

As we prepare to celebrate the birth of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ during Advent this year, we have been focusing on the role of Joseph, the forgotten man, in the life of Jesus. Last week, we discussed who Joseph was and the influence that he might have had on Jesus' early life and ministry. In the first chapter of the Gospel of Luke, we are told that the angel Gabriel appeared to Mary and told her that she had been chosen by God to give birth to His Beloved Son. Once Mary overcame the initial shock of the appearance of an angel, she asked a very logical question: "I'm pregnant? How can this be? I made an A in biology; I know all about the birds and the bees. I have not had sexual relations with any man. How can this be; I am a virgin!"

Now the explanation that Gabriel gave was more theological than biological. Gabriel tells Mary: "The Holy Spirit will come over you and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. Therefore, the one who is to be born will be holy. He will be called the Son of God. Nothing is impossible for God." Now the concept of the virgin birth has been the subject of much debate and doubt. One of the reasons is that we humans tend to look at things based on what we can and can't do, and not what God can do. For centuries, skeptics have dismissed the virgin birth and this story because they claim if science can't do it, then God can't. But today through the advancements of science, we are cloning animals and there is artificial insemination. So why couldn't God who created the universe have done this two thousand years ago? For if God can raise Jesus from the dead, then the mystery of the angel Gabriel and a baby born to a virgin named Mary should pose no problem to us at all.

But think about this, if you have ever had any doubts about the virgin birth, how do you think Joseph must have felt? As we discussed before, neither Matthew nor Luke discusses how Mary broke the news of her unique pregnancy to Joseph. Now this definitely had to come as a shock to him, and he most likely stormed out of the room, shaking his head in disbelief, and went somewhere to gather his thoughts. The Gospel of Matthew gives us the best insight into what Joseph was thinking. Let's look at this story again from the first chapter of Matthew, verses 18-25.

Read Matthew 1:18-25

Now Joseph had every right to be angry and hurt at what he thought was a betrayal. He would have been within his legal rights to follow the harsh Jewish rules that could have resulted in the stoning of Mary. But, because Joseph was a righteous man and loved Mary, he did not want to expose her to public disgrace. So, while still doubting Mary's far-fetched explanation for her pregnancy, he planned to quietly call off the marriage. When he did so, others would have assumed that he was responsible for the pregnancy and for the divorce that would follow. He

would be dishonored, and Mary would retain her honor. This shows the true character of Joseph, and why God chose him to raise His son.

That night after hearing Mary's news, Joseph went to bed with his mind set on divorce, and then experienced what was undoubtedly a restless sleep. As he slept, Joseph had a dream. In it, an angel of the Lord appeared to him, announcing that he should not be afraid to take Mary as his wife, because the child conceived in her womb was of the Holy Spirit, just as Mary had said. The angel further informed Joseph that he was to give the child the name "Jesus," for He would save His people from their sins. Here the angel clearly stated the main reason that Jesus came to live among us, to save us from our sins. It is interesting to note that in Luke's gospel, Gabriel does not mention this when he appears to Mary.

In obedience to the heavenly message, Joseph took Mary as his wife and named the child Jesus; by naming the child, he adopted Jesus into the lineage of David, fulfilling the Old Testament prophecies. Thus, Jesus could use the title of "Son of David."

Now our English word "angel" comes from a Greek word which means "messenger." We often think of angels as winged creatures, but when you read the Bible closely, that is not how they are normally portrayed. Yes, the Bible does describe some heavenly creatures as having wings in Isaiah's vision of the heavenly temple and John's vision in Revelation. However, most often in the Bible, we find that angels simply look like regular people. Hence, the writer of Hebrews warns us in chapter 13: "Do not forget to entertain strangers, for by so doing some people have entertained angels without knowing it." The fact that we could entertain or host angels without knowing it implies that angels most often look like ordinary people. Who knows; look to your right and left, you might be sitting next to an angel this morning!

The Gospel of Matthew records angels appearing to Joseph four times in his dreams. In the first dream that we just read, the angel of the Lord confirms that Mary is pregnant by the Holy Spirit and describes the child's destiny. In the second dream recorded in Matthew 2:13, after the visit of the wise men, an angel tells Joseph to take his family to Egypt to save the Baby Jesus from King Herod. In the third dream, an angel tells Joseph that it is now safe to return home. Joseph is told in his fourth dream that it is safer to go to Nazareth instead of Judea, fulfilling another prophecy of the Old Testament.

I don't know if you believe in angels or not, but I do. A *Times Magazine* survey a while back found that 69 percent of people confirmed their belief in the existence of angels; 46 percent acknowledged their belief in a personal guardian angel; and 32 percent claimed to have felt the presence of angels at some time in their lives. During his life, Billy Graham often wrote on the role of angels in our lives, and in one of his devotionals that I have used in the past, he has told many stories about angels and how they have come to the rescue of Christians throughout

history. Charles Spurgeon, the great British preacher once said: "I do not know how to explain it, but I believe angels have a great deal to do with the business of this world."

There's a story that just before Christmas, God was looking down on the earth and saw all the evil that was going on, like right now. So, He called one of His best angels and sent her to earth to see how bad things really were. After a while, she returned and said that His observation was correct; 95 percent of the people were bad and only 5 percent were good.

