

Angelic Appearances at the Time of the Advent

by the Rev. Daniel W. Heinrichs

And behold, an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were greatly afraid. Then the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid, for behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy which will be to all people. For there is born to you this day, in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord" (Luke 2:9-11).

Who is not deeply affected by the gospel accounts of the Lord's birth into the world? Little children respond to the Christmas story with awe and wonder. Adults too are deeply moved by it. People who normally pay little heed to the Word, its teaching, or the church, nevertheless love the story of the Lord's birth into the world. Although we hear this story year after year, we do not tire of it. It has the power to move us, to warm our hearts, to awaken and stir our affections.

Why does this story of the Divine birth have such power to affect people? It has this power because it is a Divine narrative about an event of incomparable wonder—God Himself clothed His Divinity in the body of a little baby in order that He might approach nearer to humankind and thereby redeem and save them. This was a miracle of miracles! Furthermore, His birth was attended with great wonders. Within a relatively short space of time angels appeared to people no fewer than six times: namely to Zacharias, Mary, Joseph, the shepherds, and to the wise men as a new shining star. Moreover, through the agency of angels, Zacharias, Elizabeth, Simeon and Anna were inspired to utter stirring and prophetic words about the Lord, His life in the world, and its purpose.

In coming into the world, the Lord passed through the heavens in order that His Divine might be clothed and accommodated for the Divine conception. Thus His birth effected a nearer presence of the sphere of heaven with those who were disposed to receive Him. And it is the heavenly sphere, communicated by the angels, which we feel even today when we again hear this wondrous story which fills our hearts with hope, joy, peace and love.

We are told in the Word: "A man can receive nothing unless it has been given to him from heaven" (John 3:27). All our states of love and affection are communicated to us by means of angels. The angelic visitations which are related in connection with the Lord's birth are ultimate representations of spiritual realities. It is useful, then, to ponder the spiritual significance of those angelic appearances attending the Lord's birth, for by so doing we may come to a clearer understanding of how the Lord prepares each one of us for His advent into our lives.

In order of time, the angel first appeared to Zacharias while he was burning incense in the temple and told him that he and his wife Elizabeth would have a son in their old age—a son who would have the special use of preparing the way for the Lord. We are not given the ages of Zacharias and Elizabeth, but their being old reminds us of Abraham and Sarah

who were ninety-nine and ninety, respectively, when a son of their old age was promised to them.

Their being old, we are told, represents a fully developed state—the celestial—which could now proceed to bring forth a new state, represented by the birth of Isaac. In both of these cases the pending birth, which represents the beginning of a new state of life, was announced by angels. In this we can see that only through the presence of angels can we be prepared to receive those truths in which the Lord can be born in us.

The angels stir within us the affection of knowing the truth. But of ourselves we doubt. We cannot yet overcome the false ideas and reasoning of the natural mind. We become dumb and inarticulate in spiritual things, and we remain so until love leads us to acquire knowledges of Divine truth from the literal sense of the Word—which is represented by the birth of John the Baptist.

These concepts of truth, derived from the literal sense of the Word, are not the true light, but rather bear witness to the light, and in this way prepare us to receive the spiritual light itself—which is the Lord.

But even before much progress has been made in acquiring knowledge from the Word, a promise is given, a promise that the end which we seek—a true and sure vision of the Lord Himself—will be given. So the angel Gabriel appeared to Mary six months later with the announcement: “You will conceive in your womb and bring forth a Son, and shall call His name Jesus.” Mary represents the spiritual affection of truth, and this does not doubt the angelic announcement.

Although the new truth, the new concept of the Lord, is not yet given, still the spiritual affection of truth is sufficiently strong to lead us to the confession that with God nothing is impossible. It also gives us an outlook which desires that all things be done according to the Divine will. This is beautifully expressed by Mary’s words: “Behold the maidservant of the Lord! Let it be to me according to your word.” And it is a remarkable thing that throughout the life of regeneration, even in states of doubt and despair, the angelic promise of hope and salvation can always be renewed, strengthening us in our ultimate longing that the Lord may come and dwell with us.

