

Wesley United Methodist Church

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Angels Among Us

Text: Luke 1:5-25, 57-80

Title: Make Ready a People: #morehope

Around us the world is not only getting ready to celebrate Christmas, but already celebrating in many ways. Hallmark began its countdown to Christmas movies a couple of weeks ago. Merchants are offering all sorts of incentives to lure us into the stores or into purchasing on-line.

In the church we have a season leading up to Christmas that we call Advent. It is a season of waiting and we all know that waiting for something can be really hard. It can be especially hard if all we are doing is passively waiting. But Advent does more than call us to wait – Advent calls us to prepare. If truth be told, the season of Advent really doesn't start until next week, but as you can tell, for a variety of reasons, we are starting to prepare now. Of course, when we are being really intentional about our faith, then we are always preparing for Christ's presence in our hearts, for our faith to grow and deepen, and we are preparing for whatever new thing God is doing in our midst.

We know that we cannot really be prepared for Christmas if we just sit back and wait. In fact, we cannot really be prepared for anything if we just sit and wait. Rhonda Britten in her book "Fearless Living" says that "when we passively wait, we are living in fear." Marcia McFee, a worship designer, who wrote many of the pieces that we are using in our worship of "Angels among us" said that what Rhonda is referring to is that when we wait for circumstances outside of ourselves to change in order to feel hope, peace, joy or love, or to live our lives fully, we rob ourselves of the chance to have those things right now. When we claim our role in making our lives

our own and move freely into the future no matter the circumstances of our lives or the world around us, then we are living fully into who God calls us to be because we have the power to make a difference – to help shift circumstances, rather than live in fear of them.ⁱ

The story is told of a young man who looked at the world around him and saw poverty, injustice, violence and cried out to God. “What is wrong with this world that you created? Even I could do a better job!” God responded, “That’s what you are supposed to do.”ⁱⁱ

The waiting of Advent is not and cannot be a passive waiting. It cannot be the kind of waiting that believes that God doesn’t need us in order to make the world a safer, better place for all people. In the Biblical stories that we are looking at in Advent, leading up to Christmas, the stories of the angels appearing to Zechariah, Mary, Joseph, and the Shepherds, the angels do bring news but even more than that, they invite participation in the story. “The message is ‘God is doing thus-and-such’ and ‘you are a part of it.’”ⁱⁱⁱ The message is Do Not Be Afraid, get up and get moving, because God needs you.

This season as we look at the messages from the angels, we want to be careful that we don’t fall into the Hallmark card version of angels which really came out of Medieval Christianity and religious art and not out of the Bible. If you really like the Hallmark angels, that’s fine – I have a collection of angels that adorn my Christmas tree but Angels in the Scriptures are not cute little cherubs if they were, then it is unlikely that their first words would usually be “Do Not Be Afraid.” The English word “Angel” comes from the Latin *angelus* derived from the Greek translation and it means messenger. Angels are messengers sent to tell us something important; angels are

announcers. When we talk about angels during Advent, we are talking about messengers from God.

We are talking especially about Angels among us – messengers among us – messengers that include us – messengers to a world that is exposed to a lot of information that causes fear and anxiety. I want to invite us to “fly in the face of fear” and to share information that counteracts the pervasive messages of fear. I want to invite us to be messengers that bring more hope, peace, joy, love, and life into our world.

You might be thinking that you can't be an angel, that you can't be a messenger, that you are just an ordinary person living an ordinary life. It is true that we are all ordinary people living ordinary lives, but that was also true of everybody in the Bible. It is true of every person that God uses to help bring God's message to the world.

It was an ordinary day for Zechariah. He was a priest and it was his job to make sure that things were done properly and orderly in the temple. But on one of those ordinary days, something unusual happened. An angel – a messenger from God – appeared with a message for Zechariah. Zechariah and his wife Elizabeth had hoped for a child but now they were old, and their hope was gone. They no longer believed that they would have a child but suddenly an angel told Zechariah that they would soon have a child – a child who would be a messenger to prepare people for Jesus. Zechariah and Elizabeth's son was to make people ready for Jesus, for God's unexpected call to make a difference.

This first chapter, and all the chapters, in the amazing Christmas story is a story of the divine breaking into ordinary life. It is a message that God uses ordinary people to make a difference. It is a message that one person can and does make a difference no matter how insignificant the

contribution may seem. In this story, God is calling even us to become people who are ready to be messengers of hope through our words and our actions.

