



Westminster Presbyterian Church

The Rev. Dr. Richard Baker
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Hearing the Angels on High: Our Souls at Christmas Shepherds, Why This Jubilee?

Scripture Lesson: Luke 2:8-15, 20

I am not yet able to know myself, as the Delphic oracle instructs. . . . I want to know whether I am a monster more puffed-up than Typhon or a gentler, simpler creature who shares in a more humble, divine nature.—Socrates, Plato's *Phaedrus*, 230A

Nearly all the wisdom we possess, that is to say, true and sound wisdom, consists of two parts: the knowledge of God and of ourselves.—John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*

Give me yourself, O my God, give yourself to me. . . . This only do I know: that it is not good for me when you are not with me, when you are only outside me. I want you in my very self. All the plenty in the world which is not my God is utter want.—A Prayer of St. Augustine

So how many angels are there? I mean, Richard, if you're going to talk about angels, how many angels are there?

Well, as of now, heavenly census data is not yet available online, but if you go back in time, lots of answers have been proposed.

57. I know, seems like a strange, even arbitrary, answer, but it arises from the time when our earth was believed to be the center of the universe, and the sun, moon, and all the stars all revolved around it in various spheres—57 spheres all told, hence 57 angels as the guardians and movers of each of the spheres. Hence, also the “music of the spheres”—created by the God's harmonization of their various movements.

There was also said to be nine orders of angels, a kind of angelic hierarchy, Seraphim, Cherubim, and so on. Each order has its own unique characteristics, functions and kinds of messages to deliver—because angels are first of all, messengers—God's messengers to us—and always (in the Bible at least) fearsome—terrifying—to behold. But all that still leaves open the question: how many angels are there?

Maybe the best answer is “You can't begin to count”—an answer that seems in line with our Scripture reading today which speaks of “a multitude of the heavenly host.” “Host” being the English translation of Greek and Hebrew words that originally meant “armies” but has come to mean “a great, even uncountable, number,” as in “When I saw her, a whole host of memories came flooding in upon me.” So when the Bible speaks of God as “The Lord of Hosts” (a phrase you'll hear tonight in Handel's *Messiah*), it means that God is ruler of all the armies of angels in heaven (“the whole heavenly host”), and by extension, ruler of everything in the universe, everything in heaven *and* on earth—all the sands on the earth and all the stars in the sky—everything.

So how many angels are there? “You can't begin to count.”

But that answer has at least two different senses. One is that there are too many for us to count, like the grains of sand on the earth, or the stars in the sky. The number of these is simply beyond our comprehension—although we could try to extrapolate and approximate: Take the the average size of a grain of

sand, the number of grains in a teaspoon, and then multiply by the number of teaspoons in all the beaches and deserts on Earth, and you get 7.5×10 to the 18th power grains of sand. More or less.

But the second sense is that you can't begin to count, because they are *in principle* uncountable, unquantifiable. How much beauty, love or light is there in the universe? Can you really put a number on it? Oh, I suppose you could try: "Oh, my love . . . take the average of my love for you in a moment, the number of moments in eternity, and multiply by the metric tons of your beauty . . . and I love you 7.5×10 to the 18th power. More or less." Somehow that, besides being comically bad poetry, seems to miss what matters most, miss the experience, miss the thing itself, the beauty and the love. So it's in this second category—you can't begin to count it because it is in principle uncountable—that I want to put the angels.

Of course, another answer to the question, *how many angels are there?*, presents itself to our minds, especially to our modern minds: zero. There are no angels at all; they don't exist; they are simply vestiges, fossilized images, left over from an older, more naive, less scientific, now outdated, way of understanding the world—as when we speak of the sun or the stars moving across the sky during the course of the day or the year—they don't really move, you know. So also with angels: really, they don't really exist at all.

I think that answer mistaken, understandable in our day and age, but mistaken for that very reason—and to explain that, I need to speak about the human soul, especially our souls at Christmas.

In speaking of the human soul, I recognize that there's a whole host of words and phrases in English—*self, mind, heart, spirit, my true self, my inner being, who I really am*—that are all getting (sort of) at the same thing (more or less) with overlapping and complementary meanings, but also with very different connotations and implications. And we could discuss all of them—including their analogues in the Bible, in Hebrew, Greek, and in other languages—which, while fun, would take awhile.

