

"Angels We Have Heard on High?"
A Sermon by the Rev. Scott Herr
First Pres., New Canaan, CT – Dec. 24, 2023 (10:00 a.m.)

Please read:
2 Samuel 7:1-11, 16
Luke 1:26-38

Most of us aren't much into mystery. For the most part we're a banking, finance, insurance, matter-of-fact society here in New Canaan. Most of the time, we're trying to take the mystery *out* of life, not put it *in*. We solve the problems of a fluctuating world economy, eliminating the guesswork from investing, or employment, or whatever. Especially in the last couple days before Christmas, we're typically more interested in getting the shopping done than stopping to contemplate any mysteries of life. Sometimes I even feel like I'm doing my best work on a sermon when I take the mysterious otherworldliness out of a biblical passage; make it down-to-earth and applicable to daily life...

So, we're suspicious of this Mary-and-the-angel thing from the start. Most of us, to tell the truth, aren't even interested in it anymore. We've heard it so often, over so many Christmases, that it's only a story, and a story mainly for children.

Even many biblical commentaries denigrate such annunciation texts as “mythological.” We naturally deflate the story. We reduce it to something we can manage, something we can halfway understand with our skeptical, pseudo-scientific secular minds. We have to do this because we are not prepared, in this bottom-line, empirical, no-nonsense world, to receive such news with the wonder and mystery with which it was originally told. Mystery makes a muddle of most people's minds. We're conditioned to avoid it or eradicate it, let alone receive or celebrate it!

Without the mystery of life, though, what is life? What have we become, in our sophistication and cynicism? We speak of the Gospel here, the good news of Jesus Christ coming to save us all. But we cannot really hear the gospel until we hear again the mystery, until we can hear more than the bare story, until the story opens up wells of joy and excitement in our hearts and minds and we are surprised again by God's grace.

I love how Pulitzer-prize winning writer Annie Dillard makes the point rather sharply in her book *Teaching a Stone to Talk*. There is nothing we church people resemble more, she suggests, than a bunch of "cheerful, brainless tourists on a packaged tour of the Absolute. We stand around having coffee with the tour leaders, smiling and joking and making small talk, oblivious of what the Absolute is really about.

"On the whole," she says, "I do not find Christians, outside of the catacombs, sufficiently sensible of conditions. Does anyone have the foggiest idea what sort of power we so

blithely invoke? Or, as I suspect, does no one believe a word of it? The churches are children playing on the floor with their chemistry sets, mixing up a batch of TNT to kill a Sunday morning. It is madness to wear nice dresses and silk ties and jackets; we should all be wearing crash helmets. Ushers should issue life preservers and signal flares; they should lash us to our seats. For the God of all creation may take offense, or the Lord may draw us out to where we can never return."¹

That's dynamite, isn't it? But which of us understands Annie Dillard? She is a poet. Poets are crazy, right? They don't fit into our world any more than the Christmas story does. Angels appearing, immaculate conceptions, stars guiding scholars, and a Savior named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace showing up as a baby in a manger sounds more like poetry than "reality"...

The word angel in the Greek, simply means *messenger*. The angels of Scripture are *messengers of God*. That's why artists portray them as humans with wings. Angels are not gods; they are messengers of God. I believe to move angels onto center stage in our faith is to trivialize the God of our faith. I for one have never seen an angel with wings, but I'm pretty sure I've heard from a messenger of the Lord.

Mary heard from a messenger of the Lord, and she was afraid! And can you blame her? What would your reaction be if you were an unmarried teenager, poor, living in a forgotten, depressed, and oppressed part of the world, and you were greeted one day by a man dressed in white and told that you were going to have a baby? He was not a gynecologist. He was Gabriel, which means "God is my strength."

Luke says Mary was "much perplexed," which is a polite, Bible way of saying that she was scared out of her wits. That's usually the way it is in the bible when angels show up. They are usually a sign something strange, something mysterious, something terrifying and new is about to happen. God is intervening, preparing to change lives. "And guess who is going to help God?" says Gabriel...

