

DECEMBER 27, 2020

# Marion weekly update

## FIRST UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

*“Connecting people with Jesus Christ so all can experience his love and joy.”*



SERMON Dec 20th: “Angels– More Than a Christmas Choir” Matthew 2:10-15, Luke 1:11-20

This week our Advent series centers around the character of the angels.

Right off the bat, let’s note a couple details about their role in the birth story. First, Matthew and Luke have different takes on how the angels visit. Both have grounding in the Old Testament, but in Matthew they only visit in dreams and Luke they only visit in person. It’s an interesting detail, but it says more about the writers of the gospels than the angels themselves. Each is telling the story from their own vantage point, and so depict the angels as they understand them. What is important is that both find it necessary and compelling to include the angelic presence in the story. The significant clustering of angels between the two gospels we’ll come back to a bit later on.

The other detail is something I’ve noticed year to year as we tell the story over and over again. Most times the angels are in “silos”. They tend to be seen in the context of whatever scene in which they appear. The angel to Mary is seen isolated in that scene, the angel to the shepherds in that one, and so forth. Today we are going to consider them collectively. What does the big picture of these angels tell us?

I suggest that seeing them this way is far richer than seeing them separate. The witness of the angels combined gives a much fuller picture of their role overall, of God and God’s presence in the event, and ultimately of a more complete sense of God’s love. The angels reflect through the story, and throughout scripture, some key attributes each pertaining to a person in the Triune Godhead. This should make sense as the angel’s job is to do God’s bidding. The result is that what they do should naturally be a direct reflection of the fullness of God.

We see here the angels observing 3 primary roles: accountability/protection, ministering, and messaging. The accountability/protecting I associate with the might and authority of God the Father. The ministering, compassionate, gracious, ultimately redeeming I associate with God the Son. The messaging, calling and directing us, I associate with God the Holy Spirit.

We see the accountability, or disciplining, take place in the story of John the Baptist’s father, Zechariah. Zechariah is an upright educated man on in years. In the temple he receives a visit from an angel who tells him he’s going to have a child. Not just any child, but a child that will prepare the way for the coming Messiah. You’d think that Zechariah, knowing well the story of Abraham and Sarah having Isaac in their later years wouldn’t be quick to disbelieve, yet he is. The angel disciplines Zechariah’s lack of faith by striking him mute until the child is born.

We see protection in dreams to Joseph and the Magi. When Jesus is born Joseph is told to pack up and get out of Dodge until Herod is gone to protect the child. The Magi are told to go home by a different way than they came for the same reason. They can’t risk tipping Herod off as to where Jesus is or Herod will hunt Him down and kill Him.

The ministering and the messaging actually overlap. This shouldn’t come as a surprise that different roles or persons of the Godhead might overlap. The notion of the Trinity is that these three persons are woven together inextricably. They don’t just act individually on creation, but often can and do act together, all at once, in the same moment.

The angels minister to Mary in both part of the messaging her calling as well as the calling of Joseph. Mary is called to be the mother of the Messiah. Joseph is called to be the earthly father of the heavenly child. These messages are also an act of compassion on Mary. Mary knew how babies came about, and to suddenly find herself pregnant with no clue as to how or why would be terrifying and confusing. In speaking with her, the angel sets both of these things aside. With Joseph, were the angel to not have visited, he would have not taken Mary back. Word would certainly get out as to why, and mark her as unfaithful. I imagine this would destroy future prospects of marriage and lead to a very difficult and hard life. The calling of Joseph and Mary is filled with both divine message and gracious ministry.

The most direct, informative manner of messaging is the shepherds. They are informed of the what, the where, and the why. And they respond. In the angelic, the fullness of the Godhead is stamped all over the birth of Christ.

Yet there is another detail that we don’t often focus on from the standpoint of the angels. In Luke when the angels appear, all three, Zechariah, Mary, and the shepherds, are afraid. Luke reports of Zechariah and the shepherds that they were terrified. Mary was perplexed and told not to be afraid by the angel. There is no need to say that to someone unless they are scared. Why?

The most obvious reason is that they just had a heavenly being pop in out of nowhere. That would scare anyone. It’s a perfectly reasonable response to that kind of surprise.

