

Learning from the Angels

- A television reporter asked people on the streets of NYC basic questions about Christmas. Here are some "facts" he heard: Jesus was born in Jerusalem, his profession was "all-around nice guy," and the Wise Men brought him "frankincense, myrrh, and baby diapers."
- Even with that sad silliness, there's truth to the song that says "It's the most wonderful time of the year." Because at Christmas, unlike any other time, people's hearts are pried open just a little to the greatest truths in the universe, those about God and his plan of salvation. And people's hearts are open enough to believe in a visitation on a Judean hillside two thousand years ago, when angels appeared to shepherds.
- Let's take a look back at that night, the night that Christ was born. It was the night of nights. There was an appearance like none the world had ever seen. There was an announcement like none the world had ever heard. There was adulation like none the world had ever experienced.
- Luke 2:8-14
- **The Appearance**
- The shepherds were watching their flocks by night. That's all. Just a normal night for a shepherd. Maybe glad to have sheep to watch. But also maybe wishing they had a job that didn't require them to be outside so much, with the elements. And the quiet. And the dark. It's dark out here! Then it wasn't. Everything changed in an instant. The sky was lit up as an angel of the Lord appeared. The word for appeared means to "be at hand in an instant." The angel was not there. Then it was. It wasn't like the shepherds looked way off in the distance and saw something lit up moving in their direction. "Hey, Levi. What's that coming yonder?" "Don't know, Jake. But it's headin' this way." (Hey! Bethlehem IS in southern Israel) NO! They didn't see the angel approaching. There was no warning whatsoever. The angel was on them in an instant. BRIGHT. "The glory of the Lord shone around them."
- The truth is, you can't tell the Christmas story without angels. You run into them everywhere. In fact, you can't tell the story of creation or the fall or redemption or what will be the final restoration, without angels. They are creations of God, not human, not fully divine. They were witnesses to creation, Job 38 tells us, which means that their own creation took place before the earth's. There was a cosmic war in heaven when Lucifer, the highest angel exalted himself against God (Isaiah 14). The Bible says that one-third of the angels sided with Lucifer, and they were cast out of heaven. Lucifer and his demons became the sworn enemies of God. Those angels who sided with God have played enormous roles in his kingdom. Angels kept watch at the Garden of Eden after Adam and Eve were removed. Angels were messengers of God to Abraham to announce that Isaac would be born. They were sent by God to warn Lot of the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. It was an angel with a sword that David saw standing between heaven and earth in 1 Chronicles 21, bringing destruction because of David's sinful census. There were angels that attended to Jesus during his time in the wilderness, when he was being tempted by Satan. An angel strengthened him in Gethsemane when he was agonizing over going to the cross and his sweat became great drops of blood. Angels were absent at the cross, at Jesus' own request, as he told his disciples when he

was arrested that he could ask the Father to send more than 12 legions of angels. “But how then should the Scriptures be fulfilled?” How many angels are there? Hebrews 12 tells us they cannot be numbered. The angels were in attendance at his resurrection, telling the women looking for him, “He is not here; he is risen, as he said.” Angels also attend to us, and sometimes, Hebrews 13 tells us, when we are showing kindness to a stranger, we are actually being hospitable to an angel, and don’t know it. Angels are God’s servants, and ours, and as we see in the text today, and in all the birth narratives, angels played a big part in the first advent. Here we see them appearing to shepherds in the hills outside Bethlehem.

- The pictures that have been painted of this scene over the years are almost comical. They often portray the shepherds as rough-hewn burly men, and the angels as delicate women with curls and rosy cheeks. The paintings often make you wonder who was afraid of whom? Like the shepherds should be saying to the angel, “Don’t be afraid little lady. Us big ol’ shepherds won’t hurt you. Come on down here and don’t be shy. You can talk to strangers. It’s Ok.” NO! The angel was awesome and the shepherds were terrified. “Filled with great fear,” Luke said. It was the night of nights and the appearance of an angel changed everything. Because they came with news.
- **The Announcement**
- The angel says, “Fear not!” The shepherds were still shaking, maybe hiding their faces on the ground. The angel says, “I bring you good news of great joy!” (vs. 10) It is the good news that is *not only* the answer to all of our fears but is the source of all our joy. All our fears. Gone. All our joy. Now here. Maybe that was the inspiration for perhaps the most often-sung Christmas Carol, Isaac Watts’ popular hymn, “Joy to the World.” Remember verse 2?
- Joy to the Earth! the Savior reigns; Let men their songs employ; While fields and floods, rocks, hills, and plains, Repeat the sounding joy...
- Fields and floods, rocks, hills, and plains...that reminds me of what Jesus said in Luke 19 as He was entering Jerusalem and the people were praising Him, shouting “Blessed is the King who comes in the name of the LORD! Peace in heaven and glory in the highest!” The Pharisees said, “Hey, Jesus, tell these people to be quiet!” Jesus replied, “I tell you, if these were silent, the very stones would cry out.” We all know how much stones know, right? Nothing. Aristotle said that’s what rocks dream about all day. Nothing. So, is Jesus saying that those who refuse to sound forth His praises are as dumb as a rock? No, that’s not nice to rocks because they are praising Him. The rocks and the trees and the fields and even the floods. All of creation praises God. That’s why Isaac Watts pleads with us, “Let men their songs employ.” Put your songs to work praising God, like the heavens and like the earth does.
- The angels are incredible creations, but listen! Christmas was and is for God’s people. Angels can only watch, and be amazed, at the special relationship God has with his people. Peter says they “long to look into” the experience of grace, the wonder of redemption. I like what Kent Hughes wrote about that night when angels appeared:
- “How we all would like to have been there—to be a fly on the ear of one of the shepherds’ sheep. But actually...we have the best part because we are the ones who receive God’s grace. God became a man, not an angel. God redeemed men and women, not angels. Ours in the best part, and we will praise God for it for all eternity.”

