

“Angels”

Matthew 1.18-25

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This is one of those passages in the Bible that is so familiar – we’ve heard this story every year since we were babies – that it’s hard to grasp just how *radically significant* this moment was. An angel tells Joseph in a dream what his fiancée’s pregnancy *really* means. The Holy Spirit has caused Mary to become pregnant, and now Joseph had a choice to make – whether or not to stick with his pregnant (and apparently unfaithful) fiancée. He’s thinking that there’s some other man in the picture, someone who has been intimate with Mary in ways that he has not. She hasn’t, but – as far as Joseph can tell – the evidence suggests otherwise. He’s a good man, a righteous man, and he thinks the best way forward – for Mary’s sake – would be to call off their engagement. If he had gone through with that plan, then I wonder who would have been there to help Mary and Jesus escape to Egypt after Herod started killing babies, and how Jesus’ life and ministry might have been different if he hadn’t grown up with a father-figure in his life. But, because of the angel, Joseph chose *not* to call off the engagement.

I want to talk about angels today.

There’s a story that’s *missing* at the beginning of the Bible. We read in Genesis about how God created light and separated it from darkness, how God created this majestic world in all its splendid beauty, how God created plants and trees and vegetation, how God created the birds in the air and the fish in the sea and the beasts on the land, and how God created humanity as the crowning pinnacle of it all. But there’s a story that’s missing: the story that tells where the angels came from.

The Bible is full of angels. There are hundreds references to angels, all the way from Genesis to Revelation. But we’re not told where these celestial beings come from. They’re just . . . *there*, as if no explanation is necessary. Later on we get some hints: Psalm 148 and Colossians 1 both suggest angels are *created by God*, either in the beginning or sometime before the foundation of the earth. Hebrews 2 indicates that they are of a higher order than we are; 2 Peter 2 says that they are greater in power and might than we are. They are not omniscient – Jesus tells us in Matthew 24 that there are things the Father knows that they do not – nor are they omnipresent, for they are said to go from place to place (as in Daniel 9). The writer of Hebrews calls them “spirits” (Hebrews 1:14). In Mark 12 Jesus tells us that angels do not marry; in Luke 20 he tells us that they do not die. We are never given a full systematic

account of all the attributes of angels, but the consistent picture is that they are some kind of higher beings in the cosmos that God created. We are a “little lower” than angels, yet Colossians 2 and Revelation 22 remind us that it is not appropriate for us to worship them.

I know that some of us in the modern world have a hard time accepting the concept that angels might actually be *real*. Some people are adamant: if I can't see it, if I can't touch it, if I haven't experienced it firsthand, it must not really be true. In this post-Enlightenment world there is a tendency to reduce everything to only that which can be scientifically proven. If we can't *prove* that angels are real, then some would say *they must not exist*. There have even been a rather significant number of biblical scholars who have suggested that any of the so-called “mythological” elements in the Bible are merely metaphors. That notion has done a lot of damage to the Christian faith, and to a certain extent we're still dealing with that line of thinking in some parts of the church. The Bible never sets out to *prove* the existence of angels, nor does it offer any clear explanation of how or why God brought them into being – it just *presumes that they exist*. I think we would be very unwise to just *dismiss* angels out of hand. Jesus himself believed in the existence of angels; he specifically mentions them several dozen times in the gospels, interspersed throughout his teachings. Of course, if the testimony of the gospels is worth anything, Jesus had personal, firsthand experience with angels – because, after his 40 days of trial in the wilderness, it was *angels* that God sent to take care of him.

So I would like to encourage you to accept the notion that angels really did exist. Really *do* exist. I'm not talking about cute little figurines of beings with adorable child-like faces and halos and wings, strumming harps – I'm talking about the *heavenly host*. God is referred to as the “Lord of hosts” some 240 times in the Bible. That phrase is sometimes rendered as “Lord of heavenly forces,” but what it really means is “Lord of *heavenly armies*.” These guys are ready to *fight* – ready to fight the cosmic powers of darkness, as needed and as directed by God. The commander of those heavenly armies appeared to Joshua before the battle of Jericho (Joshua 5). But why would angels need to *fight*?

