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Messengers from God **Luke 2: 8-14; Hebrews 13:2**

I have only seen one angel in my life, and he appeared in the parking lot of an Atlanta gas station on a summer evening, while I was waiting to meet someone who would become one of my best friends. I was standing with a mutual acquaintance of ours who assured me that when this guy came, he would be driving a green Vega. As if on cue, a green Vega came screeching into the parking lot, and a guy popped out of the car. "There's Matt now," my friend observed, "and he looks mad." Immediately thereafter a truck screeched into the parking lot, too, and out of it jumped two guys -- and they looked angry, too. Instinctively, I started moving toward the gas station attendant, but much to my surprise, one of these two latter belligerents came straight my way, saying, "C'mon, let's fight!" (That's Georgian for "Hello.") I tried stepping around this fellow, but he cut me off, brandishing his fists, and repeating, "C'mon, let's fight!" I could envision the headlines, "Divinity student arrested in gas station brawl," not the sort of thing you want on your resume, but this guy didn't seem to be giving me any options. The other fellow seemed determined to mix it up with my friend beside me. Suddenly an angel appeared -- a big angel, six foot four or so, 270 pounds, wingless, but bearded, with a beer in one hand and wielding in the other a sword of the Lord that looked suspiciously like a tire tool. "You boys want to fight?" he growled in a drawling bass. "I'll fight. But you leave them boys alone." With that he gave the guy bothering me a hearty whack in the ribs with his sword of the Lord, which didn't seem like a very angelic thing to do, and yet, I tell you, it wrought an instant conversion: "We don't want no trouble, we don't want know trouble," the two guys said in unison, backing up. Within seconds they were in their truck and driving away. "We'll be back," one of them yelled out the window, but that was just for show. They quickly sped away. We tried to buy our deliverer a six-pack . . . but being an angel he refused.

Ah, you might say, 'Dr. Kremer, your angel couldn't have been an angel; he was wearing no halo.' But the word 'angel' comes from the Greek 'angelos,' which simply means 'messenger.' An angel is a messenger from God. 'Ah, but Dr. Kremer, this angel you saw seemed to be a rather violent individual who relished conflict.' Well, the angel preparing to kill Baalam for traveling to aid the enemies of God's people could hardly be considered cute and cuddly. Yet he was angelic. You have to let angels define themselves. When Baalam had sense enough to recognize his angel, he had sense enough not to mess with him. Yet the Scriptures are perfectly clear that this violent guardian of the road was an angel sent from God. Ah, you say, 'Dr. Kremer, I'm sure if I saw angels I would recognize them.' Oh, really? Jacob held an all-night wrestling match with an angel and didn't know it until his opponent threw his thigh out of joint -- only then did he realize he was up against someone special. Abraham and Sarah saw three guys broiling in the hot Palestinian sun and invited them in for tea, a very Bedouin thing to do. The next thing you know these three men turned out to be angels, messengers from God, who told them that old Sarah would birth the child who would start the story of the people of God. Angels in the Bible and in real life often come disguised, which is why the writer of Hebrews notes, "Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for thereby some have entertained angels unawares."

'Ah, Dr. Kremer, you at least have to admit that angels are more than flesh and blood.' Not necessarily. The world "angel" can refer to anyone who conveys God's grace, judgment, mercy and deliverance. Most of the Biblical angels are incorporeal, I grant you, but the prophet Hosea was a flesh-and-blood human being, and he was referred to as an "angel." The prophet we call "Malachi," was surely not named "Malachi." The name refers instead to his mission, based on the Hebrew word "malach," "messenger," "emissary," "envoy" – angel. Sometimes angels are heavenly messengers from God. Sometimes they are from around the corner. You might find a few more angels in your life if you weren't always looking for wings.

Angels don't care whether we believe in them or not. They just show up in our lives occasionally to deliver us from evil and communicate a sense of God's grace. They might be purely spiritual creatures, or they might be as human as you and me. You might recognize them instantly, or live in their company for hours and not realize who or what they are. They might be sweet, or they might be scary. All we know for sure is that they serve God as pure messengers, agents of deliverance. They may bring judgment, they may bring joy, but they always serve as God's pure servants. As our society becomes more impersonal, how interesting it is that more people seem to be developing an awareness of and affinity for angels. The more scientific and rationalistic we seem to be, the more open we seem to be to visits from the mysterious that communicate that God is interested in our lives, that God is willing to provide messengers to guide us and direct us and lead us toward blessing.

