

December 16, 2018

“Praying through Christmas: Gloria in Excelsis Deo”
Luke 2:14

FCF: Activity of season crowding out priority of prayer
PROPOSITION: (magnet) The appearance of the angels
(anchor) changes the prayers of God’s people.

SCRIPTURE INTRODUCTION:

I’ve been doing an informal survey lately. Here’s what I’ve found. Everyone is busy this time of year. Surprised? And few feel they have time to slow down. With rare exception, few say Christmas is a time to reflect, ponder, meditate, and pray. There’s just way too much to do.

Which makes this quote from Martin Luther all the more striking. Luther, of course, was at the center of the Protestant Reformation. To say he was busy is an understatement. A pastor-theologian, husband and father, author, professor, leader of a movement. This is what he said of his days ([READ quote](#)) “I have so much to do that I shall spend the first three hours in prayer.”

Think about that. It makes me wonder, “Am I really that busy? Or do I allow the good to crowd out the best?” What would help us refocus this Christmas? The birth announcement.

SCRIPTURE READING: [Luke 2:8-20](#) (v.14)

PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION**SERMON INTRODUCTION:**

Wi-Fi is a great thing. Think back to a few years ago when everything was wired. The place of your computer and printer was dictated by a jack in the wall. As portable as your laptop was, it was still tied down to cables. But now you can go anywhere - the cafe, the campus, even your car. Of course, all of this assumes a strong signal. That’s something we’ve had to deal with in our home. And in this building. The walls, furniture, and distance become barriers. So you need a booster to push that signal through those barriers, enabling those devices to communicate.

Last week, we talked about how prayer can be defined as “a believer’s communication with God” and how the greatness of our salvation draws us into prayer. But the fact is there are often barriers to prayer, things that are hard to push through. What would overcome those? What would help to change how we communicate with God - how we listen and speak to Him?

Those are questions worth considering. Which brings us to our text. What would help us to overcome these barriers to prayer? This passage can point us in that direction. It’s an amazing account of real events - the appearance of angels outside Bethlehem. And that can change the prayers of God’s people. The appearance of the angels can change the prayers of God’s people.

But that then begs a question. How? Let’s take a look at the three basic parts of Luke’s account. First, the messengers. Second, the audience. And then, third, the very message itself.

I. THE MESSENGERS

First, the messengers. Angels! Sadly, there’s much misunderstanding on angels.

A) Who They Are Not

1. As portrayed

So it's pretty important we get some clarity here. Angels are not as they are often portrayed. They are not pudgy babies. Nor are they the familiar friendly figures as on TV and in movies.

2. As imagined

They are not as often imagined - domesticated and readily relatable. When the Bible speaks of angels appearing, the response is most often that of terror, as we see with the shepherds here.

B) Who They Are

1. Description

So what are they? Angels are created personal beings, intelligent moral agents. They are not normally visible but are able to appear in physical form. Again, as we see here in this account.

2. Function

Heaven is their headquarters. There they worship God and from there they are sent to render service to God's people. And they are especially active at turning points in God's saving plan.

As we see here. And that's who was delivering this message. A host, an army, of angels.

Illustration:

Fifty years ago this month, on Christmas Eve 1968, Apollo 8 was circling the moon. The crew was the first to orbit another world. Theirs was a daring feat. And an astonishing message. To a live TV audience from 240,000 miles away, they read the first twelve verses of Genesis and signed off with a greeting to "everyone on the good Earth." Merry Christmas from Apollo 8.

Application:

Astonishing. But nothing compared to that night outside Bethlehem. The appearing of those messengers remind us there is so much more than we can see. Their presence emphasizes the sure absolute truthfulness of the message. For with them, there is no possibility of spin.

How does this impact our prayers? "Lord, I am so prone to live as though this was all there is. I think so little of the importance and truthfulness of this message. Please help me. Put me there with the shepherds that night, seeing and hearing as they did. Press this into my heart."

The appearance of these messengers - the angels - changes the prayers of God's people.

II. THE AUDIENCE

Which then brings us to the audience. Shepherds! What do we know of them?

A) Who They Were Not

1. Royal figures

A shepherd must guide, provide, and protect. The Old Testament uses this image for leaders of Israel. God Himself is a shepherd. As is the Messiah. So it's often a royal image. But not here.

2. Ordinary laborers

In fact, they were less than ordinary laborers - bakers, craftsman, farmers, fishermen, soldiers.

B) Who They Were

1. Description

Who then were they? In this ancient Jewish culture, their duties rendered them ceremonially unclean. Their reputation was dubious as nomads. Their testimony was inadmissible in a court.

