

**Welcoming Jesus Like the Angels**  
**Luke 2:1-14; Psalm 103:20-21**  
**December 10, 2023**

**Prayer**

The story we heard at the start of the service and will soon read again came from a man named Luke. He was a physician by trade, a trained observer who understood the importance of details. Though there is no evidence that he ever heard Jesus speak, he was alive during Jesus' ministry.

He told his friend Theophilus that he carefully investigated everything about the Life of Christ from the beginning. His research must have included interviewing eyewitness to Christ's life which likely included Jesus' mother, Mary.

Luke's two volumes are called the *Gospel of Luke* and the *Acts of the Apostles*. Time and time again his historical details have been confirmed by other historical records of the same events. It stands to reason that, if the things we can test prove to be accurate, the things we cannot test are also accurate, even if they stretch our understanding or belief.

Luke's account sparks some questions. Does a reality beyond our physical world exist? Is there a spiritual realm that our five senses and scientific instruments cannot detect? And if so, is it possible for that reality to break into on our own to let us know of things that are beyond our grasp?

In both volumes, Luke talks about spiritual beings called angels. An angel brought a message to Zechariah, Mary and a man named Cornelius. One came to release Peter from prison and another to encourage the Apostle Paul when he was in danger. And in our story today, countless angels appear to express praise to God as they announce the birth of the long-awaited King.

We don't typically talk much about angels so let's take a moment for a quick review.

The Bible teaches that Jesus created all things on earth and in heaven, both visible and invisible, both physical and spiritual (Col 1:15-17). Scripture teaches that there is an entire realm that is invisible to us right now. Living in that realm are beings called angels.

Angels are created, personal, intelligent beings with whom we can interact. They are moral beings with the freedom to choose. Some have chosen to remain faithful to serve and worship God. They can be counted on to do His will and share His truth. Others have rebelled against God and now work to thwart God's purposes. They can be counted on to disobey God and to lie to us.<sup>i</sup>

Angels have great knowledge but are not all-knowing (Mt 24:36). They have great power but are not all-powerful. They are often spoken of in the plural expressing them as “thousands upon thousands and ten thousand times ten thousand” (Rev 5:11), but their exact number is unknown.

Scripture refers to them as the host of heaven, which is another way to say they are God’s army. This helps us because just like any human army, God’s heavenly host contains higher and lower ranks and different functions within those ranks.

Like an army, they obey their Commander in Chief but they all have the same job description. Psalm 103 reveals their two primary tasks.

<sup>20</sup> Praise the LORD, you angels,  
you mighty ones who carry out his plans,  
listening for each of his commands.

<sup>21</sup> Yes, praise the LORD, you armies of angels  
who serve him and do his will!

The first item on their job description is to continually praise and worship God. The second is for these mighty ones to serve God by carrying out His plans and doing His will. The third item is part of doing God’s will and is found in their name. When sent by God, Angels are to communicate God’s messages to humanity. In both Hebrew and Greek, the word angel literally means messenger.

Angels have played an important role in redemptive history. They were present with Abraham and Jacob and with the prophets. They became very active at significant moments, like the birth, resurrection and ascension of Christ, and they will accompany the Lord at His second coming.

While some are described with wings others are not. And I can tell you with great certainty that none are never described as cute, chubby babies with wings. In fact, a common response to an angelic visitor is to fall on one’s face in terror and the most common angelic greeting is “do not be afraid” (which says something about how they appear and present themselves).

Here is where it gets really interesting. While they are invisible, they have been known to show themselves on earth and to interact with humans. When they do interact with us it is because God sent them with a purpose.

The writer of Hebrews tells us that angels are servants, sent to minister to those who will inherit salvation (1:14).<sup>ii</sup> He also said that when they come to us, we might not even know that the person we are talking with is an angel (13:2).

The angels in today’s story did not disguise their identity as they obeyed their Lord’s command. With that we return to Luke 2:1-14.

