



Westminster Presbyterian Church

The Rev. Dr. Richard Baker
December 24, 2017 Sermon

Hearing the Angels on High: Our Souls at Christmas Light We Can See

Scripture Lesson: Luke 2:8-20; John 1:1-5

Who, if I cried out, would hear me among the angelic orders?
And if one suddenly did take
me to his heart: I would perish from his
stronger existence. For beauty is nothing
but the onset of terror we're still just able to bear,
and we revere it so because it calmly disdains
to destroy us. Every angel is terrifying.
—Rainer Maria Rilke, *The Duino Elegies*

It is not in our power to see, but in God's to appear.—Augustine, *On Seeing God*

Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified.—Luke 2:9

More than 100 years ago, in the winter of 1912, the German poet Rainer Maria Rilke encountered an angel.

It happened on the grounds of the Duino Castle on the Adriatic Sea where he was the guest of one Princess Marie von Thur und Taxis-Hohenloe, who was the heiress of the castle. One morning, Rilke was out walking along the bastions, on a narrow pathway that dropped two hundred feet down to the sea. The wind was up, blowing from the north, but the sun was shining brightly. And then suddenly . . . he saw . . . an angel.

Shortly after the encounter, when he could breathe again, Rilke pulled out his notebook (he always carried one), and wrote down his first thoughts, which first thoughts would eventually become the first lines of the poems he would eventually call *The Duino Elegies*:

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to destroy us. Every angel is terrifying.*

The rest of *The Duino Elegies* took Rilke a little longer. Ten years, in fact. Writing these poems was a fitful process for him—he suffered from severe writer’s block and depression—but whenever he was finally able to write, the angelic terror was never far away:

I wrote in a hurricane of the spirit, receiving signals form cosmic space, the most mysterious . . . the most enigmatic dictation I have ever endured and achieved . . . written down in a single breathless obedience.

It is worth noting that, despite his encounter with the angel, and despite his talk of “breathless obedience,” Rilke was not a man of faith, at least not in any conventional sense. And yet, immediately upon completing *The Elegies* in one, final, three-week frenzy, Rilke, in a letter to his publisher, once again spoke of his “obedience,” this time of his “huge obedience in the spirit”:

*My dear friend,
It is late, and though I can barely manage to hold the pen, after several days of huge obedience in the spirit—you must be told, today, right now, before I try to sleep: I have climbed the mountain! At last! The Elegies are here, they exist. . . .*

Even allowing for the self-dramatizing tendencies of poets (and Rilke had more than his share), not to mention the relief and exhilaration any writer feels having finally finished a manuscript (especially a long-labored-over and much-delayed one)—even allowing for all that, something truly dramatic, something of profound and lasting effect seems to have happened to Rilke at Duino Castle: he encountered an angel. Every angel is terrifying.

And not just for Rilke; for the shepherds, too. “And, lo, an angel of the Lord came before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were **terrified**.” Indeed, every time an angel appears in the Bible, it is, at least at first, terrifying.

Now I realize that “terrifying” is not a word we’re accustomed to use when speaking of angels. “Angelic,” in our dictionaries, is variously defined as “sweet,” “innocent,” and “adorable,” but never as “terrifying.” And in our popular culture, angels are, by and large, benign: they protect us, assist us, answer our prayers, guide and advise us. Hence, Clarence, the angel, earns his wings by reassuring George Bailey (as played by Jimmy Stewart) that it’s really a wonderful life, after all.

And I’m not saying that that’s all wrong; it’s not. (Leave those cute angels on your mantlepieces and Christmas trees—they have their place.) Our popular conception of angels beautifully captures the loving intent of the angels themselves, and even more than that, God’s loving intent in sending them to us, and most especially, God’s loving intent in sending the message that the angels bear. What it misses, however, is the power and the glory—and yes, even the terror—of that loving intent. And to explain that, a little more on angels.

Tradition has it that angels are creatures of light, created by God on the first day of Creation—"Let there be light," God said—and so there was—and so there are—angels. Hence, in Renaissance paintings and elsewhere, angels have haloes—circles of light around their heads, really auras of light around their whole bodies—really, they are all light and nothing but light.

But although angels are made of light, they are still *made*—they are creatures; hence their light—however pure and bright it may be—still does not approach God's light. "God *is* light," the Bible says, "and in him there is no darkness at all." In fact, in the Bible, in the Book of Isaiah, the angels are depicted as using one pair of wings (they have three) to shield their eyes in God's presence, lest they be blinded—lest they be destroyed—by God's light. "See God," the Bible says, "and die."

And as God is to the angels, so the angels are to us. As Rilke puts it, if an angel suddenly did take one of us to his heart, we would perish from his stronger existence. Hence when the angels do appear to us—when they appeared to the shepherds in the fields—they tone their light down, dial it back (so to speak), and even then, it is still almost too much for us to bear; it is still terrifying. And yet as terrifying as it *is*—as terrifying as the glory of the Lord *was* shining around those shepherds—it is nonetheless light *accommodated*, light accommodated *to us*, to our limited human vision.

And as the angels are to us, so also God is to us—only even more so.

In sending angels to us as messengers, God is doing the same thing that the angels are: toning his light down, dialing it back, accommodating us; giving us all the light we can see relative to our own darkness—so that we can bear his presence, if only just barely—so that we don't die.

And as for the message that the angels bear—well, think of it this way: imagine all the power, all the vastness, all the light of the universe—all the atomic particles, all the alpha, beta, gamma and x-rays, all the atoms, all the molecules, all the dust, all the space rocks, all the comets, asteroids, moons, dwarf planets, planets, solar systems, stars, black holes, nebulae, and galaxies, all the life and light of the universe, including our earth's, including our own—and now imagine, if you can, something, someone, far greater than all that, who brought all that power and all that vastness, all that energy, all that life and light into being and who rules and loves it still—imagine that one (if you can). . . brought down into the flame of a single candle.

Or in the words of Madeleine L'Engle:

Power. Greater power than we can imagine. Given up. As God, the Word, became the powerlessness of the unborn child—still unformed, taking up almost no space in the ocean of amniotic fluid, unseeing, unhearing, unknowing. Slowly growing, as any human embryo grows, arms and legs and a head, eyes, mouth, nose . . . slowly swimming into life until the ocean in the womb is no longer large enough, and it is time for birth.

“Do not be afraid,” the angel says to shepherds, “for behold —I bring you good news of great joy for all people.”

God *is* light—the light of the world, the light of all people, the light of the universe, light itself,—light in whom there is no darkness at all. But God is also light *accommodated* to us, light brought down to us, light made visible to us, light we can see.

For unto you is born this day in the city of David, a Savior, who is Christ, the Lord. And let this be a sign unto you: you will find a baby wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.

There, there, lying there in that manger, is the power and the glory of God’s loving intent. There, is the terrible beauty of the Lord.

So in a few minutes, when you see the light—when you see this candle, the Christ candle,—shining in the darkness, and then when you see your own candles, as you begin to raise them and see them shining in the darkness, and then as you look up at them, and see this whole church, all the churches, and all the church—all our faces, and all the faces—when you see them all alive with light . . . let this be a sign unto you: the light shines in the darkness and the darkness did not overcome it; it is Christ our Lord.

Merry Christmas.