

The Voice of Angels

Four Lessons of Advent:

Luke 2:8-14

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A little boy called a pastor on the phone: “Pastor Bob, this Joey, and my Mom is real sick with the flu. Would you come over and pray for her?” The pastor answered, “Joey, I’d be glad to come; but wouldn’t you prefer your own pastor? I know where you go to the church and he’s a nice pastor.” Joey answered, “I know he is, and I don’t want to risk him catching what Mom’s got.” We pastors are surprised now and then. The term *surprise* may understate the experience of the shepherds Christmas night. In a moment, our perspective will vastly expand as we consider their surprise and the voice of the angels.

We are using the candles of our Advent Wreath to help us see our lives in terms of vital and biblical truths. The first week we lit the Prophecy Candle. Prophecy is the light that revealed Jesus and the hand of God in this world. It still is that light. If we want to see Jesus today, if we want to know what God is doing, we must pay close attention to prophecy. The second week we lit the Shepherds Candle. We considered why an impartial God favored them with the first news of Christ’s birth. We learned how we can become so favored. Indeed, God desires to show you the favor he showed the shepherds.

Today, we light the pink or rose colored candle. This Sunday is known by some Christians as Gaudete Sunday. Gaudete is a Latin word that means rejoice. The candle we lit is called the Angels Candle. The shepherds not only heard the news of Christ’s birth; they witnessed the worship and joy of angels. With their ears and eyes, the shepherds observed angels praising God.

Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men on whom his favor rests." (Luke 2:13-14, NIV)

In October of 1987, I hoisted my 7 year old daughter onto my shoulders as I stood in downtown Minneapolis. I don't know if she enjoyed a pitch or hit from the '87 World Series, but she enjoyed the victory parade. The streets were jammed. Elation and joy reverberated among the buildings. The mood, as Twin players and coaches passed by, was euphoric in the extreme. It was a moment like none others. Understand this championship came to people who had witnessed four near misses with the Super Bowl, a lost World Series in baseball, a lost league championship and years of frustration and failure as the Twins accumulated losing seasons. The franchise, originally born as the Washington Senators, had not won a championship in 63 years. Now rising from the rubble and embarrassment of the '86 season, they were the world's best. People could rise up out of futility. People could win when money, talent and all the odds are stacked against them. People could work and become the best in the world, right here in Minnesota. What a moment of joy!

Now let's savor the moment on Christmas night. The angel had just announced the birth of Jesus. Can you imagine what that angel felt like? These angels are assigned to serve humanity and experience intense feelings. Jesus warned his listeners:

See that you do not look down on one of these little ones. For I tell you that their angels in heaven always see the face of my Father in heaven. (Matthew 18:10, NIV)

Does that sound like emotion to you? Does that sound like if you step out of line with a child, an angel will be in God's face immediately? There is an intensity of feeling in Jesus' statement.

We're not the only ones with feelings. We can see feelings in many creatures, for example dogs

and cats. How many of us have been licked and pawed to death by a happy dog? They feel, don't they? Angels feel.

In the Bible we read of a devastating time in King David's life. His son Absalom led a bloody coupe against him and his government. Finally, David's loyal troops fought with Absalom and his warriors. The fight was going well for David. His troops were routing those of Absalom, and Absalom himself was killed. Armies at that time had runners. There were no radios. Messages were carried by youth skilled in running cross country. The field commanders knew David would enjoy the victory, but be devastated by the news of his son's death. They discouraged one young boy from running to the king. Yet, the news of the victory compelled him. He begged for the opportunity and outran the runner sent before him. Do you think the angels are any different? Their very name means messengers. There was pure victory, and no death, in their Christmas night announcement. Who received the favor of sharing this great news? It was not merely an emotionally intense night for those shepherds. It was also an incredible night for the angels of heaven. Don't you think all desired the favor of sharing this news with the human family? They all may have gotten to. Suddenly, the shepherds saw countless angels celebrating. Was this the host of heaven? Was this the entire army of God? Did the shepherds see your guardian angel and mine there?

This does not appear to be a rehearsed moment. It's not like Gabriel took music lessons and then rehearsed a choir to perform for the shepherds: "Tenors, when you come in on 'Glory to God,' make sure you stay on top of the note and hold it four beats. Keep the energy and breath support. Don't flat. We don't want flat angels on Judean hills. Incidentally, Michael, you can't come. You've spent too much time fighting principalities, and not enough time learning the tune."

On Christmas night, the occasion was so momentous and the celebration so great that our Father in heaven had to give us a glimpse. As you know, Jesus fully expresses the heart and will of God. When we look at Jesus, we fully see our heavenly Father; and Jesus prayed that we might experience “the full measure of his joy” (John 17:13). Don’t you like it when people are glad because of something you do? That’s the heart of our heavenly Father. God wants you to know his joy. Would you like to know it? It’s his will for you.

Instead of a host of angels being sent to sing and perform for the shepherds from some faraway place we call heaven, God rolled back the veil so that the shepherds could see the celebration in the heavenly realm that surrounds us. Angels were dancing, leaping, shouting and praising God. It was heavenly mayhem. The intoxicating euphoria was stronger than any celebration we human beings have ever tasted. The news was better! The victory was sweeter! The stakes were higher! This was a moment of pure light and delight!

Earlier, I shared my taste of the victory parade and some factors that made the Minnesota Twins 1987 World Series Championship so meaningful. Similarly, our heavenly Father not only gave the shepherds, you and me a glimpse of heaven’s celebration. He gave us all the reason. Listen again to the voice of the angels:

Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men on whom his favor rests.
(Luke 2:14, NIV)

The shepherds heard only two things. They heard honor for God and blessing on humanity.

They heard honor for God. The angels declared, “Glory to God in the highest.” They are not just saying “Good job, God.” They are saying *glory*. Some day I’ll say much more about this. However, the term God chose to express his glory in the Bible is a Hebrew word that means heaviness or weight. When we say that someone has a heavy heart, we are saying that

some concern has overcome all other things to dominate one's reality and experience. That concern carries more weight. When the angels say "Glory to God in the highest," they are saying that God's words and work carry more weight in the highest realm of decision-making that affects and dominates all creation. God's will is getting done. God's love is dominating. God's power is overcoming. God is prevailing. All creation will feel the effect. Since they see and deal with the effect of sin and death, this is a momentous word and great moment. God's love and wisdom carry more weight than the sins of humanity and the demons of hell. Like a cleansing rain removing winter's salt and soot, the heaviness of God's love is having an effect on the judgment of creation. It's removing it. Glory to God in the highest!

They voiced peace to people on earth. With the birth of Jesus, God is not only bringing an end to the enmity on earth that is stirred up by the demons of hell. God is also making everything new. What is promised through the prophets, demonstrated by Jesus and taught by the apostles is unfolding. God is renewing creation.

Creation will not be fully renewed until all evil is judged. So we live in a moment when evil doers have a chance at redemption. Thus we live in a time of salvation rather than a time of peace. We live in a time when all that is needed has been seeded in Jesus; it simply needs to be received. We live in a time that calls for faith.

The victory has been won. Our fight is to believe. It is to keep asking, keep seeking, keep knocking, and keep looking to the Prince of Peace. The answer to the deepest hurts is already on the way. The mercy and favor of God are already extended. The destiny of humanity and the world is already settled. On what side will you land? Will you persist in believing Jesus for victory and rejoice? That's the light of the angels' candle. That's a lesson of Advent and a light we are to walk in.