



# Westminster Presbyterian Church

The Rev. Dr. Richard Baker -  
December 3, 2017 Sermon

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## Hearing the Angels on High: Our Souls at Christmas The Aevum

Scripture Lessons: Luke 1:11-15a, 18-20

*Without the angels God would not be revealed and perceptible. In the beauty, work, and witness of angels there lies the basis of the fact that the mystery of God can have a place in the earthly realm. To deny the angels is to deny God.—Karl Barth, Church Dogmatics*

“That’s not in the Bible, you know.”

It’s the kind of thing pastors, especially Presbyterian pastors, especially head pastors, say—especially around Christmas. It’s one of the reasons we don’t get invited to many Christmas parties.

That donkey that Mary rode on into Bethlehem?

“That’s not in the Bible, you know.”

That innkeeper who told them there was no room at the inn?

“That’s not in the Bible . . .”

The wise men, the shepherds and the angels *all* gathered round the baby Jesus in the manger *at the same time*?

“That’s not in . . .”

Now angels *are* in the Bible, especially around Christmas—but really from beginning to end: Old Testament and New, from Genesis to Revelation, from the angel closing the gates of Eden with a flaming sword to the angel showing the tree of life ablaze with leaves for the healing of the nations . . . angels most definitely *are* in the Bible.

But **not** as we know them. You’ve probably heard this spiel from preachers before: the word “angel” comes from the Greek word “angelos,” which means “messenger,” and that’s what angels are: messengers who deliver a message from God. And when they do it’s a fearsome thing; the first thing an angel says upon appearing is, “Be not afraid,” which means everybody *is* afraid—*very* afraid (or “sore” afraid, as the old translation has it). Angels are **not** “angelic,” at least not in our sense of the word: they’re not cute or adorable or precious. *That’s* Victorian England; *that’s* the local Christmas pageant; *that’s* not in the . . .

You've probably heard all this before. I can remember the first time I heard it. I must have been in the third grade, sitting next to my mother in church; the pastor was going on like this, and all I could do was look up at my mother in shock and disbelief. I mean, that year, my older sister was playing the angel Gabriel in the Christmas pageant (I was a shepherd) and my mom had made her costume: a white smock with nylon wings held on by scotch tape and safety pins and a tinsel-festooned wire bent into a circle for a halo. But more than that—way more than that—every year, we had an angel on top of our Christmas tree at home. It—she—was made out of the inner sleeve of a paper towel roll, with a white gown made of silk with wings taped on, a little round balsa wood head with painted-on eyes and a little “o” for a mouth, yellow yarn for hair, and (most especially) a halo made from a pipe cleaner spray-painted gold. That angel was the last ornament we put on the Christmas tree every year. And it was my job—as the youngest, it was *my* job: My father would put me on his shoulders—well, the year before, he had lifted me up by the hips—and with great ceremony, and to much applause, I would slide the angel onto the top of the tree. And *then* Christmas could come. If angels like that weren't in the Bible . . . well, no angel on *top* of the tree meant no presents *under* the tree. I looked at my mother in shock and disbelief.

My mother gave me one of these—you know, that gesture with the hand, that says “calm down, don't worry about it, everything will be OK.” Now, I want you to know my mother was a devout and dedicated churchwoman, and like every devout and dedicated churchwoman—or churchman, for that matter—she had long ago learned one very important lesson, namely, not to take what the head pastor said *too* seriously. And she was right. Nobody else did, either. That year we still had the Christmas pageant: Warren Smedley was the innkeeper who said “I'm sorry, we have no rooms,” my sister was the angel Gabriel in full costume, and in the end, all of us—shepherds, wisemen and angels—were *all* gathered round the baby Jesus in the manger *at the same time*—singing, *Hark the Herald Angels Sing!* Have you ever noticed all the angels in all our Christmas carols and hymns?—they're all over the place. (And by the way, did you notice the picture on the front of your church newsletter, *The Chimes*, when it came this past week? In case, you didn't see it: there she is: an angel in white smock with little sneakers peeking out underneath, nylon wings fastened on, and a gold tinsel halo—and she *is* cute, adorable, *and* precious.)

