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities, all things were created through Him and for Him.*" This tells us that angels are created beings because everything that inhabits the heavens and the earth was created by God. Only God stands outside of creation. In Genesis 2:1 it says, "*Thus the heavens and the earth were completed, and all their hosts.*" From what we know of creation it seems that God created the earth for mankind and the heavenly realm for the angels.

The word "host" means "a multitude or great number of persons or things." When we look at Luke chapter two, we can see who these hosts are. "*And suddenly there appeared with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God.*" When you combine the word "host" with the descriptive word "heavenly" you can see that the heavenly host is a multitude of angels.

But according to Ezekiel and John the hosts of heaven would also include the four living creatures and the four living beings which stand before the throne of God. These beings and creatures do not appear to have the same form or shape as angels. Ezekiel saw the four living creatures in a vision as well as the four living beings. He describes the four living creatures as having two pairs of wings, with human hands beneath its wings, and four faces; that of a lion, an ox, a human, and an eagle. (Some say these faces are representative of all wild animals, domestic animals, humans, and birds.) He describes the four living beings as having six wings; with two they covered their faces, with two they covered their feet, and with two they hovered. Though they have a different appearance than angels, they too are part of the heavenly host and participate in the worship of the Almighty.

In Revelation the apostle John says, "*Then I looked, and I heard the voice of many angels around the throne and the living creatures and the elders; and the number of them was myriads of myriads, and thousands of thousands, saying with a loud voice, 'Worthy is the Lamb that was slain.'*" (Revelation 5:11-12). The word myriad means "countless or extremely great in number", and the four living creatures as well as the angels are included in this number.

Some angels in Scripture are mentioned by name while others are known for what they do, like the angel of death who killed all the firstborn of Egypt. There is also an angel mentioned throughout Scripture called "the angel of the Lord". This angel appears to Abraham, Hagar, Jacob, Moses, Gideon, and Samson's mother, as well as others. When Elijah was running from Jezebel after defeating the priests of Baal at Mt. Carmel it is said that the angel of the Lord came to him twice, touched him, and provided food and water in order to revive him for the journey ahead.

Most scholars agree the angel of the Lord is the representation of the preincarnate Christ. They have deduced this from several verses where the angel of the Lord appears. For instance, in Genesis 31:11-13

the angel of the Lord said to Jacob, *“I am the God of Bethel, where you anointed a pillow, where you made a vow to Me.”* And in Exodus 3:2-6 the angel of the Lord appeared to Moses in a blazing fire in the midst of a bush, and then says to him, *“I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.”* Also, when Moses asks the angel of the Lord what his name is the angel of the Lord replied, *“I AM WHO I AM”*, giving the name of the only true God.

These verses and many others show that it is God Himself who is speaking whenever the angel of the Lord appears. And when you think about it, the use of the term angel is not inappropriate when referring to the preincarnate Christ, for the name angel means messenger, and Jesus was in fact God’s greatest messenger.

The angel of the Lord appeared as a flaming fire to Moses, but descriptions of angels are not always given. We do have some instances where angels have the appearance of a man such as those who appeared to Daniel and to Zechariah; but sometimes they simply appear in a dream as they did with Jacob and Joseph and all we are given are the words they said. In any event, it seems that angels, whether it is the angel of the Lord or another angel, can take on different forms. Perhaps that is why the author of Hebrews tells us to not to *“neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by this some have entertained angels without knowing it”* (Hebrews 13:2). We never know when someone standing before us looking like a human, might be an angel in disguise.

The appearance of angels can be a comforting thing as it was to the servant of Elisha or a frightening thing as it was for Zechariah. Angels can strengthen us as they did with Jesus or leave us in a weakened state so that we cannot stand or speak. When an angel (whom we will identify later) appeared to Daniel, he described him like this. He was *“a man dressed in linen, whose waist was girded with a belt of pure gold of Uphaz. His body also was like beryl, his face had the appearance of lightning, his eyes were like flaming torches, his arms and feet like the gleam of polished bronze, and the sound of his words like the sound of a tumult.”* It’s no wonder that angels frequently tell us, *“Do not be afraid”*. Who wouldn’t tremble at the sight of such a being?

Yet when an angel appeared to Mary, Scripture only describes her as being perplexed at the message she was given. She did not seem to be physically affected. Angels can appear in person or in dreams but in all cases, they are sent to deliver a message to God’s people. With some they hold conversations and answer questions as they did with the prophet Daniel. With others they simply deliver the message.

Angels are not only mentioned in the Old Testament and during the time of the early church, they are also mentioned throughout the book of Revelation. At the beginning when Jesus instructs John to write to the seven churches, He addresses each letter to *“the angel at the church of”* then names one of the seven cities such as Smyrna and Sardis. I am unclear as to what this means but considering angels are ministering spirits it could mean that God is instructing the angels assigned to each church to convey this message to those whom they oversee.

