



SERMONS THAT WORK

Christmas Day (I)

The Archangels

[RCL] Isaiah 9:2-7; Psalm 96; Titus 2:11-14; Luke 2:1-14(15-20)

The archangel Gabriel crouched low so he could see clearly when enough shepherds had assembled for the great announcement to be made. He was looking through a tiny hole in the firmament, smaller than a pinprick. The light emitted by Gabriel and the angelic choir behind him, although equal in human terms to a supernova, through the pinhole would have looked just like a star, at least until what Gabriel was calling “the great glad tidings.” When the time was right, the angelic host would tone down their luminescence to a level tolerable to humans, go through the opening, and announce their good news to the shepherds outside of Bethlehem.

Gabriel had been waiting nine months for this moment, ever since he had gone to visit Mary, the one chosen by God to be part of God’s plan to dwell among humans as one of them. Gabriel remembered with a smile the moment Mary had said yes to God’s plan: “Here am I, the servant of the Lord,” said the girl. “Let it be with me according to your word.”

There was great rejoicing in heaven that day, although some of the angels thought God was taking a great risk in becoming a human. God had explained the plan, and, of course in their obedience, the angels had supported it, but they were awestruck when God had shared the details. God was going to entrust God’s very self into the care of humans, and even more, God was going to begin this plan, what God called “the Incarnation,” or the taking on of human flesh, in the very same way that humans do, that is, as a baby.

Gabriel loved babies. He thought the sound babies make, especially when they laugh, was the sweetest sound in the entire universe. And he should know, he thought. He had heard other beautiful sounds: the flutter of a myriad monarch butterfly wings as they take off *en masse*, whale song, the hiss of a red giant star. But a baby’s first laugh was the very best sound of all.

Gabriel also knew too well the sorrowful sound of a baby uncomforted—he had heard plenty of guardian angels’ reports to know that being a human baby was tough. Even though loving parents tried their best, babies are vulnerable, and although God never wanted any of God’s creatures to suffer, allowing free choice in the world meant danger and sorrow, especially for the smallest and weakest.

So, when God announced the plan to become incarnate, live with people and as one of them, and to begin it all as a baby, Gabriel found himself with the other archangels first a little dumbstruck and then offering their specific archangelic assistance.

“I will protect you,” said Michael, the Protector. “With my flaming sword, I will prevent anyone from harming you.”

“No,” God said, “I will go without your special protection. I will get hurt. All humans do.”

“Then,” said Raphael, the Healer, “I will tend to you and restore you instantly to health.”

“No,” God said, “I will be wounded and bruised. All humans are.”

Michael and Raphael nodded silently, obedient. Gabriel wondered if, at the Almighty One’s words, the other archangels were also thinking back to the day God had first made humans, way back when. They were the pinnacle of God’s creation and the Almighty One beamed with delight when, just before God placed them in the garden God had made for them, God showed them first to all the angels. The man and the woman appeared to be sleeping. God hadn’t opened their eyes yet so they would be protected from the glow of the heavenly court.

“Behold,” said God, “Humans. The only creature made in my image. Bow down before them in honor.”

All the angels retracted their luminescent wings and bowed.

Except one. Gabriel heard the slight thrumming of one angel’s still-outstretched wings and a throaty humph of protest. Gabriel couldn’t believe it, and peeked up to see who among them would rebel, who among them did not understand the love they were privileged to behold between Creator and creation.

It was Lucifer.

“Bow down,” said God. “My love for them does not diminish my love for you. I love everything I have made. But you,” God said, and motioned to all the angels, “were made to serve me and my creation. Honor them.”

“I will never honor them.” Lucifer hissed. “I will make it my purpose to destroy them.” Lucifer’s eyes flashed and he vanished from the heavenly court.

The remaining angels were stunned. What would God do? Cancel creation? Destroy all the wonderful, exquisite things God in love had created?

The angels watched in silence as God blessed the humans, placed them in the garden, and said to them, “Love me. Love one another. And trust that I will never stop loving you.”

God had kept God’s promise, never giving up, always loving and calling humans to love themselves, their neighbors, their God.

Now here they were, generations later, as God’s love was taking a new form, God’s plan, a new step—a magnificent, risky, wondrous step. God among humans as a baby.

“It’s the only way,” said God. “I need people to understand, to know how much I love them. To know that I understand them. That I’m willing to go through anything and everything because of love for them. And I will show them what true love looks like, the joy and freedom that comes from true love. And I will start as a baby so they will know there is no part of their lives love cannot touch.”

Gabriel thought for a moment, then spoke, “But how will people know about your plan? Don’t they need to know that’s what you’re doing, so they don’t miss it? Babies are so small, so easy to overlook.”

“Yes,” God said. “They need to know.”

“Then, O Great One,” Gabriel said, “Let me announce your plan to all the powerful, those whose words people listen to and obey. I will alert the kings and the princes, the rulers and the magistrates, the scholars and the sages...”

God interrupted him. As the highest ranking of all the herald angels, Gabriel could go on a bit.

“You know, Gabriel,” said God, “That’s not how I usually work.”

Gabriel was quiet. He knew. God had this thing for going to the poor, the lowly, the people on the edges. Why, even the girl God had chosen for this plan, Mary, was not of noble birth, far from it.

“No,” said God. “The first people to whom you’re going to announce the good news of the baby’s birth are some shepherds, keeping watch over their flocks outside the town of Bethlehem of Judea. Tell them this: “To you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.””

Ah, thought Gabriel. Brilliant. God, who was from the beginning, the source of light and life, the life of all people, becoming flesh and dwelling among them. This baby will show them that the light shines in the darkness and the darkness will never, ever, ever overcome the light.

Gabriel gave one more check through the pinhole in the firmament. The shepherds had gathered. It was time to go tell the good news of the savior's birth, and hope that the shepherds and all faithful people through the ages would choose God's love and light, seen first and most fully in this tiny child.

Amen.

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