The rest goes back to the Old Testament, which would be their understanding of the angelic. The first thing we need to remember is that angels are not the “Precious Moments” figurines we associate them with. Flowing robes, rosy cheeks, a perfectly placed halo, and a smile. Yes, sometimes they appeared in human form as they did to Abraham on the way to Sodom and Gomorrah, but they were something else as well.

In Genesis, we hear that a Cherubim was set at the entrance to the Garden after Adam and Eve were ejected. Ezekiel tells us what the cherubim look like. They have four wings, and four faces. The face of a human, a lion, an ox, and an eagle. They are tethered to the ground by several wheels that take it in any direction it needs to go. This is a terrifying image. And just to put it in the realm of accountability/discipline, it wasn't there in a “doorman” capacity. It was there as a bouncer to keep everyone out with flaming sword in hand.

The next order of angels up is the Seraphim. These guys have six wings, two covering the face, two covering the feet, two for flight and when they enter a room their voice shakes the very pillars of the building and the room fills with smoke. I would call that terrifying.

They are fierce in disciplining/holding accountable. They destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah. In the story of Baalam the angel stood blocking his path and was going to kill him for having a heart purposed against God's wishes. The angel of death killed the firstborn in Egypt of anyone without the lamb's blood on the doorpost. When she didn't follow their orders, Lot's wife turned to salt. In Chronicles an angel wrought destruction on Israel for their disobedience until God finally intervened and said “that's enough, you can stop now.”

In their messaging we see them acting primarily as they call and instruct the prophets. While we might find it a privilege to have been called to be a prophet, it probably didn't feel like much of one to them. Time and again they were given the unpopular message to hand off to kings and rulers. These kings had their “lackey prophets” who only told them what they wanted to hear so as not to upset them. The true prophets were the ones willing to deliver the hard messages calling them to account.

What was their reward? They were abused, jailed, and sometimes killed. Even Jesus refers to this in His own ministry to those who won't believe Him. “Of course you won't, God gave you the prophets and you persecuted and killed them.” To be called to the life of a prophet was to be called to suffering, and to having a life many times turned on its head.

I would imagine that to have an angel appear would have had two immediate questions. “What did I do wrong and am I going to die” and “what is this angel going to ask me to do and just how bad is it going to get?” Very good reasons to be afraid.

Still, we can't forget that there was also the ministering presence of the angels. When Elijah was at his wits end and giving up, wishing to die, God sent angels to minister to him. They brought him food and drink for strength. God sent the angel to minister to Hagar and Ishmael when they were cast into the desert and left for dead.

The angels protected the people. They saved Lot from the destruction of Sodom. They closed the mouths of the lions for Daniel. When Elisha was set upon by a king's army and his servant was terrified, he asked God to open the servant's eyes what was seen was a host of angels amidst the army, flaming horses and chariots, waiting for the order to strike. The angel led and watched over the people during the exodus leading and following them.

Even the messaging that may have been harrowing in the end to the prophets was an exercise in protection. Seeing the poor choices of the rulers, God sent messengers to get them back on the right track. The angels were trying to turn them to spare them the consequences on both themselves and the people under them of acting and choosing apart from being faithful to God.

This pushes us back to the nativity story.

The clustering of angels as well as the various reasons for their intervention is, I think, unique in the Biblical witness. It is more whole, more complete, and intentional. Clearly God wants this event to go off properly. Clearly God's full attention is on this moment. The angelic action here testifies to that, particularly in its more whole reflection of the Triune Godhead.

It also reminds us that in this participation, we see that the love of God is present far greater than just the heart warming of a newborn child. It is even more than the inbreaking of the divine into creation, setting forth on a destiny that is instructive and redemptive. It is a much more complete sense of God's love, and therefore a more complete sense of the love we are to offer one another.

When we consider the bigger picture of how God is acting in the world, including through the angels, we begin from the foundation that everything God is doing is for our own best interests, and more significantly for the best interests of all creation. The desire is that what God does is drawing us closer to God and driving creation closer to the potential God has wished for it from the beginning. Since the fall, God has continued to try to steer the world back on course and into the fullness of glory intended all along.

When God holds us accountable or disciplines us, it isn't because of some cosmic desire to deliver a spanking. It is to get our focus clearer. It is to wake us up to make better choices so that our lives will be more attuned to Christ, and so that others will be spared the consequences of our bad decision. It is to bring us more in line with God's desires.