In the middle of Revelation, after the opening of the seven seals, we see four angels standing at the four corners of the earth, holding back the four winds of the earth, so that no wind would blow on the earth or on the sea or on any tree. These angels were granted the authority to harm the earth, the sea and the trees but not before other angels had placed a seal on the foreheads of the believers in Christ. Then, at the sound of angels, seven different calamities occurred on the earth as judgment for sin. It appears that angels are given great authority and power to do what God commands them to do.

Near the end of Revelation, we see several angels flying in mid-heaven. One says with a loud voice

to those on the earth, *“Fear God, and give Him glory, because the hour of His judgment has come.”* A second angel announces the fall of Babylon, the kingdom of the anti-Christ. A third angel warns people not to worship the beast or his image. (Revelation 14:16-10). These angels were then joined with four others and told to pour out on the earth the seven bowls of the wrath of God. After the seventh bowl had been emptied the wrath of God was complete. It was then that an angel came down from heaven, took hold of the devil, bound him, threw him into the abyss, shut it and sealed it over him for a thousand years while Christ reigned on the earth. So, we see that angels will have a large role to play at the end of time as messengers of both His mercy and His wrath.

There are three angels mentioned by name in the Bible: Lucifer, Michael, and Gabriel. Lucifer is probably the angel we know the most about. The name Lucifer means “light-bearer”. He is one of God’s created angels and originally held a position of high authority in God’s kingdom. Ezekiel tells us that he was the anointed cherub who was on the holy mountain of God. (Cherub is a type of angel, just as Seraphim are.) Ezekiel goes on to explain that Lucifer was blameless in all his ways from the day he was created until unrighteousness was found in him. His heart was lifted up because of his beauty and he corrupted his wisdom by reason of his splendor.

It seems that Lucifer’s pride in his appearance led him to rebel against God. Isaiah describes what was going on in the heart of Lucifer which caused him to be cast out of heaven *“You said in your heart, ‘I will ascend to heaven; I will raise my throne above the stars of God, and I will sit on the mount of assembly in the recesses of the north. I will ascend above the heights of the clouds; I will make myself like the Most High’”* (Isaiah 14:13-14).

In Revelation chapter 12 John had a vision of what happened when Lucifer attempted to usurp the throne of God. In John’s vision Lucifer is seen as a dragon. *“There was a rebellion in heaven. Michael and his angels waging war with the dragon. The dragon and his angels waged war, and they were not strong enough, and there was no longer a place found for them in heaven. And the great dragon was thrown down, the serpent of old who is called the devil and Satan, who deceived the whole world; he was thrown down to the earth, and his angels were thrown down with him”* (Revelation 12:7-9).

In his fallen state Lucifer’s name was changed to Satan which means “accuser”, and his purpose was no longer to be a light-bearer but to be a deceiver. He is the accuser of the brethren that John speaks about in Revelation 12:10 when he says, *“Now the salvation, and the power, and the kingdom of our God and the authority of His Christ have come, for the accuser of our brethren has been thrown down, he who accuses them before our God both day and night.”* What this tells us is that angels have free will just as we do; but there is no forgiveness of sin available to angels; there is only judgment. Jesus did not die for the sins of fallen angels. He died solely for the sins of fallen man.

We said earlier that some angels can look just like a man, yet we do not always recognize them when they take on a human form. Satan can also appear as something other than he is. In Genesis he is described as the serpent who appeared to Eve (Genesis 3:1-15) and the apostle Paul tells us that *“Satan disguises himself as an angel of light”* (2 Corinthians 11:14). Because of this we are told to beware of Satan’s deception and to rebuke him so that he will flee from us. But there is one comforting scripture which assures us that no matter what happens to us through the interaction with created beings such as angels, both good and fallen, we are assured of this. Nothing and no one in all of creation can separate us from the love of God.

Romans 8:38-39 says, *“For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, height, nor depth, nor any other created thing, will be able*

to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.” Therefore, no matter how powerful Satan and his demonic followers are, no matter what shape Satan takes or what lies he says, he is not able to separate us from God and His love for us.

Let’s move on now to the good angels – the remaining two thirds of the entire angel creation who did not rebel against God. These angels continue to do God’s bidding and remain faithful messengers. These are the ones who continue to be sent out to serve those of us who will inherit salvation.

Besides Lucifer there are two other angels whose names are mentioned in Scripture. Each of these angels announced themselves by name to the person they were interacting with. Their names are Michael and Gabriel. Michael is described as one of the archangels (Daniel 10:13). Michael is the only archangel mentioned by name in the Bible. An archangel is higher in rank than other angels. Michael’s name means “who is like God?”. In the book of Daniel, he is also called “the great prince and the protector of the Jews” (Daniel 12:1). He is said to have other angels at his command. He is the one on whom the angel Gabriel called upon when he needed help in fighting against Satan in the heavenlies on his way to tell Daniel the meaning of his visions (Daniel 8:16; 9:21; 10:10-14).