One thing is certain, when the messengers of God come into your life, they carbonate it. God's messengers stir things up. God's messengers alert you to the truth that God is not going to be confined to the strictures of your expectations, that God is not going to be contained within your conventional definitions. God's messengers alert us to the fact that God is doing something new – and, equally important, God may be calling you to do something new, too. Of course the people of Jesus' day believed strongly in the reality of angels. Yet their attitude toward them seems much like ours toward flying saucers. You might say that UFOs exist, but if one appeared in your back yard, I'll bet you'd be pretty darn scared. People in the Biblical era believed in angels, they just never expected to meet one. That's why when they saw one, they pretty much reacted the way we would: in short, they freaked out. Zechariah was doing his priestly duties and Poof! there's an angel. The first thing the angel has to say is, "Don't be afraid!" There's a little Jewish girl named Mary, tending to her knitting, and Poof! and angel appears; the first thing the angel has to say is, "Don't be afraid!" When the shepherds are on the hillside tending their sheep, Poof! an angel of the Lord appears, and though he brings news of "great joy and good tidings," the first thing the angel has to say is, "Don't be afraid!" Angels carbonate your life. They scare you! God's messengers tend to disturb our equilibrium. God's messengers announce that God is doing something new – and God wants you to do something new, too. The angel says to Zechariah, "I want you and your wife to nurture the child who will prepare the way for the Lord." The angel says to that young Jewish woman, "I want you to bear the Christ." The angel says to the shepherds, "I want you to become a positive, powerful evangelical force." These realities lead us to ask: what sort of message of change is the messenger of God trying to call

us to embrace? What sort of new thing is God's messenger calling us to undertake?

Advent is not only about God's coming. It is just as much about our becoming.

Advent is not only about God's acting; *it is equally much about humanity's reacting.*

Advent is not just about God's giving a gift to earth; it is equally about humanity's *appropriation* of the gift in the form of transformation. It is about God's giving and humanity's changing.

This is the interplay of Advent.

Christmas is about God's being a giving God and about our becoming more like the God who created us.

The angels of God, whether they appear in winged or unwinged form, deliver the message,

You can become more than you seem.

I came across the story of a Texan named Pritchey Smith, who characterized his upbringing as "white trash."

He was poor, rural and backward, but exceptionally bright and was accepted to the University of Texas in 1959, where he met the first black person he had ever attended school with, a guy named TJ.

TJ invited Pritchey to come drink coffee with him under a tree outside their classroom, and Pritchey thought that drinking coffee was something a college student ought to do even if he didn't drink coffee, so he did. He and TJ became friends. He was aware that TJ was amazingly articulate, extremely well-educated and well-spoken, and that his ambition in life was to become a great teacher, which astonished Pritchey, for Pritchey had never heard anyone express the grand ambition of becoming a great teacher.

One Friday night Pritchey was walking down the main social drag in town and passed the Longhorn Theatre, where he noticed two parallel lines of people stretching down the block, waiting to buy tickets.

One line was made of white people, the other of black people.

Suddenly Pritchey heard TJ calling out his name. "Come join us, Pritchey." Pritchey asked what TJ was doing and he said, "We're trying to integrate this theatre, fool. You see, we stand in line in tandem, black and white, and tie up the line so that people who really want to see the movie give up and go home . . .

When we get to the ticket window, my white partner asks if he and I can buy a ticket.

Of course the ticket seller always says no and we go back to the end of the line and start over.

It's kind of a boycott. The theatre owner is either going to integrate the theatre or go broke."

Pritchey had never imagined himself performing an act of civil disobedience,

never imagined himself challenging the social order, even though he knew it was unjust.

Pritchey went home, keeping his distance from TJ but pondering some words of TJ in his heart:

"Pritchey, if you are not in this line, you are in the wrong line."

Pritchey thought on those words a long time, "If you are not in this line, you are in the wrong line,"

and then he joined the line himself. In fact, he was in the line the night police waded in with nightsticks, brutalizing the crowd without provocation.

Pritchey realized that those police cared more about preserving an unjust social order than they did protecting protestors who were exercising their right to self-expression.

On the day they graduated, TJ said to Pritchey, "Smith, you're OK for a white boy. You're gonna be alright." As TJ walked away, Pritchey said, "I remember feeling like something in the world had changed . . .

I was not ever going to be the same again, like maybe I knew for the first time that people have a choice.

They can stand in the wrong line. Or they can stand in the right line."

Pritchey and TJ never saw each other again.

Pritchey Smith went on to found the National Association for Multicultural Education

and was a lifelong advocate of racial equality. TJ was drafted and was killed in Vietnam.

Years later, Pritchey Smith found the name of Thomas Jefferson Johnson etched on the wall at the

Vietnam Monument in Washington. Running his fingers across the name, Pritchey Smith said through tears, "TJ, indeed, you became a great teacher. You became a great teacher."
Drinking coffee with a black kid under a tree on a college campus allowed Pritchey Smith to entertain an angel unawares.
His messenger of God put him in the right line – and called him to the right life.
No messenger of God can do more.

The messenger of God who appears to Zechariah says, "Get in the right line!"
The messenger of God who appears to Mary says, "Get in the right line!"
The messenger of God who appears to those shepherds says,
"Get in the right line and become a part of the ongoing story of the Christ."
The messengers of God who appear in our lives, winged or unwinged, deliver TJ's message,
"Get in the right line!"
For if you are not in the story of Christ, you are not a part of the right line.
The story of Christ is one of redemption, transformation, forgiveness, acceptance, reconciliation and joy.
If you look at the Advent text carefully, messengers from God leap out at you from everywhere.
Everyone in the Christmas story seems surrounded by angels. Perhaps we all are.
May we have eyes to see the messengers of God who are in our lives.
And who knows?
In the right moment, with the right openness to God,
you might just be an angel yourself.

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