God cares for us, strengthens us, forgives us, cares for us, comforts us. Why? God knows we can't do it on our own. We need help. We need some source outside ourselves to make up the difference when the difficulty of life wears us down.

God directs and calls us. The Holy Spirit speaks to us constantly moving us towards the purposes of God. God knows that left to our own devices every one of us is prone to wander. We are likely to go afield God's purpose and plan, and so provision is made to keep us directed rightly.

The only question is whether or not we listen to it.

The point is that all of this is the love of God seeing a bigger picture. Even when our individual role is uncomfortable and inconvenient, there is a larger meaning for the greater whole. We all merely need to get on board with pursuing this design of God.

This love of God didn't just begin with the advent of Jesus. It has existed since the beginning of time and will until time ends.

This is a whole, complete love. This is what Jesus grows into in example and witness. This powerful, complete, whole love is the love that came down at Christmas.

I encourage all of us to embrace the fullness of God's love. It is evidenced in the work of the angels and more so in the life of Jesus. It is a love beyond measure, without bounds, and unconditional. Let this be what we experience this week as we approach the holiday. Let it be what guides who we are and how we treat one another.

This is the love that embodies the spirit of Christmas. This is the love that we are called to model. This is the love that will help us experience the fullness of Christmas no matter what the trappings around us hold.

## BIBLE STUDY John 11

This chapter of John is a famous one. The dead man, Lazarus, is raised from the dead. In many ways, while this story is truly incredible, it is a kind of transition chapter within the book of John. What follows is that we very quickly move into the last week of Jesus' life. This chapter is the bridge between the ministry of Jesus and that final stretch that leads to His redemptive work on the cross.

This chapter goes to great pains to make sure that we understand that Lazarus dying was not something that happened because Jesus was too little too late. Quite the opposite, we are told that Jesus intentionally delayed His going to visit his sick friend so that a point and example could be made. Jesus knew that Lazarus was dead, though His disciples required some more specific and blunt guidance. Trying I suppose to soften the message, Jesus says Lazarus is "asleep". Again, we see the use of a term with double meaning. And again, we see the disciples seize on the wrong one. He is not napping, Lazarus has died.

The reason for this is also set out that the whole circumstance is to glorify God's son, Jesus. Pitching a bit forward in the story here, raising Lazarus serves multiple purposes. It serves to be one more major miracle to convince the disciples of Jesus' identity. If the other miracles weren't enough, raising someone from the dead should do it for sure. It also serves to comfort Jesus' friends Mary and Martha. They are distraught. To say nothing of aiding Lazarus. Finally, we are cast forward to the crucifixion and resurrection. Jesus is about to go into His own death and raising moment. Having this moment add tremendous weight to the sense that if He lays down His life He has the power to take it up again. The event is rich with meaning beyond the act.

In this passage we see a tremendous amount of humanity. First, we see it in the disciples with the comment by Thomas. "Well, I guess this is it, might as well all die together." They know how high the tension now is between Jesus and the Jewish leadership. They've already tried to stone Jesus twice. So for Jesus to head back to Judea is walking into a death trap. Thomas' statement has both the hallmarks of grim resignation as well as fierce loyalty. The sense that they are heading into an inevitable punishment for subverting the powers that be is completely understandable. Sometimes resigning to what seems to be reality is the only way to embrace it and forge ahead into it. In this case, to a degree they forge not just into it, but through it. At the same time, there is a loyalty to Jesus. Whatever has transpired to this point, Thomas at least in his resignation won't let Jesus endure whatever is to come on His own.

This brings us to a very human point. At this moment, it seems that Thomas, and if the disciples agreed the rest of them as well, were all in. Ready to follow Him to the grave. Yet at the actual event of Jesus' arrest they bailed. All of us have this same sense. It's that point we won't go beyond. This was not that point for Thomas. It occurred later, but it wasn't now. The glory and grace of Jesus is that He loved Thomas now, and He continued to love Thomas later even after he doubted. Jesus does the same for each of us.

