

FIRST LESSON: Judges 6: 11-16
SECOND LESSON: Luke 2: 8-20
December 19, 2021

“Unexpected Angels”
Sermon © Lisa C. Farrell

Angels are very mysterious beings. Fortunately, we have children who have offered us some very important information about them.

- Evidently angels don't eat, but they drink milk from Holy Cows.
- Guardian angels are generally good at science, but they're no help with math. This explains a lot to me.
- It's hard to become an angel. First, you have to go through flight training, and then you have to agree to wear those angel clothes.
- Angels live in cloud houses. These are made by God and His son, who is a really good carpenter.
- Bad news for us—when it gets cold outside, angels fly south for the winter.
- And finally, especially relevant this time of year, the two most important angels are named Hark and Harold.

An angel of the Lord came to a very unlikely hero named Gideon and said, “The Lord is with you, mighty warrior.” Gideon was threshing wheat in a winepress hiding from the Midianites. He was not exactly “mighty warrior” material. And he didn't respond with much grace either. In fact, he was downright sarcastic, saying, “Pardon me, my lord, but if the Lord is with us, why has all this happened to us?” Gideon explained to the angel that he was an insignificant man from an insignificant tribe. It did not get him off the hook. The Lord sent an angel to him. The Lord meant business.

Shepherds also had no status to speak of. We have a very romanticized view of shepherds. But real first century shepherds were very different from the version in our pristine nativity scenes. By the time of Jesus shepherds no longer had much in the way of status or reputation. Most shepherds were not the owners of the sheep. They were hired hands, and it wasn't a job many people wanted. Shepherding was lonely work, with a lot of the year spent in the wilderness. Those attracted to such work were often people who *needed* to get out of town and lay low for awhile. Even if they were innocent of any crime it was generally assumed that shepherds were thieves, guilty until proven innocent. Shepherding also made it impossible to fully keep the law with all of its hand-washing and dietary and ritual obligations, so shepherds existed in a sort of “permanently unclean” state according to the legalists of the day. But God sent angels to bring the glorious revelation of Jesus' birth *to shepherds*. Why?

Why did God send an angel to *Gideon* of all people?

It seems God specializes in sending unexpected angels to unlikely people.

The shepherds were watching their flocks by night. The only time they kept this kind of watch was during lambing, which means that Jesus was born in the Spring. I know, I just ruined something else about Christmas for you! Sorry. The Church chose December 25th because no one actually knew when Jesus was born and it conveniently replaced all the pagan holidays celebrating the solstice, which before the calendar was adjusted, was December 25th. In case you ever wondered why we decorate with greens, Christmas trees, gift giving, holly and mistletoe, that's why. A lot of pagan traditions got mixed in. But how appropriate is it that the lamb of God should actually be born during lambing season? Even more significant, the flocks kept outside of Bethlehem were used for the Temple sacrifices.

The shepherds were terrified. This is reasonable. Sheep are noisy at night, but a sky full of angels is something else. The first angel said, "Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger." And then the sky was filled with a great company of angels in the sky praising God. It was blinding. No one could ignore this kind of a call, and as I said last week, because the child was in a manger, they knew it was a peasant home. That meant that they had a fair chance of not being immediately thrown out. But they would have had to bring a lot of sheep close to town to do this, *and that must have been interesting!*

God goes about things very differently from us. We would not have had Jesus enter the world in this way. We would not have sent angels to appear to shepherds. But nothing about the birth of Jesus was left to chance, and shepherds were chosen for two reasons. They were chosen first because they were exactly the kind of people Jesus came for. They were on the fringes and had been pushed out. They weren't respectable enough. They didn't have money or looks or stable family backgrounds. They weren't popular. They didn't have it all together. They knew what people thought of them and didn't have any pretensions. We look for people who are not only highly qualified but who look good too! Appearance, polish and education are very important in our society. God looks for people who are unqualified, and makes them qualified. We would have sent angels to the political leaders and scholars. God sent them to shepherds.

But there is a second reason God chose shepherds. Back in David's day shepherds were the owners of the flock and shepherding was considered an honorable vocation. David himself shepherded his flock, even killing lions and bears with his slingshot. A stone thrown at high speed that hits the right spot can be deadly. This is why David knew he could take down Goliath. And Bethlehem was the City of David. Micah 5:1 tells us that out of Bethlehem will come a "ruler of Israel," a ruler like David. Jesus is that one, descended from the line of David, born in Bethlehem. Jesus is the new shepherd king.

On that first Christmas long ago things were far from idyllic. And that is the good news, because a beautiful and spotless nativity has no power to save. Jesus was born in a humble home surrounded by the poor. The news of his birth was proclaimed to shepherds—people with a rich past and an

impoverished present. He was born in the city of David, the shepherd king. And he came to be our shepherd, to rescue us and bring us safely home. Amen.

Judges 6: 11-16

¹¹ The angel of the Lord came and sat down under the oak in Ophrah that belonged to Joash the Abiezrite, where his son Gideon was threshing wheat in a winepress to keep it from the Midianites. ¹² When the angel of the Lord appeared to Gideon, he said, “The Lord is with you, mighty warrior.”

¹³ “Pardon me, my lord,” Gideon replied, “but if the Lord is with us, why has all this happened to us? Where are all his wonders that our ancestors told us about when they said, ‘Did not the Lord bring us up out of Egypt?’ But now the Lord has abandoned us and given us into the hand of Midian.”

¹⁴ The Lord turned to him and said, “Go in the strength you have and save Israel out of Midian’s hand. Am I not sending you?”

¹⁵ “Pardon me, my lord,” Gideon replied, “but how can I save Israel? My clan is the weakest in Manasseh, and I am the least in my family.”

¹⁶ The Lord answered, “I will be with you, and you will strike down all the Midianites, leaving none alive.”

Luke 2: 8-20

⁸ And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. ⁹ An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. ¹⁰ But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. ¹¹ Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord. ¹² This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.”

¹³ Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying,

¹⁴ “Glory to God in the highest heaven,
and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests.”

¹⁵ When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, “Let’s go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about.”

¹⁶ So they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby, who was lying in the manger. ¹⁷ When they had seen him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child, ¹⁸ and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them. ¹⁹ But Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart. ²⁰ The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen, which were just as they had been told.