

“A Time for Angels”

Luke 1:5-20

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This morning we turn from the Psalms to the Gospel narratives of the birth of the Lord Jesus. Today I want to consider the interesting fact, a fact we take far too much for granted and think about far too little, that angels encounter us everywhere in this history.

Text Comment

- v. 5 There were many priests but only one temple, so the priests served on a rota. They were divided into 24 divisions of which that of Abijah was the 8th, as you can read in 1 Chron. 24:10. Only four of the 24 divisions returned from the exile in Babylon, but those four divisions were subdivided again to make up 24 again and were given the old names. Each division was on duty at the temple twice a year for a week at a time.
- v.10 There were so many priests that even when a priest's division was on duty at the temple there were not enough sacred duties to go around. The offering of incense, which required the priest to enter the Holy Place, the outermost of the two rooms in the temple, was a privilege and so assignments were, as it were, drawn from a hat. Some priests at this time never enjoyed the privilege and no one was allowed to do it more than once, so this was a momentous day in Zechariah's life. The incense represented the prayers of the people and, once it had been burned, the priest would come out to bless the people.
- v.13 The obvious question raised by the angel's response is: what prayer? Frankly, v. 7 makes it seem likely that Zechariah and Elizabeth had stopped praying for a child long before this. Did Zechariah pray for the redemption of Israel as a priest might think it his duty to do on such an occasion? If so, the granting of their prayer for a child became a sign that the redeemer of Israel was about to appear. “John” appropriately means “the Lord is gracious.” (The name is longer in Greek than it is in English!)
- v.17 Referring to Malachi's prophecy of the return of Elijah before the coming of the day of the Lord, the angel prophesies that John will be the cause of many Israelites returning to the Lord. There can be no doubt that, in the judgment of the NT, Israel had fallen away from the Lord in largest part and needed to be called back to him. All four Gospels bear repeated witness to the spiritual and theological declension of Judaism at the time first John and then the Lord Jesus made their appearance.
- v.18 Zechariah was caught off guard. He wondered how, given their age, what the angel had told him about Elizabeth having a child could possibly be true. This is a human touch, as so often in the Bible when the supernatural is encountered. This is not a myth, some fable or legend. Such stories are rarely life-like about the difficulty people have accepting the eruption of the supernatural into their lives. And so, Zechariah asked for a sign. He needed assurance, like Gideon or Hezekiah before him. You have only to compare this

account to those of the apocryphal gospels to see how very differently such stories are written when they have been made up! This was C.S. Lewis's point, a man who probably knew more about mythical writing than any person alive in his time. Whatever the Gospels were, he wrote, they were not the sort of tales one finds in the ancient myths and legends. They are a very different thing, report-like in their nature, rooted in daily life, with all manner of unaffected and artless touches of realism. They haven't the typical features of invention; they have all the features, the telltale signs of history. *This is a fact of extraordinary importance as we will see!*

- v.19 The sense of Gabriel's reply is debated, but there is certainly a rebuke in it. "For goodness sake, what is more difficult to believe: that an angel from God is standing in front of you or that his words will come true?" Zechariah's doubt compares unfavorably with Mary's later humble acceptance of the angel's remarkable announcement to her.
- v.20 Clearly the sign is itself a form of rebuke. Zechariah didn't believe what Gabriel *said* to him so he won't be able to *say* anything about it to others. Apparently, he was also made deaf, because we read in 1:62 that after this people communicated with him by signs, which would not have been necessary if he were still able to hear. He didn't believe what he had *heard* from Gabriel, so he won't be able to *hear* either. If a man doesn't believe what God says to him, he might as well be deaf and dumb! No doubt the Lord had another purpose in this: it served to conceal the revelation until the proper time.

The casual reader of the Bible might well suppose that angels are found everywhere in the biblical narrative. They assume, perhaps, that if you find them anywhere, you would find them everywhere. But in fact, you do not. Angels appear rarely in the Bible. Indeed, according to the Bible, only a very few people in the history of the world have ever seen an angel, either in person or in a vision. Only very rarely has the veil been lifted that separates the unseen world from the world of sight and sense.