Michael is also the one who gathered his fellow angels and led the fight against Lucifer and his followers when they rebelled against the authority of God. This tells us that Michael is not afraid to confront Satan and that when he does, Satan is powerless to stop him. This is confirmed in Jude 9 where we are told that *“When the archangel Michael contended with the Devil and disputed about the body of Moses, he did not dare to bring a condemnation of slander against him, but said, ‘The Lord rebuke you!’”* He is also most likely the archangel alluded to in 1 Thessalonians 4:16 where it says, *“For the Lord Himself, with a cry of command, with the archangel’s call and with the sound of the trumpet, will descend from heaven, and the dead in Christ will rise first.”*

In summary, Michael is the only archangel named in Scripture. He ministers in authority and judgment; He has some protective connection with the nation of Israel and has, in the past, contended with Satan over the body of Moses and over the delivery of a prophetic interpretation to Daniel. He will also appear in the last times fighting against the armies of Satan.

The last angel mentioned by name is Gabriel. His name means ‘God is my strength’ or ‘Might of God’. He is the angel who spoke to Daniel and explained to him the visions which God had given to him concerning the future (Daniel 8:16; 9:21). Though he is not mentioned by name he is most likely the fearsome angel who appeared to Daniel after fighting in the heavenlies with Michael the archangel on his way to speak to Daniel. (Daniel 10). Gabriel also spoke to the priest Zechariah and told him that he and his barren wife would have a son, whom they would call John

When Gabriel appeared to Daniel and Zechariah they were both very frightened. The Scripture says that Zechariah was “startled and gripped with fear”, and that Daniel was so frightened that he fell on his face. After Gabriel left Daniel was “overcome and lay sick for some days.” Angels can be a terrifying sight as they are powerful beings. Jesus Himself said He could have called more than twelve legions of angels to fight against the Roman soldiers who were sent to arrest him. These are not timid beings but rather warriors ready for battle. When Gabriel appeared out of nowhere and spoke to Zechariah it was enough to startle him and cause him to be gripped with fear.

As for Daniel, the vision that he saw which the angel Gabriel interpreted for him, had already caused him to be alarmed enough to make his face grow pale. But when Gabriel came to explain the vision, he “sank into a deep sleep” with his face to the ground. The vision itself may have been enough for Daniel to

be overcome and lay sick for days; but it appears the very presence of the angel Gabriel overwhelmed his human senses so much that Gabriel had to touch him to make him stand upright (Daniel 7:28; 8:18). Gabriel is the angel Daniel described as a man dressed in linen whose face had the appearance of lightning and whose eyes were like flaming torches.

The purpose of angels is to deliver messages from the Most High to His creation. God used these same messengers, these ministering spirits, to proclaim at the appointed time the news of Messiah's birth. Gabriel is the angel who appeared to Mary and told her that the Holy Spirit would overshadow her; that she would become the mother of the Son of God and that her cousin Elizabeth was pregnant with her child's forerunner, John the Baptist. We are not told but it is possible that Gabriel was also the angel who proclaimed the message of the birth of Jesus to the shepherds and who appeared to Joseph in a dream directing him to take Mary as his wife, as well as to flee to Egypt and then return to Israel after the death of Herod.

Regardless of whether it was Gabriel or another unnamed angel who spoke to Joseph and the shepherds, you can see now why God used angels to proclaim the good news of the birth of Christ to the world. It was a message of extreme importance and it was entrusted to those who were unwavering in their faithfulness to the truth and their steadfast allegiance to God. Let's close today with the story of the proclamation of the birth of Christ by the angels to the shepherds.

LUKE 2:1-20

“Now in those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus, that a census be taken of all the inhabited earth. This was the first census taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. And everyone was on his way to register for the census, each to his own city. Joseph also went up from Galilee, from the city of Nazareth, to Judea, to the city of David which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and family of David, in order to register along with Mary, who was engaged to him, and was with child.

While they were there, the days were completed for her to give birth. And she gave birth to her firstborn son; and she wrapped Him in cloths, and laid Him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn. In the same region there were some shepherds staying out in the fields and keeping watch over their flock by night. And an angel of the Lord suddenly stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them; and they were terribly frightened.

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; for today in the city of David there has been born for you a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. This will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.” And suddenly there appeared with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying, “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among men with whom He is pleased.”

When the angels had gone away from them into heaven, the shepherds began saying to one another, “Let us go straight to Bethlehem then, and see this thing that has happened which the Lord has made known to us.” So they came in a hurry and found their way to Mary and Joseph, and the baby as He lay in the manger. When they had seen this, they made known the statement which had been told them about this Child. And all who heard it wondered at the things which were told them by the shepherds. But Mary treasured all these things, pondering them in her heart. The shepherds went back, glorifying and praising God for all that they had heard and seen, just as had been told them.”

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