There's another story that the Bible doesn't tell us clearly. There are tantalizing hints – in Ezekiel 28, in 2 Peter 2, in Jude 6, in Revelation 12, in several other places – that something went *wrong* in the heavenly realm. Some of the angels God had created rebelled, fell from grace, were cast out of God's realm, and having been waging *war* in the spiritual realm, against God, against light, against truth, against goodness, against holiness. Those passages, and others like them, help us to understand why there is so much suffering and evil and sin and death on this earth – why there's child abuse and domestic violence, why there's theft and murder and adultery, why there's jealousy and envy and hatred, why there are mass shootings and acts of terrorism. There are spiritual battles going on all around us, and *within* us – and sometimes the spiritual forces of darkness gain the upper hand for a while, creating carnage and destruction, marring and tarnishing God's beautiful world.

So God relies on his trustworthy angels to do his will, to influence things for good, to hold the powers of darkness at bay. God gives some of these angels special jobs to do. God sent an angel to Abraham just at the fateful moment before the sacrifice of Isaac (Genesis 22), an angel to Elijah to give him sustenance when he was fleeing from Jezebel (1 Kings 19), an angel to deliver Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego from the flames in the fiery furnace (Daniel 3), an angel to deliver Peter from prison (Acts

12), an angel to Paul to reassure him during that great storm in the Mediterranean Sea (Acts 27), and numerous other angels to a wide variety of other people in an array of different situations. Clearly, there are certain tasks that God delegates to angels to perform – tasks that save God’s people, tasks that advance God’s plan for the redemption of humanity, tasks that promote the good news. So in the New Testament, in Luke’s gospel, we hear about the angel Gabriel’s visit to Zechariah, announcing the impending birth of John the Baptist, and Gabriel’s subsequent visit to Mary, announcing the impending birth of Jesus (Luke 1); later we hear of another angel who appears to a group of shepherds, bringing them good news of great joy for all people, and that angel is quickly joined by the whole host of heaven, God’s angel armies (Luke 2).

And then there is *this* visit, *this* angel who delivers an important message to Joseph in a dream.

God is invading this broken and fallen world with the *best* news it has ever heard, or ever *will* hear. *Jesus is coming*. Jesus is coming to redeem this fallen humanity. No, scratch that, it’s not just *humanity*, for the *angels* need God’s saving grace as well. I suspect they’re as tired and weary of this age-old struggle against evil and sin and death as we are. They need Jesus just as much as we do. After his ascension, in the fullness of time, Jesus takes his place at the right hand of God, with all the angels bowing down in humble obedience to him, *including* those that had gone astray. So the angel who visits Joseph has a vested interest in what’s going on. He wants Joseph to make the right choice. He *needs* Joseph to make the right choice. *His* fate hangs in the balance too.

Joseph hears the angel talking to him in his dream and recognizes it for what it is. He doesn’t ignore it; he doesn’t dismiss it. This wasn’t a figment of his imagination; this wasn’t just an ordinary dream; this was the *real deal*. God was communicating to him through an angel. If it could happen to *Joseph* – who, as we talked about last week, was nobody special, with a somewhat questionable pedigree – what makes you think that something like that might not ever happen to *you*? *Has an angel from God been visiting you in your dreams? Have you been ignoring or dismissing it?* God might have an important role for *you* to play in the redemption of this world. But, first, you have to be willing to *listen*. Listen, and *believe* that it might actually be *real*.

Joseph listens. Then, Joseph *acts*. God had told him to do two things: go ahead with the wedding plans, and name the baby “Jesus,” which means, “God saves.” Having accepted the dream as gospel truth, Joseph does as he’s told. Faithful obedience to the Lord his God. In the grand scheme of things, Joseph doesn’t have a *huge* role to play. There are just a couple things God needs him to do. But they’re *important* things. They are necessary pieces in God’s plan of redemption. This story could have had a different outcome. Not everyone does as they’re told, when God tells them to do something. Especially when it’s something out-of-the-ordinary, something *unusual*.

What would happen if God asked you to do something out-of-the-ordinary? Something *really unusual*? Would you do it?

God’s whole plan for the redemption of the cosmos might hinge on your choice.

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