The next visitation by the angels was to the shepherds on the very night that the Lord was born. First a single angel was seen, who announced the meaning and place of the birth and how it could be recognized; then a multitude of the heavenly host joined in the glorification of this event. Indeed, on every occasion that the angel appeared he was a representative of a whole angelic society, but only with the shepherds was spiritual sight opened so as to see the whole society. The shepherds represent the remains of good which the Lord arouses within us as He seeks to make His closer approach. If these remains of innocence were not stored within us from infancy and were not capable of being aroused to consciousness by the angels who are present, the Lord could not make His advent with us.

Nothing that is properly our own could respond affirmatively to the angelic message and impel us to go to Bethlehem, which in Hebrew means the “house of bread”, to receive the bread of spiritual life. But because of remains, the angels can inspire us to do this. So it was that as soon as the angels had left, the “shepherds said to one another, ‘Let us now go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has come to pass, which the Lord has made known to us.’”

At the same time the angelic society also appeared to the wise men in the east, in the form of a star. In the spiritual world, a distant society of angels appears as a star. So when the wise men’s spiritual eyes were opened, the society of angels called Gabriel appeared to them as a star. Upon seeing this star, the wise men knew, from ancient prophecy, that it was the announcement of the Lord’s birth. They immediately made preparations for the long journey they would make to seek the Lord. They had no doubt of the reality of His advent, but a long journey lay before them before they could see and worship Him.

The wise men represent a second kind of remains implanted in childhood—remains of truth—which prepare us for a love of growing wise. When the Lord approaches us more closely, the angels awaken or stir up consciousness of these remains, creating in us a desire to learn about the Lord so that He may make us spiritually wise. However, before this desire can be fulfilled, we must endure a long process, involving study, doubts, and the work of ridding our minds of misconceptions which arise from merely natural thought. This process is represented by the long journey the wise men had to take to seek the Lord.

Just as the shepherds arrived at the Lord’s birth place the very night that He was born, so our innocent affections can be stirred and aroused to a state of immediate reception. But our understanding has many trials, and much development must take place before it can attain its goal. So it was many days—probably around forty, which signifies a state of temptation—before the wise men could offer their adoration and present their gifts to the Lord.

The angel of the Lord also appeared to Joseph on several occasions: to inform him of Mary’s virgin conception, to warn him to flee into Egypt, to tell him of Herod’s death, and again to warn him to take the coastal road, avoiding Jerusalem, on their return to Nazareth. We should note that each of these appearances came in a dream by night, rather than in a clear waking spiritual vision.

Joseph represents the spiritual rational. He was betrothed to Mary—who represents the spiritual affection of truth. He was not yet married to Mary, because the human rational cannot bring forth the birth of the Lord in our life. The seed of this conception comes from the Lord alone, and it is received by the spiritual affection of truth. Nevertheless, in our minds, we must be looking toward a conjunction between this affection and the rational before the Lord can be born.

Joseph here has a similar representation to Joseph, the son of Jacob. You may recall how frequently the Joseph of the Old Testament received revelations by means of dreams. The reason for this is that ideas of truth that partake of human reasoning always have something of obscurity attending them. Only those who have been gifted with love can receive the Divine truth of the Word in clear light. Yet this rational, imperfect as it may be, is necessary to protect the first beginning of spiritual life from the perversions and attacks which come by way of the proprium, or selfish will, represented by Herod. And so it was through Joseph that the Lord was taken down to Egypt, protected there, and finally returned safely to Canaan.

This sermon has only been able to suggest some of the deeper spiritual meanings involved in each of the angelic appearances. Hopefully, however, it brings home to us more clearly the realization that it is only in the sphere of heaven—through the instrumentality of angels—that we can be prepared to receive the Lord in our lives.

Just as angels were close to people on earth at the time of the Lord's advent into the world, and had an active part in preparing for His birth and reception, so also with us, it is the angels of the Lord—angels sent by Him to us—who prepare our minds (our thoughts and affections) so that we may awaken to spiritual life. True, we do not see them or hear their voices, but every time we have a clear perception of the Divine truth of the Word, we are, as it were, hearing the voice of the angel of the Lord. When we bring our lives into agreement with the new truth we perceive, we are hearing their message of glad tidings.

So may we, in this Christmas season, hear within ourselves the message of glad tidings which the angels proclaim. May it awaken hope and wonder in our hearts, and may we also go to Bethlehem to see this thing that has come to pass, which the Lord has made known to us.

Amen.

Lessons: Matthew 1:18-25; Luke 1:26-38, 2:8-15