

December 24, 2017
Luke 2:9-14
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“So Excited!”

Good morning! It’s almost Christmas! I’m so excited! We have been tightening the focus of our Advent adventure. We know that Christmas Eve is just a moment in the whole sweeping epic story of God’s salvation: from the beginning of creation and through to faithful believers and followers in the final weeks of 2017, but what an exciting moment it is! All of the characters we have talked about over the past three weeks are converging on this moment in this place: a humble stable in Bethlehem and a newborn baby in a feed trough. If you’re not excited about this moment, you haven’t caught the spirit of this adventure -- or maybe you’re just too tired from shopping and cleaning and baking and holiday gatherings. If that’s the case, I’m glad you’re here this morning. Take this as an invitation to take some time out from all the busy-ness of the past few weeks and to remember that this story is bigger than any of our preparation, our anxiety, or even our celebration. We are all held within this story and in God’s hands.

Our final character of Advent is this angel who has flown in to the chancel table this morning. Like the shepherd, this angel is a stand-in for a lot of others: a whole host of angels in fact. You heard from just one of the junior angels a little while ago, and based on her enthusiasm, it must have been quite a mission to be charged with. I use the word ‘mission’ intentionally, because there is a decidedly military flavor to the account from Luke 2. I want to explore the nature of angels generally and these angels in particular this morning as we prepare for the good news of Christmas.

Angel, as you probably know, comes from the Greek and Latin words which mean *messenger*. Angels carry messages from heaven to earth -- maybe they report back to God about what’s happening here -

- we never hear that end of the message chain, and I'm pretty sure that God already knows better than we do what is going on with us. The news that the angels bring is not always good news -- at least not for everyone. In Exodus 12, we're told about the Angel of Death which entered the houses of the Egyptians and killed each of their firstborn, because their Pharaoh would not free the Hebrew people from slavery. There were angels who caused death among the Hebrews in the wilderness when they disobeyed God's commands. More often though, angels are agents of praise and worship. In Job 38:7 we have this wonderful image of the dawn of creation when the morning stars sang together and the angels shouted for joy. At the other end of our meta-story, at the end of creation and the end of time, we get an image in Revelation 5 of the throne room of God and thousands upon thousands of angels singing praise, honor, glory and power to the Lamb upon the throne.

When angels gather in great numbers, it's almost always in heaven, for the purpose of singing praise to God. It's only in Luke 2 that there is a multitude of angels which come to earth. This had to be a really important message. There is just one angel -- undoubtedly a senior angel, a four-star general angel -- who delivers the message about the birth of the Messiah: the Savior who is Christ the Lord. That one angel is almost too much for the shepherds, who are terrified. But it is that whole host of angels and their message that I'm especially intrigued with.

I mentioned earlier about the military imagery of that battalion of angels: the Good News Bible version actually describes them as a "great army" of angels. We may be more familiar with the phrase "a whole host" of angels, but it means the same thing. The word "host" is amazingly complex and sometimes contradictory. One of its meanings is a Roman military unit, like a platoon or a squadron. The closest English synonym would be a legion, which was an army unit of 3,000 to 6,000 foot soldiers. Since it's difficult to calculate that many people with any kind of precision, the words host and legion came to mean then, as they do now, simply "a whole lot," and can be applied to anything large group of things: We had a whole host of cookies here for our Cookie Walk two weeks ago.

But there are deeper roots to that word host, too. It is from the word *hospes* where we get our word *hospitality*. It can mean a guest, a stranger, or an enemy. If it's a guest, we offer our generous hospitality; when it's an enemy we bring in the army, but it's the same word. Hosts can be animals who have parasites inside them (usually enemies) or computer servers which facilitate communication (I think these are supposed to be friendly, but sometimes it's hard to tell). The meaning of the word host is remarkably flexible, and it takes on new meaning for me when I consider the message of that host of angels and how they delivered it. You know the message, right?

Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, goodwill to all people.

That is an interesting message to send in the army to deliver. We don't have any evidence that these angels were carry flaming swords or threatening death if the shepherds didn't follow the directions to go to Bethlehem and find that baby. Although the initial appearance, and then the sheer number of angels was certainly intimidating, it doesn't seem that they were heavily armed. In fact, they do the same thing on earth that they do when they're in heaven: they sing! They sing Glory to God in the highest! And not just glory to God in heaven, they have some proclamation for folks on earth, too: not, Repent -- or else! Or God is upset with you! But Peace on earth and goodwill to all those with whom God is pleased.

That is an army that I would enlist in; I'd be so excited and honored to be an alto in the army of the Lord. I could appear and sing praise and tell folks that there is good news about a Savior, and God has a plan for peace for the whole world. It turns out, that's what I get to do: all of that -- except being an alto -- I'm a soprano. But my calling is to join with that army of angels to keep sharing the same good news they first brought to earth on Christmas Eve. And it's not only my calling -- it's for all of us; anyone who believes what the angels sang. There are parts of my job as a pastor that aren't so praiseworthy -- nothing shady, but administrative tasks which help the wheels of the church turn smoothly. Those things are my job. Lots of you have jobs, too, professional, non-professional, paid and not paid -- we all of have jobs to do which are necessary. But our calling, our *calling* as Christians is to hear the news the angels sang and to share it with

others: glory to God in the Highest! On earth peace, and good will to all people.

Here's where that gets difficult: "all people" is a pretty big group. Remember all the meanings of host? Guest, stranger, enemy, friend? All people probably fall into one of those broad categories, but the angels gave us only one message for all those people: Glory to God! Peace on earth, goodwill to all. Proclaiming peace to our enemies is pretty risky business; that's the kind of thing that could get us killed. What kind of army recruits people in order to send them out where they can be killed? Every army, actually.

The final piece of this message from the angels comes from one more definition of the word 'host.' Some of you may have thought of this already. Host is the name of the wafer which is used in communion which represents -- or becomes, in some Christian traditions -- the body of Christ. If you are here this evening for the Christmas Eve service, you will be invited to the Lord's table for communion. Jesus is the host: not only the one who invites us -- guests, strangers, enemies -- but the one who gave up his body and blood for the message of peace on earth, goodwill to all people. Jesus could have called on that host of angels when he was being crucified by the earthly soldiers of the Roman Empire, but he chose not to. He carried the message of peace to his death, and because of that, God glorified him above all armies and kings and nations, and above Death itself.

We cannot separate the significance of Jesus' death from the good news of his birth: they are parts of the same story. The Word became flesh and dwelt among us because that was the only way God could reconcile friends and strangers and enemies. We didn't get the message of goodwill to all people, even when a whole host of angels sang it for us; even when we try, it is a message we live out sporadically and imperfectly. That little baby in Bethlehem will grow into a prophet and teacher, but more importantly, that baby is Emmanuel, God-With-Us: the commander of the heavenly host, who gave his life to glorify God and provide the path for peace on earth.

Tonight we will celebrate the birth of that baby. I'm so excited to be able to share in that service, and to meet your guests and friends. There may be some strangers here, and perhaps even an enemy or

two. God became flesh for us, and for all those other people, too. I hope we can carry that awareness with us this evening as we greet guests and strangers, but also as we live out our calling to embody God's news of peace for all people -- in our jobs, our families, our nation, our church.

May God bless you this Christmas. This is a day to rejoice and celebrate God's story. We still have a few chapters to go. I'm so excited. And now we get to sing!