

Wicker Park Lutheran Church

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Christmas time is probably the only time of year I think about angels. I'm not someone who thinks about guardian angels. I don't think of those who have died as angels. Frankly, angels seem so odd and a little creepy.

So, I understand the terror of the shepherds in tonight's reading. These shepherds were on guard to protect their flock, but then something unexpectedly expected happened. I imagine it's like that moment when you know someone is going to jump out and scare you, but you still about pee yourself when they do. Well, maybe that's just me. Anyway, these shepherds were actively looking for threats and then, boom, they found one and were terrified. So, the angel, told them not to be afraid—a good place to start—and told them what was happening in Bethlehem. And the angel keeps on talking. That's because angels inform. Remember, up to this point in the story, Zechariah and Mary both received some personal news from angels. After all, the word angel comes from the Greek word that means messenger.

Back in the fields with the shepherds, a whole gaggle of messengers say (notice they didn't sing, they said) "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!" Or to translate it a little more directly from the Greek, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, goodwill toward all humanity."

That sentence grabbed my attention more this year than any other year before. “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, goodwill toward all humanity.” There’s something about these messengers giving the highest of praise to God for bringing world peace and treating all humanity with goodness and graciousness that strikes me. It’s probably because rude, angry, and frustrated people seem to abound. From individuals assaulting airline workers over masks, to homicides in Chicago at the highest level in decades and rising level of reckless road rage.

While I haven’t assaulted or murdered anyone, I feel it too. I catch myself feeling resentment towards the unvaccinated, I notice myself aggravated when individuals believe that the election was stolen, and I was appalled to watch the chaotic U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan. And while my examples might not give you the same feeling, my hunch is that something brings you equal frustration, anger, and bitterness—maybe even my examples!

That's why what these messengers shared is so disarming. You see, here in Luke's gospel, this is one of the first times we are told about Christ's message. The messengers perk our ears up to listen carefully and look closely at this poor, vulnerable, little child that was born to a displaced and unwed mother. These messengers announced that Jesus is the supreme embodiment of God's nature. They said, keep an eye out for the ways that this little child will preach peace through justice and love. They said look carefully at Jesus' non-violent actions, watch closely his rejection of religious hypocrisy devoid of care for neighbor, and don't miss the fact that God values an ever-widening circle of inclusion and never-ending gift of forgiveness. In short, these messengers point to goodwill for all of humankind. They remind us that the poor, oppressed, and vulnerable are God's focus, that radical generosity is the true measure of success, and that God's vision for the world looks nothing like what we know today.

The real kicker, though, is that God would become incarnate; that is, embodied in human flesh and form. And I'm not talking about a single time 2,000+ years ago. Don't get me wrong, God was incarnate in Jesus. But God's incarnation is more expansive. Now, depending on what faith tradition you've been exposed to most, this can be a hard concept to grasp.

One helpful way I've been opened to this concept is through a song entitled "Hey Mary." It's by a presbyterian minister and his son living in New Zealand. It starts with the Mary's Annunciation, where an angel visits Mary and shares about the ways God is coming to the world through her. As the song goes on, the incarnation moves from a young girl named Mary to the minister's son and daughter and finally, to all of humanity. While I'm not a fan of you being there and me being here, one of the benefits of having this screen in between us is that we can experience this song together. So, let's listen.

"There is no such thing as ordinary now, God is here. Every life and breath is blessed, you never know when God might appear. You seem to think you're nothing much but, heavens coming close enough to touch. Hey people, God is coming here through you."

It's a reminder that God comes through those ordinary places. God comes to us in a meal each time we gather for worship. God comes through us as we feed the hungry during our Advent Project, as we stock the Little Free Pantry outside the church, and as we take steps to limit the spread of COVID. God comes through us in our homes, with friends and families, and while

playing with toys. God comes close enough for us to touch, because God is incarnate in Jesus, and God is incarnate in you.

Friends, tonight, we gather to recall the ever-shrinking space between us and our God who cannot help but get close to us. A God who reveals love through a vulnerable, poor, bastard child. A God who reminds us that God is incarnate each day. Merry Christmas, friends,—God has come here through you. Amen.