2. Summary

They were outcasts, one step up from lepers. They had no standing. They were nobodies.

These were shepherds. And they were the first to receive the message of Jesus' birth.

Illustration:

Think of the holiday special, "Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer" and the Island of Misfit Toys. Rudolph, Hermie, Yukon Cornelius met a Charlie-in-the-Box, an elephant with polka dots, a choo-choo with square wheels, a water pistol that shot jelly, a bird that swam, a cowboy riding an ostrich, a boat that couldn't float, and a lost doll. And the King of the Island ([READ quote](#)):

When you return to Christmastown, tell Santa about these homeless toys. I'm sure he can find girls and boys who would be happy with them...A toy is never happy till it's loved by a child.

Application:

The point? Christmas is for misfits, for shepherds, for nobodies. And so for everybody. For us ([READ Luke 2:10](#)). So very comforting. And humbling for it reminds us of who we are.

How does this impact our prayers? "Lord, I am prone to think of myself as in a whole other crowd - the deserving - and worthy of your coming. But I know the gap is not between me and the outcasts. It's between me and you. Thank you for bridging that gap. How I need you."

The appearance of the angels to the shepherds changes the prayers of God's people.

III. THE MESSAGE

Which brings us to the message ([READ Luke 2:10](#)). It is good news! Here too there is so much misunderstanding. What was that message? ([READ Luke 2:14](#)) Let's break this down.

A) What It Is Not

1. Surface peace

For starters, this is not a message of surface peace, just the absence of conflict. This was more than the Pax Romana - good roads, safe travel, law and order at the expense of taxes and armies.

2. Pseudo favor

This is not a message of pseudo favor. Some translations miss this. It is not "good will toward men" or "to men of good will." This is not a cosmic quid pro quo, an exchange of favors.

3. Irrelevant

Nor is this an irrelevant message, hemmed in to just a Sunday morning thing. This message is not to convey a private conviction that is meant to be quietly and politely kept to yourself.

B) What It Is

Each of those falls so far short of the message. What did they say? ([READ Luke 2:14](#)).

1. True peace

This is a message of shalom, true peace, the way things are meant to be. At the heart of it, there is peace with God. Flowing from that, we then can have peace within and peace with others.

2. Divine favor

This is a message of true peace and divine favor. It has absolutely nothing to do with what we do. It is a freedom so shocking that it, rightly proclaimed, always brings a scandal in its wake.

3. Revolutionary

And, far from being irrelevant, this message is revolutionary. It lands and connects “on earth” and so it changes everything. All the big questions are answered. “Who am I? Why am I here? What is my life to be about?” And it gives grounding to ethics, human value, beauty, and love - all the things we instinctively know are real are now proven to be anything but illusions.

That’s what the angels - the ones who could see best - proclaimed. That’s the message.

Illustration:

It’s an interesting exercise this time of year to Google “top trending news stories of the year.” The results, of course, depend on the viewpoint and worldview of those compiling the list.

Application:

The message of the angels is the top news story in the history of the world. And, note this. It’s news not advice. It’s a message of something that’s been done, not what we are to do.

How does that impact our prayers? (READ Luke 2:14) “Lord, may I hear not a message of surface peace but true peace, not pseudo favor but divine favor, not something irrelevant but revolutionary. Help me hear and become a herald myself, just as the angels and the shepherds.”

The appearance of the angels with this message changes the prayers of God’s people.

CONCLUSION:

There are different reasons we are drawn to prayer. Think of George Bailey in *It’s a Wonderful Life*. George has spent his days giving up his dreams for the good of Bedford Falls. But on this Christmas Eve, he is broken over a lost loan and the machinations of Mr. Potter. So an angel, Clarence, falls to Earth and shows him how things would have turned out if he’d never been born. That is all set in motion by prayer - his family and George himself (READ quote):

Dear Father in Heaven, I’m not a praying man. But if you’re up there and you can hear me, show me the way. I’m at the end of my rope. Show me the way, God.

What was it that drove George Bailey to pray? Desperation. Which was understandable.

But there are other reasons we can be drawn to pray - guilt and gratitude, wonder and praise, longing and hope. How can those things be stirred up? What will change our prayers - ignite and fuel our communion with God? What will draw us to pray through Christmas and then on through the coming year? The events of Christmas and the realities those events reveal. The messengers were angels. The audience was shepherds. And the message was the gospel, the good news. Taken to heart, any of those three and all of them together will draw us to pray.

The appearance of the angels changes the prayers of God’s people. Merry Christmas.

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