In 1945, a young Christian business man stood up in an evangelistic service in Dallas, Texas, and told how he had learned a valuable lesson from a small child. His business had been in a steady decline and he was sure it would completely fail. One day, in despair, he decided to go for a drive out in the country. Eventually he decided to get out and walk and soon found himself on a deserted, out-of-the way trail where he found a dilapidated cottage. There was a little girl playing outside with a doll whose stuffing was sticking out. The little girl, however, seemed to be content and happy.

Cautiously he approached the front yard and asked the child how she could be so happy living in such a house. The little girl looked up with a big smile and said, "Mister, my daddy just came into a lot of money, and he is building us a brand-new mansion just over that hilltop." The businessman said he realized for the first time that even though his business was failing, his heavenly father had greater things in store for him. He said it was "as though he heard God saying, 'Son, don't you know that I have a mansion prepared for you just beyond those clouds?' The young businessman concluded his story by telling how he went back home with a new determination to live for God and let the heavenly father take care of the business."^{iv}

In the audience that night was Ira Stanphill, the author of many gospel songs. He went home thinking about what he had heard and the next morning, went to his piano and wrote the song, "Mansion Over the Hilltop."

About 50 years later, an elderly woman lay dying in her bed at United Methodist Elder Care in East Providence. Shortly before her death, the chaplain was in the room with her. Her face suddenly took on a glow. She said, “Can you hear it? It’s beautiful! They’re singing #44.” A few minutes later she stopped breathing.

The chaplain went to look at the songbook that was used in the chapel. Number 44 was “Mansion Over the Hilltop.” A few days later at her memorial service, her teenage grandson shared with the chaplain, how angry and upset he was with his parents that they had not had his grandmother admitted to the hospital where she could have had a feeding tube and other medical interventions to keep her alive. He thought it was terrible and couldn’t imagine that his grandmother could have been ready to die.

The chaplain described her experience with his grandmother and showed him the words to #44. As he read the words of this gospel song, he began to understand.

If you aren’t familiar with that song, some of the words go like this:

Don’t think me poor or deserted or lonely
I’m not discouraged ‘cuz I’m Heaven bound
I’m just a pilgrim in search of a city
I want a mansion, a robe, and a crown.

I’ve got a mansion just over the hilltop
In that bright land, where we’ll never grow old
And some day yonder, I will never more wander
But walk on streets that are purest gold.^v

I know this story because I was the chaplain who was gifted by God with the opportunity to be present with the woman when she died, and to be able to share his grandmother’s message of hope with her grandson.

From 50 years back, something a young girl said, was used by God to give hope to a businessman. God used his words to inspire Ira Stanphill to write the words to that song. God used that song to be a word of hope, promise, peace and comfort to a dying woman. God used me to be the messenger to share his grandmother's experience with a teenage grandson who needed a word of hope.

God calls each and everyone of us to be messengers of hope. God uses ordinary people like us to bring a word of hope to those who most need to hear that hope.

“Angels are sometimes portrayed in the scriptures, and certainly in religious art throughout history, as having wings. Just as angels are symbols of God's messages to us, as God's presence with us, feathers symbolize the Spirit of God, the ability to span any distance between heaven and earth, and the freedom of flight to new heights in our lives as we claim God's possibilities for our lives and for our world.”^{vi}

I'm going to invite the ushers to pass a basket among you with feather key chains in it. There are also three wooden beads on each one to remind us of God the Father, Jesus the Son, and the Holy Spirit. I invite you to take one, and to attach it to your key ring, or purse, or someplace where you will be reminded to keep your eyes open to God's messengers in your life and also God's power to be a messenger of hope in the midst of each day, in encounters with each person you meet. I invite you to receive this gift as a reminder that you are a messenger for God, called to bring more hope to our world.

ⁱMcFee, Marcia. www.worshipdesignstudio.com/angels Sermon notes.

ⁱⁱ Source unknown to me. I read it in an illustration book somewhere. This is a brief and free paraphrase.

ⁱⁱⁱ McFee, Marcia

^{iv} <http://staugustine.com/living/religion/2015-07-09/story-behind-song-mansion-over-hilltop>

^v Stanphill, Ira "Mansion Over the Hilltop"

^{vi} McFee, Marcia. Advent 1 Sermon notes