It is, after all, a fact obvious in this narrative but often overlooked that angels, as spirits, are ordinarily invisible to human beings. It is not as if Gabriel in his shining glory, with his three pair of wings had walked through the crowded temple courts and up the steps into the Holy Place. He took visible form in the Holy Place; not before! The Bible makes that clear. There are both angels and evil spirits abroad in the world, *but we never see them. They must take some step, whatever that may be, to become visible to a human being.* For all the occasions in the Bible when angels are mentioned in some respect, and for all the information we are given about them, we know precious little. They are creatures, as we are, servants of the Lord as we are, they execute his will to a degree and with a power beyond what is true of even righteous men and women, but they too love God and serve him. Theologians sometimes debate whether they have been made in God's image and likeness as human beings have been made – I think the answer is likely yes – but it is obvious that like us, angels have distinct personal existence: that is they possess self-consciousness, knowledge, will, affections, and the ability to communicate. In the Bible angels are persons, not simply ideas or powers, still less avatars of God.

But they are clearly differentiated from human beings as spirits only. They may assume bodily form for the purpose of communicating with human beings, but they are themselves spirits

without bodies. I find that interesting not least because when we die we too will be spirits, at least temporarily without a body. We will ourselves experience what it is like to be a person, a self-conscious, knowing, feeling, willing creature, but one without a body. We will eventually be restored to our bodies, but at least for a time, we will live as the angels do. In heaven, even with our bodies, we will not be married either, and Jesus said that in that we will be like the angels. So, there is more similarity between human life and angelic life than we may at first realize.

In fact – and I think this is both interesting and important – the only reason people stumble over the existence of angels is because they don't take as seriously as they should, they take far too much for granted the *extraordinary existence of human beings!* Angels and human beings are more alike than they are different! What is more, no one thinks God is an old man with a beard except Gary Larsen. If you believe in God at all, the existence of angels – living personal spirits – should pose no problem at all to your intellect!

I am, of course, leaving out of these considerations the fallen angels, the rebel angels, the spirits who are now at work in the sons of disobedience. The angels too had a fall, but only some of them fell, and those who fell are never to be recovered to righteousness. There is no redemption for angels, which must make the human story fascinating to them. They have powers that we do not have, but God, in love, has given his Son for us which he did not do for the angels. The angels who did not fall are righteous and holy by nature, not by redemption. They are once referred to in the Bible as “elect angels,” but never as redeemed angels!

We know that angels are at work in our world, but precisely how they work and what they do, this we do not know. We know that they are sent out to serve those who are being saved, as we read at the end of Hebrews 1, but precisely *how* they serve us we are not told. How much happens in this world because of the work of angels we cannot say. Perhaps it is far more than we think. This world is, after all, *alive* with spiritual beings, both good and bad.

But you may be surprised to learn that angels appear only rarely even in the miracle-filled life and ministry of the Lord Jesus. They appear, of course, here, at the very beginning of the incarnation, at the announcement of the birth of the Lord's forerunner, John the Baptist. An angel will appear to Mary and to Joseph on separate occasions to prepare them for the roles they would play in the birth of God incarnate. It was Gabriel once again who spoke to Mary and may well have been Gabriel who spoke to Joseph. Then, of course, as we sing in many of our Christmas hymns, first one angel and then many brought the news of the birth of Jesus to shepherds near Bethlehem. Soon after his birth, an angel warned Joseph to flee to Egypt to escape Herod's paranoid rage. And when the danger was past, it was again an angel who advised Joseph that it was time to return home. Many years later they will appear at the beginning of the Lord's ministry and immediately at the end of his temptation in the wilderness. And then they will appear at the very end of it, in the Garden of Gethsemane, to sooth him after his final temptation. They will announce his resurrection to those who come to the tomb that first Sunday morning and be present at his Ascension to heaven to explain the significance of that event to the disciples. But otherwise, we hear nothing of angels during the thirty years and more of the Lord's life or the upwards of three years of his public ministry. *And only a few, other than Jesus himself, ever saw these angels!*

Indeed, there is nothing like this concentration of angelic appearances anywhere else in history or anywhere else in the history of the Lord Jesus himself. *Angels crowd the Christmas story in a way and to a degree we encounter nowhere else.* Now that is a fact worth our pondering!