We also catch a wonderful glimpse of the humanity of Jesus. So often we focus on His divinity, ministry, and sacrifice. We can forget that He also was human. This Christmas season is a tremendous reminder of that. Jesus' humanity is never more apparent than at His birth. A baby is totally reliant on the parent. Jesus didn't come into the world teaching and preaching, but just as any other child. He was vulnerable, and relied on Mary and Joseph to care for and nourish Him. His humanity didn't diminish as He aged. It was still present.

Here we see the very human side of Jesus. He wasn't all teaching and "miracleing". He wasn't all "business". He had friends. He had people who were part of His inner circle beyond the disciples. There is great emotion conveyed in this passage. To dial in on this, we can look at this, of oddly lauded for brevity, shortest verse in the Bible that tells us that "Jesus wept."

Why did He weep? In the discussion Tuesday about it, the point was made that Jesus obviously knew He would raise Lazarus. So it doesn't make sense that He'd be broken up about something He knew wasn't a permanent condition. I even suggested that if that were all that was on His mind, Jesus might even be excited or giddy at knowing what was about to unfold. Kind of like parents knowing what the kids are getting before they unwrap the present. But no, Jesus was moved to tears.

This is an important detail. When someone expresses emotion, compassion, love, and grace, the target of that expression is significant. It tells us something of the moment. I offer that Jesus wept not over Lazarus, but over the grief and heartbreak of those mourning Lazarus. He saw the grief in Mary and Martha. He saw their lament that He hadn't arrived earlier to save the day. He felt the pit in their stomach and the tragedy in their soul, and He was moved. He empathized with His friends. He allowed Himself to be in the moment and experience the pain of another. I think about when Jesus wept over Jerusalem. He knew where things were headed and what was to befall the temple. He felt for them, and He wept. This is both a lesson in Jesus' humanity and a lesson on what it means to be a Godly human. God's desire is that we love one another that we feel one another's pain and loss. We connect with one another.

And then, as Jesus did here, we act in the face of that tragedy and loss to our capability.

Jesus, as a demonstration of His identity, raises Lazarus, and what is the response?

On one hand, it tells us that there are those that then believed in Him. Martha recognized Him clearly in conversation. She called Him "Messiah", and acknowledged that she knew that whatever He might do of God, God would grant. Once again, we see humanity at work and Jesus gracious response of not chiding but simply acting to heal the brokenness.

All at once Martha and Mary seem to know who Jesus is and trust Him. Yet that also are frustrated at His late arrival and seem surprised at the resultant resurrection. This is often the story of all of us. We believe, yet our human minds and experience can find it hard to accept what we know Jesus is capable of. We've seen our share of hucksters, frauds, and those using Jesus' name for shady ends and means. We've seen them fake the miraculous for self-promotion. So it's hard for us to grasp that this miraculous happens in real time in real life. Yet we still have our belief. Jesus is patient with us. And often He works despite our questioning sensibilities.

There are also those that go and tell the Pharisees. There is often assumption here that they went to "rat" Him out. This may be the case. Scripture, however, doesn't attach a value judgement to this. It simply reports that it happened. We've seen before in John's gospel where a miracle happens and is communicated to the Pharisees with excitement, and rather than be joyful at the miracle the Pharisees instead feel threatened and use it as fuel to go after Jesus.

Whatever the reason for reporting, once again we see the leadership, in this case the priests and even high priest, Caiaphas, really making this the straw that breaks the camel's back.

You can't get much bigger of a miracle than raising someone from the dead. There have been tense interactions between Jesus and the religious leaders to this point. The more Jesus does, the more threatening He becomes. Now we see the fear that a critical mass of people will follow Him, and that will be a threat to both the authority of the priests, and in their eyes, potentially to the Jews as a whole. Remember, the priests were in cahoots with the Romans. The high priest served at the pleasure of the Romans. John takes care to note that Caiaphas was high priest "that year". Why? Because if the high priest wasn't sufficiently on board with the Romans, they would install one that was more sympathetic. Also, in a not wholly bad sense, the priests were somewhat responsible for keeping what was considered an unruly group within the Roman empire, the Jews, in check. They had a duty to help make sure there weren't insurrections and rebellions.

If enough Jews left to follow Jesus, that would remove their control. If Jesus is seen as a political dissident, His followers would be seen likewise. Not having control would do away with the usefulness of the priests and the temple. Having the Jews become see wholly as a population of dissidents would prove disastrous for the Jewish nation. It's possible that they saw a threat to both their own status and power, and legitimately feared for the people.

