

FIRST LESSON: Isaiah 9:7  
SECOND LESSON: Luke 1:26-38  
December 17, 2023  
THIRD SUNDAY IN ADVENT

***“Visited by Angels”***  
Sermon © Lisa C Farrell

To my knowledge I have never been visited by an angel, *but would I know if I had?* While angels have appeared to some as powerful winged beings, in other descriptions they do not have wings, and might even look ordinary, with maybe a *little* something different about them. The book of Hebrews says, “Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by this some have entertained angels without knowing it.” (Hebrews 13:2) Abraham encountered angels who appeared to just be men. Zechariah, John the Baptist’s father, had an overwhelming experience with an angel while serving in the Temple who was definitely NOT an ordinary mortal. What we can say is that in all the recorded instances of scripture that describe angels, in not one do they look like the cute little cherubs of popular imagination. Angels are also not people who have gone to heaven, despite the fact that we often say things like “there’s a new angel in heaven.” Angels are a separate order of creation.

Of course, there are many who dismiss the existence of angels altogether. Personally, I think this is a bit arrogant. Just because we can’t see the spiritual realm doesn’t mean that it does not exist. There are forces for spiritual good and spiritual evil in our world. The problem comes when people try to categorize and identify the spiritual realm as if they actually know how it all works. We don’t know. And attempts by Christians who are obsessed with angels or TV and movie producers who see a great way to make money are just fiction. Angels don’t operate by our rules. Neither are they the safe and sentimental beings we have made them out to be. Today we meet Mary, a young woman of maybe only 15 or 16 years, who encountered a real angel.

Mary gets a lot of attention from Roman Catholics, and as a result is practically ignored by Protestants. But Mary was arguably the first Christian. She was called to a prophetic ministry in a very literal sense. Mary brought the Word of God into the world. She was given the incredible responsibility of bearing and raising God’s son.

The angel came to Mary when Elizabeth, the mother of John the Baptist, was in her sixth month. His birth was also miraculous because the couple had been childless for years, and they assumed that they could not have children. We don’t know if Mary was aware of what had taken place with Elizabeth when the angel first came to her and said, “Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you.” We do know that Mary was not thrilled by the encounter and the message. She was “troubled.” Sometimes we get the impression that

this means she just quietly stood there having a few random doubts. But the word in Greek means “agitated” or “acutely distressed.” To put this in the American vernacular, Mary was “freaked out.”

The angel told Mary, “Do not be afraid, Mary; you have found favor with God. You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you are to call him 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 Jacob’s descendants forever; his kingdom will never end.”

This is a mind-boggling amount of information. The angel doesn’t tell Mary how she will conceive this child. Initially she could assume it would be in the natural way with Joseph after they were married. But the promise moves from the natural world to the supernatural very quickly when the angel goes on to say that God will give him the throne of his father David and he will reign over Jacob’s descendants forever. No mere mortal has a kingdom that will never end. So Mary asks the next logical question, “How will this be since I am a virgin?” Much fuss has been made over terminology, but what she said was unambiguous. “How will this be since I have not known a man?”

The angel could have said, “No need for concern! You and Joseph will get married and everything will be fine.” But he didn’t. The angel said, “The Holy Spirit will come on you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God.” As proof that these words could be trusted the angel then went on to say, “Even Elizabeth your relative is going to have a child in her old age, and she who was said to be unable to conceive is in her sixth month. For no word from God will ever fail.”

“No word from God will ever fail,” but could Mary have said “no” to the angel? Yes, she could. God knew that she wouldn’t, but that doesn’t mean that she couldn’t. And saying “Yes” was not a passive thing. Mary’s life would have been far easier if she had said “no”! We have this assumption that to be empowered always means saying “no.” *No, I won’t go there. No, I won’t do that. You can’t make me. No.* We even teach our children that they can say no to adults who ask them to do things that are inappropriate. A little girl recently told Santa that she did not want to sit on his lap, and he commended her for it. But “no” is not the only way to be strong and independent in life. Saying “yes” to God means saying “yes” to endless possibilities. It means saying “yes” to becoming all we were created to be, to being deeply fulfilled and of help to our world. When Mary said “yes” to the angel, she wasn’t being passive. She was being incredibly bold and courageous.

In most cases when God guides us, God does not send angels. The birth of God’s son was different. There are numerous angels in the story of Christ’s birth, beginning with the birth of his cousin, John the Baptist. An angel appeared to Zechariah, the father of John the Baptist in the Temple. We might expect an angel in such a holy place. When the angel appeared to Mary, it was in the tiny town of Nazareth to a young girl of no status, not a place we would expect angels at all. Despite his terror Zechariah asked for a sign. The sign he got was that he was struck dumb until John was born. Mary was just as afraid as Zechariah, but she did not ask for a sign, she asked for an explanation. Angels spoke to Joseph in a dream telling him not to be afraid to take Mary as

his wife, explaining that the child came from God. And a whole host of angels came to the shepherds telling them that Jesus had been born.

The word angel just means “messenger,” In this case, a messenger from God. Sometimes in times of crisis people have claimed to have seen or felt angels, often in the form of a presence of calm, love and benevolence. There are stories where people have actually been given directions or guidance. Guideposts tells the story of a waitress who was once walking home late at night and heard someone following her. She grew fearful and walked faster, but no matter how fast she went, she knew she couldn’t outrun whoever was after her. Then she heard a voice say: “Eat the chicken!” There was no one there. She had a bag of leftover chicken from that night, but why eat it now? It was ridiculous! She was running for her life. Still, she opened the bag and the smell of the meat quickly attracted a pair of dogs, and the dogs accompanied her safely home. Do angels ever take the form of dogs who like chicken? I’m not sure but at the very least God uses chicken eating dogs. Was it an angel that told her to eat the chicken? It *was* just the right message, and there *was* no one around.

I have never seen an angel, or heard an angel, at least, not that I know of. But Mary met an angel who gave her the most remarkable news of God’s plan, and Mary said “yes” to that plan. And because of her “yes” Jesus was born, the son of God who came to save us and heal our world. We can also say yes to God’s plan. We may not know exactly what it is, but then Mary wasn’t given detailed instructions either. God unfolds things one day at a time. What God needs from us is what Mary offered, a willing heart that says, “I am the Lord’s servant. May your word to me be fulfilled.” Amen.

Isaiah 9:7

<sup>7</sup> Of the greatness of his government and peace  
there will be no end.  
He will reign on David’s throne  
and over his kingdom,  
establishing and upholding it  
with justice and righteousness  
from that time on and forever.  
The zeal of the Lord Almighty  
will accomplish this.

Luke 1:26-38

<sup>26</sup> In the sixth month of Elizabeth’s pregnancy, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, <sup>27</sup> to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin’s name was Mary. <sup>28</sup> The angel went to her and said, “Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you.”

<sup>29</sup> Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be. <sup>30</sup> But the angel said to her, “Do not be afraid, Mary; you have found favor with God. <sup>31</sup> You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you are

to call him Jesus. <sup>32</sup> 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, <sup>33</sup> and he will reign over Jacob's descendants forever; his kingdom will never end."

<sup>34</sup> "How will this be," Mary asked the angel, "since I am a virgin?"

<sup>35</sup> The angel answered, "The Holy Spirit will come on you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God. <sup>36</sup> Even Elizabeth your relative is going to have a child in her old age, and she who was said to be unable to conceive is in her sixth month. <sup>37</sup> For no word from God will ever fail."

<sup>38</sup> "I am the Lord's servant," Mary answered. "May your word to me be fulfilled." Then the angel left her.