And it's not just in church. In popular culture too—in movies, songs, TV shows, commercials—angels are all over the place. From *It's a Wonderful Life* to *Angels in the Outfield* to *Touched By an Angel*, to *Saving Grace* (although the angel in that show, is most definitely *not* angelic)—angels are all over the place. *Angel Soft* is even the name of a toilet paper for goodness' sake.

And yet for all their ubiquity, I'm not sure we take angels all that seriously. But this hasn't always been the case: for much of church history, especially in the high Middle Ages, from say, the years 1200–1500, angels were taken very seriously: every serious theologian felt the need to address the subject at length. I've studied some of them, and would like nothing more than to tell you about their “angelologies” . . . at length . . . which may be another reason I don't get invited to many Christmas parties. . . .

*How many angels can dance on the head of a pin?*—I know, I know that's what you're thinking. But that's a caricature—a slander, really. No medieval theologian would have asked—ever did ask—that question (it actually comes from a satire centuries later). They believed that angels were invisible, immaterial beings—beyond our world of space and time—and so to ask how much *material* space could be taken up by how many *immaterial* creatures was nonsensical—a category mistake, like asking whether green is slippery, it showed you didn't know what you were talking about. Now a question they did ask was how invisible, immaterial beings, such as angels, could make themselves visible in our material world—Gabriel appearing to Zechariah, for example, and all the other places (in the Bible and elsewhere) where angels appear. And to answer that question, they postulated the *aevum*. The aevum: A-e-v-u-m; it's a Latin word, and it denotes the interface—the point of communication—between the eternal God and our world of space and time.

The aevum. And you're right: that's not in the Bible. But angels as messengers *are* in the Bible, and if they are going to deliver messages from the *eternal* God to us *in time*, there has to be some point of communication, some interface; hence, the aevum; it makes sense.

But let's be careful here: angels are not the true mediators, the ultimate go-betweens, the ultimate reconcilers, between us and God. That's Jesus. To say otherwise would be to lapse into polytheism. But angels can be—and are—the messengers of Jesus:

“I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to bring you this good news.”

But this good news is proclaimed not just to Zechariah, Mary, Joseph, and the shepherds long ago. This good news is proclaimed to us here and now. Yes, the angels are speaking *to us*—have a message *for us*—here and now. That's what I'm going to preach on—that's what I want us to hear—in the days leading up to Christmas and even after Christmas: the angels singing. My goal is not to debunk or deny angels (as Karl Barth said, to deny angels is to deny God); my goal is to honor them, and that includes the angels in our popular culture, as well as those in our Christmas pageants, on our Christmas trees, and in our Christmas songs. And we honor them best by taking them seriously, and that means first by taking their message seriously. Zechariah learned that. So: *Be not afraid*: if you invite me to your Christmas party, I will not smash your glass-spun angel collection, I promise. I will not even look askance at it. But I might want to talk about it.

But to take the message of the angels seriously here and now, we have to first take our *souls* seriously. The human soul—and our having human souls—is another ancient idea that, although ubiquitous in our popular culture, we may not take seriously enough. But we need to. If we are to hear the angels singing on high—we need to. More on this in a later sermon. But for now, this much: the soul too is a kind of aevum: an interface—the point of communication—between the eternal God and us.

And if you want to see what an aeuum looks like—well, look here: here, at the communion table. It too is an interface—a point of communication—between God and us. And it is here that God feeds our souls. This table is an visible sign of an invisible grace, bringing good news, bringing life, to us—a little bit like an angel, although perhaps not as talkative. But then again, maybe it is just as talkative: when you eat this bread, listen—listen for God speaking to your soul; when you take this cup, listen—listen for God speaking to your soul.

And then, after that, sing it! Sing it with the angels, sing it with all your heart, mind, and soul:

People, look east. The time is near  
Of the crowning of the year.  
Angels announce with shouts of mirth  
Christ who brings new life to earth.  
Set every peak and valley humming  
With the word, the Lord is coming.  
*People, look east and sing today:  
Love, the Lord, is on the way.*

It's the first Sunday of Advent. Christmas is on the way. Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.