

**“When Heaven Came to Earth”**  
**Matthew 1:18-25, Luke 2:8-14, December 11, 2016**  
**Congregational Church of Pinehurst**  
**Reverend Martha M. Nilsen**

At the knowledge of the Christ child’s birth,  
“...suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, an army of angels, praising God and singing, “Glory to God in the highest, on earth peace and goodwill toward all.”

When we look at a typical Nativity scene what do we see? We see Joseph and Mary huddled lovingly over the Baby Jesus; cows and sheep lying quietly in the background next to grazing donkeys. We see shepherds looking on with curious admiration, but no angels. Angels often take a back seat in the birth narrative and yet within the story they appear five times: The first time occurs when Zechariah and his wife Elizabeth are told by the angel Gabriel of the upcoming birth of their son, John the Baptist, who would announce the coming of the Messiah. Gabriel appears again when he informs Mary that she would bear a son. Meanwhile, through a dream, an angel speaks to Joseph

telling him of Mary’s pregnancy. The fourth appearance of an angel in the Nativity story is when an angel notifies shepherds tending their flocks of Jesus’ birth. Finally, in joyous worship that heaven has come to earth, a multitude of angels sing in bold gladness above the shepherds heads.

Have you ever noticed that the only physical characteristic of angels mentioned in the bible is that some have wings? No other details are given! All that we truly know about angels is their role, which is to carry out the **urgent** work of God. They are messengers of God delivering critical communications from God to his people. The importance of angels then lay not in what they looked like but in the message they proclaimed. As messengers of God, their task was to reveal the will of God which came in the form of specific instructions, warnings, or assurances. In the birth narrative their manifestation before human beings always began with assurances. Their first words were, “Do not be afraid” or “Fear not!” Of course we assume that the sight of an angel would be a horrifying experience, but in the Nativity story angels were never

intended to induce fear. Rather, more often angels came to people already living in fear or who were plagued by uncertainty. To these individuals angels brought helpful instructions. For example, sensing Joseph's early misgivings regarding Mary's pregnancy, an angel urges him not to desert her that is, not to flee the situation, but to take her as his wife. Likewise, in the wake of an unexpected pregnancy with all the fears and worries it brought on, Gabriel told both Mary and Joseph to name their child Jesus that means "anointed one" or "Messiah." This name reassured the weary couple that this birth was the will of God thus God would guide them as parents.

Angels bring warnings to protect those in God's care from potential harm and imminent danger. Because a betrothed woman pregnant with child was at high risk to ostracism and poverty, Gabriel insisted that Joseph stay with Mary to ensure that the anointed birth took place and that Jesus would be raised in a family. Later Joseph and Mary were informed by an angel to flee to Egypt so as to protect Jesus from King Herod's lethal plan. Likewise the

wise men were warned in a dream, presumed to be a message delivered by an angel, to return to their native country by another route so as to avoid meeting up with the malevolent Herod. Throughout the birth narrative, angels were charged with communicating God's messages in order to allay the fears and ensure the well-being of His people.

Angels continue to do the urgent work of God today. In 2008, *"Dobie Gadiant, a schoolteacher for thirteen years, decided to travel across America and see the sights she had taught about. Traveling alone in a truck with camper in tow, she launched out. One afternoon, while she was rounding a curve on I-5 near Sacramento in rush-hour traffic, a water pump blew on her truck. She was tired, exasperated, scared, and alone. In spite of the traffic jam she caused, no one seemed interested in helping. Leaning up against the trailer, she prayed, "Please, God, send me an angel, preferably one with mechanical experience." Within four minutes, a huge Harley drove up, ridden by an enormous man sporting long, black hair, a beard, and tattooed arms. With an incredible*

*air of confidence, he jumped off his bike and went to work on the truck, without even glancing at Dobie. Within another few minutes, he flagged down a larger truck, attached a tow chain to the frame of the disabled Chevy, and whisked the whole 56-foot rig off the freeway onto a side street, where he calmly continued to work on the water pump. The intimidated schoolteacher was too dumbfounded to talk, especially when she read the paralyzing words on the back of his leather jacket: "Hell's Angels – California." As he finished his task, she finally got up enough courage to say, "Thanks so much," and carry on a brief conversation. Noting her surprise at the whole ordeal, he looked her straight in the eye and advised, "Don't judge a book by its cover. You may not know who you're talking to." With that, he smiled, closed the hood of the truck, and straddled his Harley. With a wave, he was gone as fast as he had appeared.' (Victorious Christian Living, September 2008)*

Now and again we hear about guardian angels. So, was the Hell's Angel or Gabriel a guardian angel? No! Not according to the Bible. Guardian angels are not a biblical

concept. In Matthew 18:10 Jesus states to his disciples: "Take care that you do not despise one of these little ones [children] for I tell you, in heaven **their angels** continually see the face of my Father." Perhaps because of the protective nature associated with angels and this NT verse, suggesting that children have "their angels" in heaven, the belief in guardian angels evolved. As for me I tend to believe that I have a guardian angel. He or she makes their presence well known whenever I am thinking less than wholesome thoughts about someone because sure enough I'll bump my head or bang a finger. Ouch! My guardian angel carries an extension rod. There again, there may be times when my guardian angel has protected me against danger, but because I never encountered the danger I didn't know I had been protected. Whatever you believe, the fact is that guardian angels are not a biblical concept.

An angel named Hallel, which means "a song of praise," was a gifted singer so imagines author G.A. Myer. Hallel's melodious songs of praise heard from the depths of the earth to the farthest reaches of the heavens, caught

God's ear. Along with the multitude of heavenly hosts, Hallel had been preparing songs for the day when God would complete his greatest miracle since creating humanity, the miracle of the Messiah's birth. God called out to Hallel, *"Gather your heavenly host and prepare to go where My Son will be born...When you get there, do not make a sound...you are to be completely silent."* *"No songs of worship?"* asked Hallel. *"None,"* confirmed God. *"In honor of this sacred moment, the night shall be silent when My Son enters the world. But when you hear the first cry from the lips of the infant you may deliver your message of joy that the Savior is born. But not to any dignitary,"* instructs God, *"go first to the shepherds because My Son shall be both sheep and shepherd of My people."* Hallel left for Bethlehem to witness the birth. And sure enough when Hallel heard it - the soft, crooning cry of Jesus, -he flexed his mighty wings and flew to the shepherds close by. Then the shepherds drew back in fear. *"Do not be afraid,"* said Hallel, *"I bring good news of great joy for all people for unto you is born a Savior who is the Messiah."* The heavens

burst open in jubilant celebration singing, *"Glory to God in the highest, and on earth, peace to all."* Like sweet incense the music wafted down around the shepherds who then broke into playful dance and joined in the singing.

The angels were the first to worship and rejoice in the jubilant work of God which took place on a cold, starry night in Bethlehem when heaven came to earth. Amen.

### **Prayer**

Robert Louis Stevenson: Loving God, help us remember the birth of Jesus that we may share in the song of the angels, the gladness of the shepherds and the worship of the wise men. Close the door of hate and open the door of love all over the world. Let kindness come with every gift and good desires with every greeting. Deliver us from evil by the blessing which Christ brings, and teach us to be merry with clear hearts. May the Christmas morning make us happy to be Thy children, and the Christmas evening bring us to our beds with grateful thoughts, forgiving and forgiven, for Jesus' sake. Amen.