When Zechariah went into the Holy Place that day, no angel had appeared to a human being for many centuries. It's remarkable when you think about it that angels might appear and have appeared, but they almost never do appear. What's really remarkable in this particular history is the concentration of angelic appearances, far more than anywhere else in history or anywhere else in the history of the Lord Jesus and his own life. Angels crowd the Christmas story in a way and to a degree we encounter nowhere else. And that's a fact worth our pondering. I say, when Zachariah went into the Holy Place that day, all unawares of what was to come, no angel had appeared to anybody for centuries on end. Zechariah had never seen an angel, he had never met anyone who had seen an angel. The only thing he knew about angels was what he had heard about them when the Word of God was read, a smaller book in his day than it is in ours, without the further information about angels we find in what we call the New Testament. He had absolutely no expectation of ever seeing an angel! We do not know precisely what Zechariah saw, what Gabriel looked like, but the man was terrified. You would be too. Gabriel apparently made no effort to hide his angelic being, as angels have sometimes done and so were mistaken for human beings. Zachariah *knew* that Gabriel was an angel. His appearance was in some way not of this world.

Now I don't think there can be any doubt as to *why* angels proliferate at this moment in human history. *Something was up!* Something of immense importance, of historic importance, of earth-shaking importance was about to occur. Something was about to happen that would define the meaning of human history. This is what G.K. Chesterton meant when he described the incarnation, God's coming into the world as a man, as "that incredible interruption, as a blow that broke the very backbone of history." There is a reason why time ever since has been divided into years B.C. and A.D!

If you believe, as we do, in the history of the incarnation. If you believe that the living God who created the heavens and the earth came into the world as an infant human being to live a perfect human life and to endure the penalty our sins deserve; if you believe that nothing less than this was required to deliver human beings from sin and death and restore them to God; if you believe that the destiny of every human being is and must be thus determined by whether he or she welcomes this Savior or rejects him; if you believe that Jesus Christ is thus the way, the truth, and the life and the only way to God and to eternal life; I say, if you believe such things you will not stumble over an angel or two appearing in this history. For if this history proves anything, it is that God is at work in this world, that supernatural powers are real, and that no one can understand reality who confines himself or herself to what he or she can see, or touch, or hear.

If any event in the history of the world should have been announced by angels, it is this event! If any event in history deserved to be set apart from all others by the presence of angels, this is it! If the incarnation is history, in the ordinary sense of that term, an event that occurred in space and time, and if there are such beings as angels, why would they not announce the greatest thing that ever happened? And if God the Son was entering the world as a human baby and doing so largely *incognito*, why should we be surprised that at least a few human beings should have been

apprised in an unforgettable way of the astonishing events that were about to occur? True enough, as part of our Savior's humiliation and suffering for sin, his divine nature had to be hidden, remain unrecognized. And it largely was. But it does not surprise us that God did not leave the birth of his Son without a witness, without breathtaking demonstrations of the fact that this birth was of one whose goings forth are from old, from everlasting; that this birth was of the Mighty God, the Everlasting Father, the Prince of Peace. *If angels were ever to appear, this was the time!*

The Son of God came into the world as a baby, to be sure, helpless and utterly dependent. But he also came into the world as the prince of a kingdom, the king of a great host, whose servants are flames of fire!

Now, don't miss the obvious here. All you need to know is that an angel named Gabriel appeared to a Jewish priest named Zechariah. That single fact splits the world open before you and reveals to you the nature of life. There is so much in this world that we cannot ordinarily see. But if your vision never transcends this physical world, if you remain unaware of or largely indifferent to the existence of angels and demons, you will not, you cannot rightly understand this world or your place in this world. Accept this one fact, that an angel appeared to Zechariah and delivered the message from God that he did, and your entire understanding of reality must be transformed.

We are all of us in the modern West now very used to the atomization of human society. Pundits and politicians and academics are forever dividing the human race into every manner of grouping. People are defined by their genders, now supposedly a large number of genders, by their race, by their ethnicity, by their income, by their level of education, by their political or social viewpoints, and so on. There may be some value to some of this, to help us appreciate the circumstances faced by people different from ourselves.

But we must never lose sight of the fact that there are but two groups of people in the final analysis; only two so far as the ultimate destiny of human beings is concerned. There are those who believe the Word of God and live according to it and those who do not. There are those who believe that Jesus Christ is God incarnate and those who either do not believe or don't care; just as there are holy angels and evil spirits.

