

“Of Angels and Miracles”

**First Presbyterian Church
Pastor Dave Carlson
December 22, 2019**

New Testament Lesson: Matthew 1:18-25

Old Testament Lesson: Isaiah 7:10-14

During our Hanging of the Greens service this year, Jennifer Vansandt read the part about angels. Whether or not you believe angels are active in our world today, they are a big part of the Bible. In service to God, angels have appeared in bodily form and delivered the most important messages for the good of humankind.

As documented throughout history, angels are seen to have personality and individuality, with the capacity to know joy, desire, and free will. Like us, they were created to serve and worship God in his glory.

One of the most astounding appearances of an angel was recorded by the Apostle Matthew in today’s New Testament lesson. We know this is a monumental encounter because Matthew ties it directly to the birth of Jesus the Messiah, the most important event in human history. Matthew’s hope and prayer is that the birth of Jesus is also the most important event in your life.

So that we might be more mindful of the importance of Jesus in our lives, let’s look at the story of Jesus’ birth. Let’s use this time of Advent – this time of expectant waiting – to heighten our awareness of God so that we, too, might recognize those angelic encounters God sends our way.

Like Joseph, we all have circumstance in life where we could rally use God’s guiding hand, the Lord’s divine intervention, the Spirit’s sense of possibility and promise. Like us, Joseph was a normal guy going about his normal life when things suddenly shifted in profound and unexpected ways. He’s engaged to Mary and learns that she is pregnant. Matthew tells us Joseph plans to dismiss her quietly rather than disgrace her publicly.

Did you hear that? He could have disgraced Mary – Mary full of grace was at risk of being disgraced, of being pushed out of her place of safety and contentment, of being left to struggle through life all alone, just one more tragic victim of this skeptical, indifferent world of ours. The world really is indifferent, you know. The world doesn’t care about you. Oh, creation might. We all have a place in creation. But in the world – the world of dog-eat-dog, nation against nation, rich vs. poor – anyone of us can rise or fall and the world as a whole just wouldn’t care all that much.

Think about it. If Joseph had quietly dismissed Mary, how do you think she would have fared. Not so well, right? Pregnant, no husband, no job or income, tossed to the bottom of the social hierarchy, and left there to live out the rest of her life in misery, all alone. I mean, really, babies born to unwed mothers back then – they didn't fare too well at all. Yes, this story could have been quite different.

Take for instance, the story of a little boy who wanted to play Joseph in the church Christmas pageant. Instead, he was cast as the landlord, despite his loud objections. When the pageant was presented, Mary and Joseph knocked on the door and asked him if he had a room for them. The boy smiled and said, "Oh, yay. Lots of room. Come on in!" Oh, boy. That changes the whole story, right? And in fact, that's actually how the story is supposed to end when Jesus comes again – lots of room for Jesus wherever he comes.

Sadly, that's not the world we have now. Sadly, for many people there is no room for Jesus or God in their lives. We all know what it's like to feel separated from God, apart from the Lord's blessing, living under the shadow of a dark spirit. We have all been through down-and-out times, those pivotal moments that, but for the grace of God, we would have been left in a much worse place, or come out as very a different person, but for the grace of God.

Think back to such a time in your life. What was that like, before getting through it? ... More importantly, what was it that brought you through it? If you've been through a dark time like that, chances are you came through it by the grace God, the grace of a divine, angelic encounter. I firmly believe that God places divine encounters out ahead of us to guide us and comfort us in the hardest of times, just like he guided and comforted Joseph and Mary.

Matthew tells us that an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit." Here's Joseph planning to dismiss Mary out of fear, based on his own misguided judgment. He had made up his mind; we shouldn't move pass that too quickly. Joseph had his mind made up.

How often have we made up our minds about things we're so certain of, and nobody's going to convince us otherwise? We all do that, all the time. There's a real spirit of judgment and condemnation that has taken hold of the world. So much so much, it's hard to see evidence of the Spirit of love, acceptance and mutual support that is from God.

Whatever it is that's been bothering you these days, or over the years, whatever you're certain isn't working, is never going to work – whether that's in your family, at your job or

school, across our nation, or happening on a global scale – ask yourself: Is there a way to hold things a little more loosely, whatever your thoughts and judgments are?

I mean, even if you are right, is being right really worth getting yourself all worked up, sending yourself down a hole of hopelessness, slogging through life with little joy and even less hope.

At times like that, instead of thinking only of yourself, think of poor Joseph. Joseph was just as convinced about what is right and what is wrong as you are. Joseph was just as certain of a bleak and hopeless future as you once were.

For Joseph, it took an angel of the Lord to break through his time of crises and assure him of a brighter future. And that's just what it takes for us, when we're convinced that our bad and troubling situation is hopeless.

Think again about that troubling situation you're facing. What would it take for you to set aside your outlook, your way of seeing things, and maybe, just maybe be shown a new way of looking at it? If there's one thing that's certain for those who put their faith in Jesus it's that things are never as dark as they might look, that the light of Christ can truly change our outlook for the better.

The angel told Joseph that Mary's child is from the Holy Spirit. "She will bear a son," said the angel. And not only that, but you, Joseph, "are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins." Wow! Just think if Joseph hadn't softened his perspective on things. Just think if he had tossed Mary aside.

As you think about that, think about those troubling situations bothering you. Do you imagine that maybe, just maybe, there's another perspective that would lead to a blessing, a blessing for you and for our world – for all those affected by that troubling issue, that ongoing struggle that's been eating away at you.

As we know, Joseph did what the angel of the Lord commanded him. He took Mary as his wife, having no relations with her until she had borne a son. And he named him Jesus. By listening to the angel God sent his way, Joseph became central to the salvation of the world. And the same is possible for you, for me. If we would learn to recognize and listen to the angels God sends our way, just imagine the hope, peace, joy and love we would have in our hearts.

As we contemplate the birth of Jesus this Christmas season, also contemplate all the ways that God has worked in this world, through human history and in our lives today, to bring us the gift of hope, peace, joy and love.

What would you give to be in touch with that divine Spirit amid the struggles or worries you face? Would you give up your prejudgments, your certainties, your need to be right even at the expense of making someone else wrong? In other words, would you give up yourself – your carefully crafted sense of self – in order to welcome Jesus deeper into your heart? Hope, peace, joy and love – what are you waiting for this Christmas? Amen.

PASTORAL PRAYER

Holy and loving God, for the extravagant gift of your Son, Jesus Christ, we thank you. For the obedience of a young mother who embraced an unexpected plan for her life, we praise you. For the loyalty of an earthly father whose love was tested, we exalt you.

For the surprising notes of grace that ringing out in our lives like an angelic heavenly choir, we magnify you.

For the guiding light that appears as miraculously as a star to shepherds, we worship you.

Welcome, Emmanuel. Come to us, we pray, with hope, love, peace and light that we may kneel before you with gifts of adoration, obedience and faith.

We pray all this in the name of Jesus the Christ, who taught us to pray, saying:

**Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.
Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts,
as we forgive our debtors;
and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.
For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.**