

Peripheral Angels

Luke 1:5-25; 57-69

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I have a friend who has a profound trust in angels. She has had some pretty serious heart problems in midlife, which limits her activity, but she is ever cheerful and insists that angels are watching over her. Her talk about angels always makes me a little bit nervous, because she sees them all the time, and everywhere, and in whomever she suspects just might be winging a message to her from heaven.

Over time, I have come to realize that my issue with angels has less to do with my friend's faith in them and more to do with my own struggles brought on by the cultural popularity of angels. In books about angels, in the movies, on greeting cards, and even in religious circles, angels have become sort of dumbed down and sweetened up, whereas biblical angels arrive as frightening messengers with unexpected news that disturbs and disrupts. It's no coincidence that the first word out of the mouth of any angel in Jesus' birth narrative is, "Do not be afraid." Anyone to whom they appear is absolutely terrified. That's hardly the Hallmark greeting card version of angels.

Just take a look at Gabriel in our scripture this morning. First of all his name, Gabriel, means "God is my strength," and what does he do with that strength? He strikes Zechariah mute; he renders the priest speechless. He delivers the same news that found old Abraham and Sarah in such disbelief that they fell down laughing, while God stood by musing, "Is anything too wonderful for the Lord?" "You are going to have a child," Gabriel announces to old Zechariah, and for the duration of Elizabeth's pregnancy, he is absolutely dumbfounded.

One of the things I love about this story of Zechariah and Elizabeth is that it counters a myth that is alive and well during this season of the year, a myth that obscures the full gospel meaning of the birth of Jesus, and that is that Christmas is primarily for children. Now, of course, Christmas is for children, and there is plenty of evidence for it. Perhaps no other gospel story captures the imagination of a child like the one filled with angels and animals, mysterious visitors from afar, and God in the body of a baby. There is no doubt that the gospel story of the birth of Jesus lends itself to a child's sense of wonder. But if you pay close attention to what the angels say and do, you realize that the heart of Christmas is more grown up than a child's worldview. God's powerful in-breaking Word calls forth faith and faithfulness, an openness to God's presence in life-changing ways.

None of the characters in Luke's narrative of the birth of Jesus gets at the transcendent quality of this amazing, earth shattering good news quite like Zechariah and Elizabeth, Mary's aged cousins. We forget that these peripheral characters, getting on in years, are also the recipients of an angel. I have a file of articles, preaching ideas, scholarly biblical papers, and the sermons of others I have collected over time on the first chapter of Luke. It's an inch thick, probably the thickest file I have except the one on Luke 2, the Christmas story. Few of those papers even nod in the direction of Zechariah and Elizabeth. It's filled with meditations on Mary's encounter with Gabriel, but not one mentions how Gabriel winged his way to Mary, breathless after striking

Zechariah speechless. It's filled with sermons on Mary's Magnificat, but there's not one mention of Zechariah's Benedictus. John gets little face time in our Christmas traditions, but who has ever seen Elizabeth totter into the Christmas pageant, leaning on her cane at eight months pregnant? And you have to admit, Zechariah himself brings comic relief. Have you ever seen a minister who cannot talk for nine months? Probably wish you had! A man so dumbfounded by the news that he'll be a father that he is unable to participate in the predictable family feud about the naming of the child: "But nobody in our family is named John..., of course you're going to name him Zechariah..., we'll call him Junior." Zechariah stands there facing this Godly mess of unexpected births so unable to speak that he has to write it down: "His name will be John."

Elizabeth and Zechariah are peripheral characters, and yet they give us an entrée into the birth of Jesus that is movingly pastoral and relevant to all of us. They remind us that peripheral characters are also on the receiving end of angel messages. Yes, Gabriel will tell Mary the earth-rending news that she will bear a son and name him Jesus; he will be the Son of the Most High, the holy Son of God. Yes, the angel chorus will hover over Bethlehem's shepherds and sing to the whole world: "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace." But before those angel messages are broadcast for everyone to hear, an angel appeared to Zechariah, saying to him directly for only him to hear, "Do not be afraid, your prayer has been heard; you will have joy and gladness." It would appear that peripheral characters not only encounter angels; they receive really personal, even intimate messages from them. "You have nothing to fear, your prayers are heard, your prayers will be answered; you will know joy and gladness."

When things in our lives get out of sorts, when we are unexpectedly thrown for a loop, when we look into the future with no idea what to expect, the Bible says angel messengers may come; they might just upend our ordinary lives with extraordinary news; they can shake us out of our complacency with grace and truth from on high. While Mary is getting ready to give birth to baby Jesus, which of course is the main drama here, peripheral angels assure us that God also has an eye on the peripheral people, the outliers – we might call them today – the ones always around the edge of someone else's more central part. In the heart and mind of God, peripheral people always count; they always matter, they always have a role to play, here they even set the stage, if you will, for the starring character in the drama of salvation.

Martha Sterne, who was a colleague of mine in urban ministry years ago in Atlanta and is now serving an Episcopal church in East Tennessee, has written of angels saying, "So the real job of angels is to pass hard and living good news on. Sometimes they show up in a conversation, or in a dream, or in a moment on a bus, or most often for me in the checkout line at the grocery store. They are more likely to stir up the spirit than to smooth things down. Angels can be downright irritating since angels are in the business of startling people with the Holy, and thus jump-starting people to come alive in the Spirit.... Are you aware," she asks, "of angels fluttering in your very own soul?"¹

Elizabeth and Zechariah invite us not to fear, but to be brave and listen for peripheral angels, not just sweet and sentimental ones we might like to imagine, but powerful messengers, the kind that are sent from God with unbelievably good news. Their story, filled as it is with historical detail and genealogy, with poetry, song, prophecy, a little

family feud about the baby's name, and the startling news of a word from on high, all invite us into this thing that has come to pass. They stand as a bridge linking the faithfulness of God long past to something utterly, altogether new in the movement within Mary's womb. They recall God's faithfulness to Abraham and Sarah and all those other old Israelites for whom what seemed like dead ends, by the power of God, began to open upon bright futures. Their story opens the gospel, in many ways, sounding so ordinary, so much like many of our stories. They knew the kind of joy and anxiety that comes with expecting a child; they had family and neighbors who meddled in their personal lives, entering the debate about the baby's name, and all, wondering what in the world was the matter with a priest who lost his voice. And later, we can only imagine the struggles they may have suffered as upstanding people in the Temple and community, raising a wild-haired adolescent like John the Baptist. Yet, what we know for certain is that theirs is the kind of faithful witness that helps us all grow old with the gospel and never lose sight of its ability to render us speechless with awe and wonder. For from the periphery, where all of us stand on the sidelines of this unfolding story, old Zechariah looks into a future rendered possible only by God and sings: "By the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us, to give light to those who sit in darkness and the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace."

If that's the faith that peripheral angels can inspire in us, then bring them on, O God, bring them on.

Note

1 Martha Sterne, *Alive and Loose in the Ordinary: Stories of the Incarnation* (Harrisburg: Morehouse Publishing, 2006), 54.