Which prompts Caiaphas to His famous statement that it's better for one to die for many. John also communicates that this is prophetic, but in typical John style, there is an unanticipated alternate meaning to this utterance.

The high priest is looking at it as sacrificing one person to protect the physical and political status and safety of the Jews. While he is correct that one would die for many, he is totally mistaken on the nature of what the death means. Jesus is one man who will die for many. However the death is for the healing and life of the soul. It is to incorporate the many into one kingdom, the kingdom of God. In fact, Caiaphas' grasp is limited in scope. Jesus will not just die for the Jews but for all. This takes us back to the statement that there is another "flock" of sheep that Jesus will unite with the Jews. This is the flock of the Gentiles who will likewise have invitation to participate in His redeeming grace.

As we've seen, this chapter continues John's practice of foreshadowing what is to come as well as taking us back to prior chapters in his gospel. We are cast forward to the crucifixion and resurrection. We are taken back to previous healings and conversations. There is even noted that Mary was the woman who anointed Jesus' feet many chapters back. The gospel is in continual conversation with itself reinforcing for us what has been before, inviting us to ask questions, insert ourselves into the story, and preparing us for what comes next.

We know that we are headed into serious and dangerous waters as the chapter comes to a close. Up to this point, Jesus has been back and forth between Judea and Galilee. He is teaching, performing signs and wonders, and encountering His opponents. In a sense it's like He is dipping His toe continually in shark infested waters. To this point, we have seen that His "hour had not yet come." Knowing this, Jesus could courageously enter these situations with the understanding that He could work the moment in such a way as to escape any potential threat that might present itself. Remember as well, that Jesus went to teach and heal as His primary goal, not to pick a fight. His opponents sought Him out rather than the other way around.

Here, however, we see that He retreats to Ephraim and refused to move about publicly in Judea. He sees that the plot to kill Him is in full swing. He knows His hour is almost here and so tempting the authorities in their current state of committal to His death isn't wise. He holes up for the moment until it's time to go back to Judea for that last powerful week that will take Him to the cross.

The sense of where the priesthood is at is evident at the end of the chapter as well. As Passover approaches, they are on high alert. They haven't seen Jesus yet and wonder if He'll come at all. Jesus has shown Himself bold enough to be on display at the feasts and festivals, so they must be anticipating He'll show. For me this represents a tension and anxiety in their ranks. They are desperate to take Him out of the picture. We are told that they have even sent word for anyone who knows Jesus' whereabouts to reveal them so that they can arrest Him.

The question popped up last night, "on what charges?" This is a good question. We aren't told. I suggest we can infer two possibilities at least. One possibility is that to this point Jesus has made multiple claims in multiple conversations that have angered people to the point of wanting to stone Him. Perhaps they have already accused Him of blasphemy and it just didn't get communicated. The other possibility is that they were now all in to remove Jesus. They had made up their minds that He needed to die. How do we make it happen? Arrest Him first and then figure out the charges after. The prime objective it to get Him out of the picture and sort out details later.

Regardless, this chapter leaves us with the sense that the end is nigh.

It also is packed with a wealth of perspective to move us from Jesus' ministry to Jesus' destiny. We see both His divinity and humanity on full display. We see His continued effort to open the eyes of the disciples to the fullness of who He is. We see the split response to Jesus' ministry. We see the least likely people, the women, having the clearest idea of Jesus' identity while the educated religious leadership are blind and the disciples still need some degree of convincing. We are drawn back in the gospel to what has gone before even as we are primed to receive what is about to occur. Maybe more than anything, we see that as Jesus approaches the end of His earthly life, His love and commitment are evident. Regardless of the hard heartedness of the priests, the hard headedness of the disciples, and even in the midst of heartfelt loss, Jesus never gives up. He continues to try to reach those around Him and help them see Him for who He is. He continues to prepare them so that they can receive the fullness of His message once He is crucified and then glorified. Despite their faults, He won't abandon them.

This message is assuring. If He did it for them, He does it for us. Despite our faults and issues, Jesus pursues us rabidly. He loves us. He doesn't give up on us. What greater hope is there to cling to as we prepare to celebrate Christmas?



Merry Christmas