God was not pleased with these results, so He sent another angel just to get a second opinion. This angel returned and confirmed the previous report: 95 percent of the people were bad and only 5 percent were good. So, God decided to send an email to the 5 percent who were good to encourage them to keep going and not give up. Do you know what the email said? (PAUSE) So, you didn't get the email either?

Now I have never seen an angel, but I have had people who have come to my rescue as angels. I had a good friend in Grants named Calvin Edwards who was a tough old guy with a heart of gold. He was always stopping to help people stranded along Interstate 40. People would try to pay him, but Calvin would say: "No, just pass it on; next time you see somebody in trouble, stop and help them." Just think how much better our world would be if we had more angels like Calvin, and if we would all pass on God's love to others, especially during this holiday season.

Have you ever met this kind of angel? Or more importantly, have you ever been one of these angels for someone else, perhaps a complete stranger who was in need? Maybe you saw someone who had run out of gas or who had been in an accident. Maybe you met someone who needed a word of encouragement, so you offered it. Maybe God used you as an angel without your even realizing it. How did it feel to reach out and share God's love with someone who needed help?

This morning, we lit the Candle of Joy on the Advent Wreath. No word so completely captures the Christmas spirit as the word joy. This is the joy that we as Christians will sing about in our closing hymn by Isaac Watts - "Joy to the World." Unfortunately, the season leading up to Christmas is often anything but joyful. We may sing of joy, but we don't necessarily feel it. We get lost in the artificial whirlwind of Christmas with all the demands, preparations, and activities. In addition, we try so hard to make this the ideal Christmas. However, life does not look like a Norman Rockwell painting. In fact, at times, Christmas can be downright depressing, unless we are careful.

So, where do we look for joy during Advent and Christmas when it seems to be missing in our lives? We can find it by being an angel for someone else. We can experience joy when we take our eyes off our own situation and needs, and focus on blessing, building up, encouraging, and serving others. When we take our eyes off ourselves and focus on someone else, we open

ourselves to a different way of seeing and being. We become someone's angel, a messenger of God's good news, a gift during a time of need. Because caring for others reveals the best version of ourselves. So, when was the last time you were someone's angel?

Now you may be thinking, I'm no angel, just ask my wife or anybody who knows me! I don't know if you have ever noticed that in the Bible God routinely uses ordinary people just like you and me to do the work that He wants to be done. Now by ordinary, I don't mean to insult anybody, because you may think you are special. I'm not talking about kings, queens, billionaires, industrial giants, pro athletes or politicians. I'm talking about people who get up each and every day and go to work; people you see every day at work, Walmart, Smith's, Costco and church. I'm talking about you and me.

As you study the Bible, you find that God not only uses ordinary people, but in some cases, He uses some very unusual characters. For example, when God called Moses from the burning bush to lead the Israelites out of slavery in Egypt, Moses was wanted for murder in Egypt and was hiding out in the desert as a shepherd. When Samuel was sent by God to find a successor for Saul as King of Israel, God told him to not be impressed by appearance and size. As we have discussed before, God does not judge others as we do; He examines the heart. Thus, David, the youngest and smallest of Jesse's sons, was anointed king. In our story this morning, God chose a young peasant girl from Nazareth to be the mother of the Messiah, and a simple carpenter named Joseph to be the stepfather of His Son. With Joseph, God continued the pattern, looking at the heart and choosing an unlikely hero for the important mission of raising the Messiah.

And look at the disciples that Jesus chose to train and carry on His ministry here on earth. There were simple fishermen, hard-headed Peter, Matthew the tax collector, Thomas the doubter, Judas the betrayer, and Nathaniel the rebel. And finally, one of God's most interesting choices was Saul, the Pharisee who was persecuting the early Christian Church; however, following His encounter with Jesus on the road to Damascus, he became Paul the great apostle, missionary and writer. There are many more that I don't have time to mention; the Bible is full of examples of people just like you and me who God has used to spread His love and message to a world desperately in need of hope and love.

And today God calls you and me to be His angels; His messengers of His love and grace to those we encounter each and every day. During this holiday season, look for ways to reach out and help someone. I have found that if you are looking for ways to help, God will provide the opportunity. We just need to be alert and keep our eyes open. Now it doesn't have to be something special or big such as a large financial donation to some charity. It can be simple things such as holding a door open for somebody, helping carry grocery sacks to the car, raking the leaves for a neighbor, sending a card of encouragement to someone or calling someone to check on them. During this holiday season, look for ways to reach out especially to those who

are homebound and in need of an encouraging word. Like angels, may your Christmas spirit lift others to heights of happiness.

Christmas takes on real significance when we move beyond buying gifts for people who really don't need anything or thinking only of ourselves, to becoming Christmas angels. Often during the holiday season, our focus is on receiving. But Jesus has told us that it is more blessed to give than receive. One pastor regularly reminds his congregation that "Christmas is not your birthday!" At Christmas, we have a choice; we can either be a Christmas angel or a scrooge. Our choice will determine what kind of holidays we and those around us will have. Choose wisely because Christmas is meant to be a special time in our lives. Amen