Do you get my point? We Christians believe in an entirely different universe than unbelievers do. There is no point evading this fact or minimizing it or denying it. It makes all the difference whether this world is God's world, the theater of his glory, inhabited not only by creatures that we can see but by angels and demons who in ways we cannot calculate are also determining the course of events in the world. Admit this and everything else must change including the meaning of your life and the shape of your future.

To the unbeliever, the one who does not love, who does not believe that God came into the world as a human baby, life is defined *by the absence of God*, not by his presence and what a world of difference that must make. He or she may not be conscious of the fact that his or her entire life is shaped by and defined by the absence of God and of supernatural reality, but it is, and the proof is in the pudding. There is nothing in that person's life, his or hers, that reflects, that bears

witness to the existence of another world, of other creatures in this world whom we cannot see, of a looming future in which human beings live in weal or in woe.

Admit but one angel, admit that just once an angel appeared to a person and spoke to him or to her a message from God. Even in the Bible this is a very rare occurrence. Even most important biblical characters – think of John the Baptist himself – never saw or spoke to an angel. But admit that such an encounter occurred at least one time and the entire world takes on, must take on a different appearance; reality must be redefined; the meaning of life and the possibilities of the future.

So, think again of the delicacy, the reticence, the artless, the honest way in which such an episode as Gabriel's appearance to Zechariah is reported in Holy Scripture. You may have to take my word for it, but were you to read the mythological and legendary accounts of supernatural beings – whether from the ancient world mythology or the modern world's science fiction – *you would find nothing remotely like what we read here in Luke 1; nothing at all.* The telltale marks of invention are everywhere in that literature and nowhere to be found here.

There is first of all the setting: a couple now up in years, a priest whose otherwise ordinary life is about to be given a jolt for which he is utterly unprepared. We know who the man was, what his priestly division was. We know approximately when this happened. We know where it happened. We know why he was there at that moment and what he was doing. The episode is rooted in ordinary history; nothing legendary about this at all.

Then there is also this unexpected reticence. None of the many questions that intrigue us about angels are answered at all. We aren't told what Gabriel looked like; what it was that Zechariah saw – *the first thing we would expect an inventor to tell us.* Nothing is said about the sound of Gabriel's voice. We are left in the dark about most things. Zechariah is no hero; he does not rise to the occasion. He is confused, perplexed, and afraid. He puts his foot in his mouth in a perfectly ordinary way and is punished for what seems to us to be a rather minor faux pas. None of this is anything like the stories that people invented about humans encountering supernatural beings. Read those stories and see for yourselves!

And the message; it isn't what anyone would expect either. Not a prophecy of some tremendous demonstration of supernatural power, of the victory of some great army in battle. No; what we have here is the promise of the spiritual transformation of human hearts from unrighteousness to righteousness, from rebellion to repentance, from estrangement to reconciliation, and so on. This is not what avatars care about or Marvel comic book figures and it was not what the mythical heroes of the ancient world cared about either. The good news here is that God was about to turn the hearts of his children toward himself in living faith and holy love. People want a super-hero today as they did in their day; they don't want their hearts to be made good, they want to win; they want to get rich; they want to succeed; they want to enjoy good health; they want to be happy and not worry about what anyone else thinks, including God; they're looking for a Spider-Man or the Green Hornet or Batman, not John the Baptist, for goodness sake! A prophet preaching repentance; how droll! How irrelevant! A Savior come to suffer and die for our sins? Surely there must be better news than that!

But no angel appeared to anyone as the Roman Empire crumbled into ruins, no angel greeted Columbus when he first set foot in the new world; no angel appeared to the Constitutional Convention in Philadelphia; no angel appeared to General Eisenhower the night before D-Day; no angel greeted the men who landed on the moon; no angel gave tips to the Wright brothers or the inventors of the computer chip. But angels did appear when it came time for the redemption of the world to be accomplished, when it came time for the great sacrifice for sin to be offered, when it was time for death to be conquered and for new and eternal life to be proclaimed throughout the world in the name of Jesus Christ, the incarnate God.

That we find angels here and rarely elsewhere; that we find more angels here than anywhere else in recorded history is a lesson in what matters for time and for eternity. It teaches us how differently we who believe in Jesus must think about everything: the world in which we live, the meaning of our lives, and, supremely, the place that Jesus Christ, the incarnate God, must have in our hearts. That someday you may be able to talk to this same Gabriel – that he is as real *as that* – defines the gulf that separates us from those who do not realize that Christ came into the world to save sinners.