So instead, this morning, in speaking of the human soul, I want to speak simply of our general sense of ourselves (however indistinct it may be), especially in relation to the world and God.

When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers,
the moon and the stars that you have established;
what are human beings that you are mindful of them,
mortals that you care for them?
Yet you have made them a little lower than the angels . . .

What are human beings that you, O Lord, ruler of all, are mindful of them? That's the question I want to ask. And the truth is that there are pressures, in our day and age, that make it more difficult to ask and answer that question in a way that is mindful—mindful of both God and ourselves.

In the year 2000, James Kugel, at that time Professor of Hebrew Bible and Literature at Harvard University, went to the doctor for his annual physical exam. He left, an hour and a half later, having been told that he had [quote] "a pretty serious case of cancer." The prognosis was not good: two years, maybe three or four, if he was lucky . . . and with all the new research and drugs coming available . . . well, who knows?

"It was as if the background music suddenly stopped." That's the way Kugel describes his state of mind at that time. You know, in movies and TV shows, there's almost always background music, so much so that you never really notice it . . . until . . . until it stops and then it's strangely . . . quiet and still. Something's weird here. Kugel puts it this way:

It had always been there, the background music, the music of daily life that's constantly going, the music of infinite time and possibilities; and now suddenly it was gone, replaced by nothing, just silence. There you are, one little person, sitting in the late-summer sun, with only a few things left to do.

And yet this state of mind—when the background music stops—does lend itself to our being more mindful of God. Kugel recounts a conversation he had many years earlier:

The lesson was brought home to me some years ago when I heard an Iraqi Jew describe his first few years in the West after fleeing Baghdad in the 1950s. “Back in Iraq,” he said, “all of us, knew one thing: ‘God is very big, and man is very little’. Once, some years after I had left Baghdad for the West, I went one evening to hear a famous theologian speak. I hoped that he would give me some piece of wisdom. But the more he spoke, the more his ideas and mine swirled around together in my head, and the more upset I became. I could not get out of my mind this new thought: ‘Man is very big, and God is very far away’.”

(By the way, Kugel’s story ends happily: he is still alive and with us—and writing books—today.) But his point is this: Two different ways of understanding ourselves in relation to the world and God: (1) God is very big and man is very little, and (2) Man is very big, and God is very far away.

Charles Taylor, a historian and philosopher, makes a similar point when he contrasts a more porous or semi-permeable sense of the human self (characteristic of earlier, pre-modern times) with a buffered, or enclosed sense of self (characteristic of our day and age, at least in modern, developed and by and large, secular societies.)

The porous, semi-permeable self its just that—more open to outside influences and forces; whereas the buffered self has a sense of being autonomous and separated from the world.

For the semi-permeable self, think of a person’s being possessed or taken over by something, whether God or a demonic power, or even the muse who would inspire the poet or creative artist—phenomena we do associate with an earlier day and age. For the buffered self, think of the way we conceive of ourselves as in charge of ourselves and in control of our world, distinct and separate from others and their worlds.

Neither understanding of the self is all good or bad: I for one am not willing to give up our modern sense of individual privacy or our recognition of individual rights. And neither is absolute: our modern selves can be, and certainly are, still subject to outside influences, at times for better, and at times for worse: think of the way music can possess us, the way emotions can be contagious, the shared excitement of a rock concert or a basketball game, or the way the mere sight of someone can bring a whole host of memories flooding in upon you; or for worse, think of mob psychology and mob violence. But however much they may exist side by side in our experience, these two different senses of self in relation to the world are different (Taylor argues that the modern, buffered self is a key constituent of our living in “a secular age”), and they have different tendencies inherent within them.

Inherent in the modern, buffered sense of self is the tendency to think . . . to think that, well, that Man is very big, and God is very far away; hence the background music we hear most of the time seems to be “the music of infinite time and possibilities,” or as Kugel puts it elsewhere, “that music surrounds us like a great, full-body halo [like those auras of light that the Renaissance painters painted around, Jesus, Mary, or the angels] into which we extend—ourselves.” But every once in a while, this extended (over-extended?) sense of ourselves suddenly contracts—like one of those metal tape measures carpenters use, snapping back into its plastic case—and there we are, one little person, sitting in the late-summer sun.

