

"The Angels Candle"

Luke 2:9-14

December 23,2012

4th Sunday in Advent

Consider the plight of the 4th candle in our Advent wreath. This poor candle patiently waits while its brother candles get to burn throughout Advent. Finally, it has its turn and burns only one Sunday. After that, none of the Advent candles are lit again. In a few days, in our Christmas services, only the Christ candle is lit. Yet, despite being overlooked, this candle carries the most powerful symbol. After candles emphasizing prophecy, the little town of Bethlehem, and sinful shepherds, the 4th candle symbolizes those powerful heavenly figures called angels.

Angels have been very popular in our culture today. You see them everywhere in pictures, stained glass windows, jewelry and Christmas decorations. What does an angel look like? When we see angels in Christmas programs, they are always so cute - usually white robed little girls with wings and a halo. But an angel is a spirit. This means an angel has no body, is neither male nor female, does not need wings to get around, and is only seen when God deems it necessary.

Why do angels exist? God created angels to serve Him. He sent angels to help Jesus while He was on earth. After Satan tempted Jesus for 40 days in the desert and He was weak, angels came and ministered to Him. When Jesus was praying in the Garden of Gethsemane before His crucifixion, He became very weak. An angel came and strengthened Him. God has even sent angels to carry out His judgment or to fight battles for Israel.

However, angels do more than serve God. According to the book of Hebrews, "Are not all angels ministering spirits sent to serve those who will inherit salvation?" (Heb. 1:14) God sends angels to serve His people. Each of us may have a "guardian angel". Scripture seems to hint at that. An angel may have helped you and you didn't know that. Angels are wonderful helpers for God.

But angels have a more important job. The word, "*angel*", is Greek for "messenger." The chief job of the angels is to serve as messengers for God. God sends angels to tell people about important

things before they happen. Suppose God sent an angel to tell you an important message. What would you think? How would you react? Would you be afraid? Would you immediately believe the angel? God's people have reacted differently to angelic messages.

God once sent an angel to an old priest named Zechariah. The priest was afraid, but the angel said, "Do not be afraid, Zechariah; your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you are to give him the name John. He will be a joy and delight to you, and many will rejoice because of his birth, for he will be great in the sight of the Lord." That boy spoken of by the angel would eventually become John the Baptist, the forerunner of Christ. However, Zechariah doubted the message of the angel because he and his wife were too old to have children. God punished him for his disbelief. He would not be able to talk until the baby was born. God's promise came true, *despite* the unbelief of Zechariah. Those two old people did have a boy and did name him John. The angel's message was true.

God sent an angel to a young virgin girl named Mary. Mary was afraid. The angel said, "Do not be afraid, Mary, you have found favor with God. You will be with child and give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever; his kingdom will never end." This was difficult to believe because Mary was not yet married and was still a virgin. Yet, while Mary asked *how* this would happen, she did not doubt or disbelieve. Mary believed the angel and accepted the message.

In our lesson, angels come again, this time because the angel's message to Mary had come true. God wanted to let some shepherds know this so He sent an angel to them. When the angel appeared, the shepherds are very afraid. But the angel says, "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you;" The angel then explains to them who that Savior is. The Savior is not merely an ordinary man. The angel says, "He is Christ the Lord." (God and man) Finally, the angel explains how to find the

new Savior, "This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger." The shepherds believed this good news and ran to Bethlehem to find the baby Jesus, as we read last Wednesday.

Now, maybe you are thinking, "Those shepherds sure were lucky. The angels came to them and announced that Good News. I wish an angel would come and bring a message to me." If that is your wish, it will be granted. Angels will come and will come to bring a message for all of us from God. When it is time for this world to end, Jesus will come to judge all people. The angels will accompany Jesus. The Scripture says, "For the Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be with the Lord forever. " The other angels will gather all people together before Jesus Christ for judgment. God will allow His holy people to enter into heaven for life everlasting. Other people - many - will enter the flames of hell for everlasting punishment.

Are you ready for *that* angelic proclamation? Are you ready for Jesus to come again and judge your lives, thoughts, and actions? Do you measure up to His standards -- holiness and perfection? That's very hard. Consider your lives - your thoughts and actions. Are you perfect? Have you never sinned? Never lied, cheated, or gossiped about another person? Never felt jealous, angry, or hated someone? Never hit or hurt another person? Never strayed away from God and His church? If we are honest and examine our lives, then we see that we are far from perfect. If God only accepts holy people into heaven, how could we possibly be prepared for that? How can we be ready for the angelic announcement of the end of the world?

We can be ready for that second angelic announcement by believing the first angelic announcement in our text for today. These angels came, not with a message of judgment and condemnation, but a message of hope and deliverance "good news of great joy that will be for all the

people." Why? A Savior, not a Judge, had been born. This was Someone who would deliver us from our present state of evil and the future wrath of God by taking our sins upon Himself and making us thereby holy in God's eyes. Who is that? The Savior is Christ, the Lord. Jesus Himself man and God came down from heaven to free us from our sin and prepare us for the angel's call on the Last Day.

We are celebrating His birth now, but you know that this is only the beginning of the salvation process. The Babe of Bethlehem grew up and accomplished everything to free us from our sin. He died on the cross of Calvary as the punishment for our sins. He rose from the dead as verification of that fact. When you trust in Jesus Christ, your sins are forgiven. When your sins are forgiven, that means they are gone. As the Psalmist says, "as far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us." (Ps. 103:12) When your sins are gone, that means that, in God's sight, you are holy before Him. When you are considered to be holy by God Himself, then you are ready for the angelic summons.

With this having all been accomplished already, you are now free to live lives of readiness and expectation as you wait for that angelic message, not disbelief and fear like the shepherds in our text when they experienced their angelic message. Live ready by not allowing sin and Satan trap you into living in selfishness and sin. Abandon those sins and selfish way of living, not in order to become God's people, but because you are already God's holy people through faith in Jesus Christ.. Let God's Holy Spirit transform your lives through the abiding effect of your baptism and the continual strength of the Lord's Supper so that, as the Bible says, you "no longer live for [yourselves] but for him who died for [you] and was raised again." [2 Cor. 5:15]

Do that by loving and serving Him here in our church and by loving and serving each other every day of your life. As we soon begin a new year in 2013, may it be as a strong Christian congregation for our Lord Jesus Christ. Instead of focusing our attention solely on problems or deficiencies that we may have, as the shepherds must have been doing on that first Christmas night as they sat cold, hungry, and alone in the field, let us focus our attention on the message that they

heard and which we have heard and come to believe -- "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord." Let us reach out with that message to each other, to our brothers and sisters in Christ who do not join us here regularly, and to those who have not yet heard or believed this Good News.

As we draw to the close of another Advent season, remember the meaning of the 4th blue candle - the Angels Candle. Remember who angels are and what they have done and will do. They are messengers and, as they came long ago with the message of salvation, so they will come with a message of judgment. That may seem scary, but it does not have to be for you. Because we have heard and believed the Christmas angels, we are ready for the End Time angels to come. In fact, we welcome them. So, don't live in fear. Live in excitement, anticipation, and readiness. As Jesus was born to save us from our sin with all of His angels proclaiming that glorious news, so He will come again, with all of His angels accompanying Him, to bring us to our heavenly home. And you will be ready. Amen.