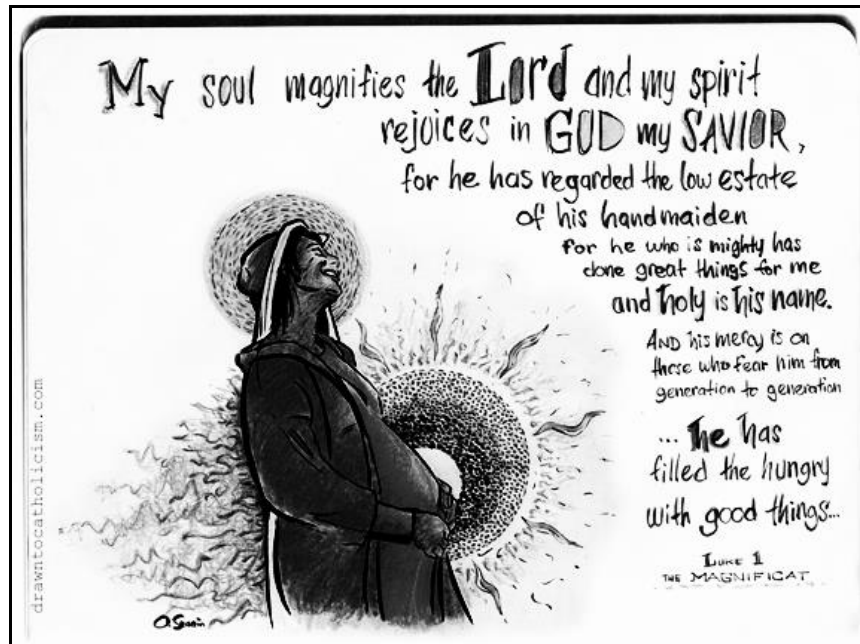


SING WITH THE ANGELS!



Scripture:

Micah 5:2-5a

²But you, O Bethlehem of Ephrathah, who are one of the little clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to rule in Israel, whose origin is from of old, from ancient days. ³Therefore he shall give them up until the time when she who is in labor has brought forth; then the rest of his kindred shall return to the people of Israel. ⁴And he shall stand and feed his flock in the strength of the LORD, in the majesty of the name of the LORD his God. And they shall live secure, for now he shall be great to the ends of the earth; ⁵and he shall be the one of peace.

Luke 1:46b-55

⁴⁶And Mary said, “My soul magnifies the Lord, ⁴⁷and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, ⁴⁸for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant. Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed; ⁴⁹for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name. ⁵⁰His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation. ⁵¹He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. ⁵²He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; ⁵³he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty. ⁵⁴He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, ⁵⁵according to the promise he made to our ancestors, to Abraham and to his descendants forever.”

This is the Word of the Lord! Thanks be to God!



To put this passage in context, you should know that earlier in Luke 1, the angel Gabriel appeared to Mary and said, ‘Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you.’

But Mary was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. The angel said to her, ‘Do not be afraid, Mary, for you

have found favor with God. And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David.

He will reign over the house of Jacob for ever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.’

Mary said to the angel, ‘How can this be, since I am a virgin?’

The angel said to her, ‘The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called “Son of God.”’

And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren. For nothing will be impossible with God.’

Then Mary said, ‘Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.’ Then the angel departed from her.

There are many amazing facets in the story of Christ’s birth. In fact, it may seem too impossible. (Some say that about quantum physics too.) But two amazing parts to the story that I will focus on today are:

1. Mary’s response to being favored by God.
2. The Angel Gabriel and his angelic comrades.

MARY’S RESPONSE

First, Mary’s response to being chosen to be the mother of God was quite incredible. According to Luke she said, ‘Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.’

Most of us would have thought, “Whoa! This must be a really scary dream!” And maybe she did say that first but then left that part out when she told others about it later. The other amazing thing about Mary’s response is the fact that she was asked by Gabriel personally, not through a man. She was given the message directly at a time in Jewish history when women were not appreciated for their wisdom in making decisions and not encouraged to be independent.

Yet, the story goes on to say that soon after the conception, she travels to her cousin, Elizabeth’s home, not with Joseph, but by herself. As soon as she gets there, Elizabeth says, “Blessed are you among women.” Then Mary replies with the Magnificat, which is the scripture for today. [It’s on the first page under the sermon title.]

Doesn’t Mary beautifully magnify the Lord when she accepts Gabriel’s Mission Impossible assignment? What an amazing response by Mary to the news that she will give birth. Many women in that era, especially young ones like Mary, died in childbirth. There is much to learn from the humble way Mary accepts God’s assignment to bear a son to be named Jesus, also to be known as the Son of

the Most High. Can you imagine the feelings she must have had? Yet, God chose well. Mary carried out the dangerous and holy assignment and accomplished the impossible.

THE ANGEL GABRIEL

The other amazing facet in the Luke story leading up to Christ’s birth is the Angel Gabriel whose name means: “God is my strength.”

He had a major role in the birth stories of both John the Baptist and Jesus. But before these stories, Gabriel is mentioned in the Old Testament as the angel who interpreted visions for Daniel in the Book of Daniel chapter 8. And did you know that Gabriel is in the Quran in the faith of Islam? Gabriel is one of the four Archangels who give divine messages to Muhammad. In the Baha’i faith the Angel Gabriel is mentioned as a messenger of divine words. Gabriel is very ecumenical it seems.

In the New Testament, the Angel Gabriel appeared to both Zechariah, the father of John the Baptist, and to Mary, mother of Jesus. And he calms them both in the beginning of their conversations with these words: “Do Not Be Afraid!”

Gabriel must be a formidable figure to frighten both Zechariah and Mary. His message to Zechariah was: “With the spirit and power of Elijah he will go before him, to turn the hearts of parents to their children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous, to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.”