And it doesn’t have to be the prospect of death that snaps us back into ourselves. Again, Kugel:

Long before the doctors’ diagnosis, that background music had stopped for me every once in a while—as I’m sure it does for everyone, at least for a minute or two. Sometimes in the oddest places, for no reason at all: when you are just sitting on some park bench somewhere; or at a wedding, while everyone else is dancing and jumping around; or else one day standing in your backyard, as the sun streams down through the trees to land in a little dazzling square patch right in front of you. Then everything shimmers for a while and you are completely there, compact and contained.

Angels, we have heard on high, singing sweetly o’er the plains . . .

Now I have to tell you that part of me—the part of me that has always wanted to end a sermon by dropping the mic (although I don’t know how I would do it, with this headset) —that part of me wants to end this sermon

right here, and leave it to you to put it all together. But another part of me, that teacher part of me that can never say anything just once for fear that someone will miss my point, wants to sum it all up. So here goes:

The human soul is best understood as the interface, the point of contact and communication between God and us. It is—to borrow the word that the medieval theologians used to name the point of communication between otherwise immaterial angels and our material world—our aevum. And as that aevum, as that point of contact and communication, the human soul is, if not porous, at least semi-permeable: it is designed to let certain things—but not other things—enter into it. Most notably, it is designed to let in God—who is the life of the soul. Augustine's prayer (which I put on the front of your bulletins) says as much: "*Give me yourself, O my God, give yourself to me. . . . This only do I know: that it is not good for me when you are not with me, when you are only outside me. I want you in my very self.*" Or to say the same thing another way: Although we exist in space and time, we—our souls—are fitted for eternity.

If you think about it, it makes sense, makes sense of our experience, makes sense of why all the good things we experience—friendship, love, beauty, joy—it's not just that we want these to last forever, it's that, as we experience them and from our experience of them, we believe that they must, *by their very nature*, last forever. Hence, BFF, "best friends forever" (or it's not true friendship); "I will love you forever" (or it's not true love); and "a thing of beauty is a joy forever" (or it's not true beauty, not true joy). And it also makes sense of why all the passing things of this world—all the money, power, status, and adulation—eventually turn to ashes in our mouths. We keep wanting to fill our souls with them, but they will not satisfy. Again Augustine: "*All the plenty in the world which is not my God, is utter want.*"

Our souls are not only fitted for eternity, they will be satisfied with nothing less. But here's the good news: they will be satisfied. That's the message the angels bring to—sing to—the shepherds: God is here—here and now, for us.

Shepherds why this jubilee?

Because the angels on high are proclaiming—singing—to them the good news of great joy for all people: the deepest longings of the human heart, our soul's deepest desires, are coming true: God is coming into our world, coming to us and into us, compact and contained in a young woman's womb, in the city of David, you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger, a Savior, who is Christ, the Lord.

And the angels are singing this to us too—if we can hear them. And if we can't, if we doubt whether the angels even exist, it may be that we, as modern people, have the background music of our lives turned up too loud, drowning the angels out, drowning out even the music of the spheres, as we try to extend ourselves infinitely in time and space (man is very big, and God is very far away) trying to fill that emptiness in our souls. So how many angels are there? Well, how much beauty, love or light is there in the universe? Probably more than 7.5×10 to the 18th power. But really you can't begin to count (or at least you shouldn't try), because to do so is to miss what matters most, miss the experience, miss the thing itself—it is to miss the beauty, the love . . . and the light . . . at the heart of their message.

I don't know when it's going to happen, but I know it will—for you and for me—I know it's going to happen, at least for a minute or two, perhaps in the oddest of places, for no reason at all, maybe even during this Christmas season, despite all its franticness and noise, *it's going to happen*: the background music is going to stop—it may even be Christmas music that makes the background music stop—but whatever—suddenly! it will stop . . . and we'll be snapped back into ourselves. No doubt it will be weird, disconcerting at first—strangely . . . quiet and still . . . but then, everything shimmering, you will be completely there—compact and contained (God is very big, and man is very little)—and so will God . . . be there, as God has always been, closer to us than we are to ourselves. Only then, in that moment, for a minute or two, we will know it. In that moment, in the sound of the thinnest silence, quiet at first, then louder and louder—the shock, the joy—the angels, all of them, a multitude of the heavenly host, singing:

Gloria in excelsis deo.

Christmas is getting close.

Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.