At that time the Roman emperor, Augustus, decreed that a census should be taken throughout the Roman Empire. <sup>2</sup> (This was the first census taken when Quirinius was governor of Syria.) <sup>3</sup> All returned to their own ancestral towns to register for this census. <sup>4</sup> And because Joseph was a descendant of King David, he had to go to Bethlehem in Judea, David's ancient home. He traveled there from the village of Nazareth in Galilee. <sup>5</sup> He took with him Mary, to whom he was engaged, who was now expecting a child.

<sup>6</sup> And while they were there, the time came for her baby to be born. <sup>7</sup> She gave birth to her firstborn son. She wrapped him snugly in strips of cloth and laid him in a manger, because there was no lodging available for them.

*Look at the amazing historical detail Luke includes here. What follows is just as true. It is historical fact.*

<sup>8</sup> That night there were shepherds staying in the fields nearby, guarding their flocks of sheep. <sup>9</sup> Suddenly, an angel of the Lord appeared among them, and the radiance of the Lord's glory surrounded them. They were terrified, <sup>10</sup> but the angel reassured them. "Don't be afraid!" he said. "I bring you good news that will bring great joy to all people. <sup>11</sup> The Savior—yes, the Messiah, the Lord—has been born today in Bethlehem, the city of David! <sup>12</sup> And you will recognize him by this sign: You will find a baby wrapped snugly in strips of cloth, lying in a manger."

<sup>13</sup> Suddenly, the angel was joined by a vast host of others—the armies of heaven—praising God and saying,

<sup>14</sup> "Glory to God in highest heaven,  
and peace on earth to those with whom God is pleased."

The angel was bringing good news that will bring great joy to all people. By using the three titles, Savior, Messiah and Lord, the angel was covering the full scope of God's promise.

The Messiah is the long-promised King who will set up His righteous kingdom. Those who enter His kingdom by submitting to His sovereign authority will be saved from sin and from death. This promised King and Savior is none other than the Lord Himself, God almighty, come in human form.

This was familiar wording but it was delivered and received at a whole new level. It was familiar because these words had been used for other monarchs. For instance, an ancient inscription celebrating the birth of Augustus was found. It calls him a "savior" and says that "the birth date of our god has signaled the beginning of good news for the world" <sup>iii</sup>

So, the words were familiar, but their meaning went far beyond anything that had been heard before.

Unlike other kings, this one had been promised for more than 700 years. The Jewish people knew who this was and, though they did not yet have clarity on the kind of salvation he would bring, they knew that this truly was good news for all people, Jews and Gentiles alike.

This amazing birth announcement deserves the best kind of presentation. Caesar had his armies and choirs but he had nothing like this. This announcement was proclaimed by God's heavenly army. What is really amazing is that those with great power brought this message in the most amazing way to those with little influence.

This is good news for those with little power in the world. Unlike any other king, God sees you! It supports what Mary said about God lifting up the humble (Lk 1:52).

Not only this, but the sign confirming this announcement to be true is a strange oddity. The birth of the greatest king ever to enter the world is verified by the fact that he is lying among animals in a manger. Not a golden cradle but a rough-hewn feeding trough.

This is not usual. When the shepherds find this, they will know these words are true.

And then suddenly the skies were filled with the armies of heaven praising God for this birth and proclaiming that this king will bring a true peace, a shalom of wholeness, completeness and harmony. Caesar may have brought the pax Romana, the peace of Rome. But this, this is the peace of Christ made available to all.

No matter how many times I read this passage or any in the New Testament, I am struck by the details. Our Lord's arrival as an infant, to impoverished parents, through the pregnancy of a virgin at a very specific place and at a very specific point in time was no small miracle. It points to God's sovereign control over all things.