THE IMPORTANCE OF THE PARENT/CHILD RELATIONSHIP

“To turn the hearts of parents to their children” is an interesting proclamation for that era isn’t it? It could be related to the fact that children in the days of King Herod suffered a high mortality rate. The average life span lasted only thirty-five to forty years. Sometimes the parents would not invest emotionally in their children because the child mortality rate was very high. About one third of the children died before age eighteen.

This passage, spoken by Gabriel to Zechariah, seems to be reminding all parents of how precious their children should be to them and not to forget the importance of the parent/child relationship.

This encouragement for parents to turn towards their children may have been a prescription for good quality childcare of both John the Baptist and Jesus. Maybe the Angel Gabriel was guaranteeing that the two boys would be raised in a loving healthy way to help them survive into adulthood.

The Angel Gabriel was the important messenger to the parents in these two birth stories. But it was a heavenly host of angels who gave the shepherds the message of Christ's birth, not just Gabriel alone.

ANGELS IN THE BIBLE

The presence of angels weaves in and out and through the Bible three-hundred times. They appear most often as special messengers. (The Greek word for angel is angelos meaning "messenger.")

However, the first appearance of an angel in the Bible is in the form of a guard with a flaming sword. Do you remember where? Yes, at the garden gate, keeping Adam and Eve out of the Garden of Eden after they were banished.

The second mention of angels in the Bible is in Exodus 23. This is where the idea of guardian angels originated: The Lord gave Moses the Ten Commandments and then a guardian angel. "And now I am sending my angel to go before you and guard the way and lead you to the place I have made ready."

WHO BELIEVES IN ANGELS?

So, who believes in angels? How many here have either seen an angel or know someone who has? I know three people who have seen an angel. My son is one of them. He saw an angel watching over him and his Dad while on a mission trip to the Dominican Republic when he was nine years old. He was frightened at first, too. But he was positive it was an angel.

I have a few friends who think angels are around us all the time but we just can't always see them. I think we can agree angels are a mystery and yet according to the Bible they are a part of God's diverse creation.

In Hebrews 2:5-9 it says that we humans were made a "little lower than the angels," yet given the care of the earth. Paul is speaking to the Hebrew people when he says, "Now God did not subject the world to angels. God made humans a little lower than the angels, and crowned them with glory and honor, subjecting all things under their feet." And he goes on to say, "...see Jesus, who for a little

while was made lower than the angels, now crowned with glory and honor because of the suffering of death, so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone."

I imagine, like the shepherds, most people are generally afraid of God's angelic messengers when they see them. But everyone has seen babies and almost everyone loves them. So if God wanted to be loved as well as revered, he did the right thing by coming to earth as a baby in a humble stable while the angels sang in celebration.

Christmas is the story of God going to extreme measures to communicate unconditional love to us.

THEOLOGIAN AND AUTHOR BRIAN MC LAREN

Theologian and author Brian McLaren comments about the nativity story. He says we might suspect that Luke made up the story to echo Isaiah's prophecy about a son being born to a virgin. And maybe the Elizabeth story was invented to echo the story of Abraham and Sarah having a child in her old age. McLaren says, "...it is tempting to assign both stories to the category of pre-scientific legend and be done with them. After all, both stories are to scientific minds, simply impossible!"

But McLaren asks: What if that is the point? What if their purpose is to challenge us to blur the line between what we think is possible and what we think is impossible? Do we think there will truly be a time when God's justice will flow like a river to the lowest and most forsaken places on Earth, when the brokenhearted will be comforted and the poor receive good news? If you think about these things, "They too seem impossible."

Yet, maybe it's not too late for something beautiful to be born. Maybe the present moment is pregnant with possibilities we can't see or even imagine.

The actual point of these birth stories is a challenge to us all to dare to hope and to see that the seemingly impossible may actually be made possible!! McLaren says these stories of birth challenge us to align our lives around the impossible possibilities hidden in the present moments.

Nevertheless, whether the story of Mary and the Angel Gabriel is scientifically provable or not, I like to finish off the Advent season with the angelic spirit Ann Weems conveys in her poem called:

Angel-Filled Advent.

**"Wouldn't it be wonderful
if Advent came filled with angels and alleluias?
Wouldn't it be perfect
if we were greeted on these December mornings
with a hovering of heavenly hosts
tuning their harps and brushing up
on their fa-la-la's?
Wouldn't it be incredible
if their music filled our waking hours
with the promise of peace on earth
and if each Advent night we dreamed of
nothing but goodwill?
Wouldn't we be ecstatic
if we could take those angels shopping,
or trim the tree, or have them hold our hands
and dance through our houses decorating?
And oh, how glorious it would be
to sit in church next to an angel
and sing our hark-the-heralds!
What an Advent that would be!
What Christmas spirit we could have!
An angel-filled Advent has so many possibilities!**

**But in lieu of that,
perhaps we can give thanks
for the good earthy joys we have been given
and for the earthy "angels" that we know
who do such a good job of filling
our Advent with alleluias!**

Let us whole-heartedly sing with the angels while we still have time on this earth to joyfully do so. We don't know the day or the time when our perspective will change and we will find ourselves spending the rest of eternity singing right alongside the heavenly host.

Benediction: In the wrapping up of this Advent season, the season of waiting and pondering the coming of God in Christ, let us in our own hearts dare to believe the impossible by surrendering ourselves to God. And like Mary, may we courageously cooperate with God's creative power in us and through us for the healing of the world around us.

**May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you now and forever more.
Amen**



**Rev. Dr. Cindy Alloway
Presbyterian Church of the Roses
2500 Patio Court
Santa Rosa, CA 95405
December 20, 2015**