As I read this account and hear again Mary's response, I hear my own voice in the words "how can this be..."? However, the message comes, the word of the Lord is often disturbing, disorienting, mysterious. At best, it sounds too good to be true. Indeed, could truth be stranger than fiction? What do you think?

¹ Annie Dillard, *Teaching a Stone to Talk*, pp. 40-41.

As we stand on the threshold of another Christmas in a world where we allow little room for mystery, let alone angels, I invite you to consider two things about Mary's encounter with the angel Gabriel.

First, note that though Gabriel called Mary "favored one," she didn't feel favored at first. Perhaps because Mary knew enough about the real, living God of Israel, she knew that a message from God might be something about which she might be fearful. It would mean a change in her life plans, a change in her relationships; it would mean great blessing and honor, but also great challenge, pain, and grief. This was not a guardian angel come to tell Mary she was going to be safe while crossing the street; the angel came to tell her that she had been chosen by God to change the world through the advent of the Messiah.

Secondly, note how this story of Mary's encounter with the angel ends. After she ponders and questions the word of the Lord to her, Mary says, *"Here I am, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word."*

Mary said, "I'm not sure what all of this means, but nevertheless here I am, ready to be of service to God." Which was a wonderful, faithful thing for Mary to say - that's why the church regards her as the very first of all the disciples, the first person in the gospel to be called by God and to say yes to that call.

Our God comes to us bearing a name, Jesus Christ, wearing a face that is not only compassion, but also vocation. "Follow me," he says to us. Yes, I believe in angels, the messengers of God. Not because life is tough and we all deserve a personal guardian to help us cope, but because even in a short three years here I have seen you, offering yourselves in service to the living God. You received a message from God through a messenger named Gabriel, or Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, or Paul, or Bob, or Jen, or Serena, or Terry, or Wendy, or Mary, or Steph, or someone saying, "God wants to use you to bless the world," by working as a food server, or as a Sunday School teacher, or as a witness for Christ in the corporate world or in a school or at home, or by quietly praying, or faithfully bearing life's many hardships. I believe in God's angels because I've seen so many of you hear God's calling and living a Yes, embodying God's Word.

Sometimes, though, we are afraid of the mystery. Sometimes, we do not receive grace. We do not always see the glory of the Lord in our world full of hostages and countless war dead. We do not always recognize messengers of God, nor do we hear God's word to us. We cannot see always how God is calling to us or working in and through us. We don't bow down and worship the Holy God, and our hearts are filled with inconsequential things.

Is that the way it is with you this Christmas? Is it feeling like it could be just another year of tinsel and tinny carols? If it is, don't you think it's time you backed off from some of your worldly holiday hustle and make room in your heart again for mystery? The poetry of Christmas?

As you're making your last-minute preparations, visitations, travel plans, for feasting and frolicking, stop and look again at the people around you - in the grocery store, in the shops, at the office, and around the table. Remember that God, the Lord of the universe has spoken and changed the world through people just like them. And the message of the Lord they echo is this: "Greetings favored one, the Lord is with you!" Do not be afraid, for you have found favor with the Lord!" "The Holy Spirit will come upon you and the power of the Most High will overshadow you." "Nothing will be impossible with God!"

Christmas is meant to be full of mystery - it's awesome, really. God getting in touch with us. God coming in the flesh for our salvation. There isn't anything in our banking, insurance, finance, matter-of-fact world to compare with it!

So, if by chance this Christmas you should be touched by the mystery of God encroaching upon your life, if by chance you should even encounter an angel - like the ones who greeted the shepherds while they worked the night shift, terrifying them with the message of the Messiah's birth; or like Gabriel who surprised Mary telling her that, even though the world regarded her as insignificant, God was going to enlist her in the salvation of the world; or like the more subtler apparitions of God's messengers sitting all around you - I hope you might be given the grace to respond like Mary: "Lord, I don't know exactly what you want me to do, but I am here, ready to be used in your service..." With that kind of response, we can sing together and mean it, "Angels we have heard on high!"

In the name of the One who is our Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer. Amen.