A gathering of angels around a specific occasion like this is unusual. In fact, the only other time we read of the Heavenly Host singing praise to God is at the first creation (Job 38:4-7). Think of this. John's gospel tells us that in the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God. The Word created all there is. Jesus is the Word

Jesus created all there is. Jesus is the word that was made flesh among us. These heavenly beings remember the time they praised God for His work at earth's creation and now they praise God for His work at earth's re-creation as He enters His creation in order to redeem and restore it. Wow!

Think about that! How exuberant and lengthy was their praise? I don't think this was just for a brief moment. I think their praise was offered before the shepherds

were allowed to see it. The shepherds were given a momentary glimpse of what was already taking place behind the spiritual veil.<sup>iv</sup>

They couldn't see it or hear it, but the praise and worship was already there. And this kind of worship is happening right now and by the Holy Spirit in us, we have the opportunity to join our voices with all God's creatures—both physical and spiritual—in singing His praise.

I think you can see that this really isn't a message about angels. It is a message about what the angels did when Jesus was born, and how their response to this good news can inform our own.

I have celebrated Christmas for many decades now. I know the story, watched the movies and have heard Charlie Brown's friend, Linus, recite this passage more times than I can remember. It is easy for me to become too familiar with the wonder of this story or too distracted with the trappings of this season. Perhaps it is the same for you too.

But the angels never lose the wonder or get distracted by anything earthly minded.

The angels understood the awe-inspiring weightiness of what was taking place. They lived in God's full presence and knew His glory. They knew Him as the King of Kings and Lord of Lords, the Creator who pre-dates time. They knew Him as the one who dwells in unapproachable light, who lives in an eternal day where there is no darkness.

They knew what Jesus had to lay aside in order to take on human flesh so that He might bring all who believe into eternal relationship with Himself. And they knew the deep, deep love that compelled Him to do it and all these things leave them in awe.

While we could conclude by joining with the angels in a joyful song of praise, I'd like to take the moment to help us become anchored to what they already knew and were conveying to us. Awe is always found at the start of all praise.

The reason they could offer such exuberant praise was because they understood who God is and what He was doing. Next week we will join the shepherds and the angels in praising God. This week, I invite you to close by considering what the angels knew and allowing this to lead each of us to a place of awe which can lead to deep praise and thanks.

## Prayer

Open our eyes, Lord. Help us to see what you did.  
Open our minds, Lord. Help us understand who you are.  
Free our hearts, Lord. So that we might join with your heavenly host in  
worshiping you with zeal and joy.

Five important NT passages on the incarnation

Mt 1:23

Lk 1:31-33

Jn 1: 1, 14

Phil 2:5-7

Gal 4:4

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<sup>i</sup> 2 Sam. 14:20; Rev. 22:9; Matt. 25:31; Mark 8:38; Luke 1:26; Acts 10:22; Rev. 14:10; John 8:44; 1 John 3:8–10

<sup>ii</sup> In his book, *Christian Theology*, Millard Erickson writes, "The major ministry is to spiritual needs, however. Angels take a great interest in the spiritual welfare of believers, rejoicing at their conversion (Luke 15:10) and serving them in their needs (Heb. 1:14). Angels are spectators of our lives (1 Cor. 4:9; 1 Tim. 5:21), and are present within the church (1 Cor. 11:10). At the death of believers, they convey them to the place of blessedness (Luke 16:22)." Page 468.

<sup>iii</sup> Arnold, C. E. (2002). [\*Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary: Matthew, Mark, Luke\*](#) (Vol. 1, p. 343). Zondervan.

<sup>iv</sup> I've thought about the word, "suddenly." Suddenly a singular angel was present with the glory of the Lord to tell them the good news. It wasn't like they saw a glowing figure making his way to them over the hills. BAM! The angel appeared.

And in the same fashion, suddenly a vast host of others were there. They didn't watch this multitude float in and take their places. This throng was already present and already in their places when the veil that separates the physical from the spiritual realm was temporarily removed and the shepherds were given a glimpse into what was going on all around them.