- That is why it was such good news that brings great joy: “For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord.”
- The announcement is first a message of what He has come to do. Save us! And just for emphasis, there is no definite article in the Greek text. The translation is more literally, “For unto you is born in the city of David, **Savior**, who is Christ the Lord.” Hey shepherds, the One who came to save you is here. In Bethlehem. Not in Jerusalem. Not in Rome. He is born today in the city of His ancestor, King David. The irony is that the one who thought he was the Savior and was hailed by the Roman Empire as Savior and Lord, Caesar Augustus, decreed that all the world should be registered for a tax, which required Joseph to take his pregnant wife to Bethlehem, because he was of the house and the lineage of David. There the real Savior would be born. Before Jesus was born in Bethlehem, a man named Paulus Fabius Maximus, proconsul of Asia during Augustus’ reign, proposed that the year should start with Augustus’ birthday: He wrote, “We could justly hold it (the birth of Augustus) to be the equivalent to the beginning of all things.” Sorry, Caesar. The Savior would be found in a manger, not seated on a throne. Hey, shepherds. He has come to be your Savior. “But, who is He?”
- He is Christ. That’s not a name but a title. Messiah! The Anointed One. He is Christ! This is the one whom the prophets foretold, “Unto us a child is born; unto us a son is given.” He is Christ, and the government shall be upon His shoulders. Just to make sure there is no mistake who he is the angel adds...
- He is Lord. Christ is who he is on earth. Lord is who he is in heaven. “Oh, shepherds, you will not see the Lord in all of his glory and power and might like we have,” the angels might have said, “but Lord God Almighty he is. He has come to save. He will come again to reign!” It was the night of all nights, and the announcement was like nothing the world had ever heard.
- **The Adulation**
- It was about this time that the angel was suddenly joined by a heavenly host of angels. Again, there was no warning as a multitude, a military brigade of angels stepped through the veil to join their fellow messenger. Then they began to worship together. “Glory to God in the highest.” There is no greater glory that God could receive than He received through His Son Jesus. There is no greater glory that we will ever know than the glory of Jesus. Paul said, “And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another.” (2 Cor. 3:18). Then Paul wrote in chapter 4, “For God, who said, ‘Let light shine out of darkness,’ has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.” (2 Cor. 4:6). The shepherds looked into the face of the angels and saw the glory of God reflected there. But not anything like what they saw when they looked into the face of Jesus. Or when you and I do the same.
- Then the angels said, “and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!” Where is that peace found and why is it only for those with whom He is pleased? It can only be found at the cross. Christ came to “make peace by the blood of his cross,” Paul said in Col. 1:20.
- It was an appearance like none the world had ever seen. It was an announcement like none the world had ever heard. It was an adulation like none the world had ever

experienced. Here we are today. Still celebrating that first Christmas, when we got everything we ever wanted, and everything we ever needed.

- Franklin Graham told the story in Greensboro a few months ago about a little orphan boy in another country who was invited to come to the church to get a Christmas shoebox. "I don't want a shoebox," he said. "I want a Mom and a Dad." Well, we don't have a Mom and a Dad for you...but we do have a shoebox. Won't you come and receive your gift? The little boy went reluctantly and was given a gift and when he opened the box he found a picture of a young couple, a note from them, and their address. "Hey, why don't you write to this couple and thank them for the gift?" The boy agreed, sent his letter, and six weeks later they got it and wrote him back. Six weeks later, he got their letter and wrote them back. And six months after the little boy first received a shoebox, he got what he really wanted: the young couple took him home as their adopted son.
- There's good news of GREAT joy today. The Father has sent His Son to make a way for us to BE His sons and His daughters. That's what we all want. It is certainly what we all need.
- Micah and Jesse are going to come now and sing about that night in Bethlehem.
- Prayer