

December 4 – Good News!

Carol: Angels We Have Heard On High

Luke 2: 8-14

As we continue our journey through Advent, we are being reminded of the work each of us is called to do through the carols we sing. Last week we focused on Bethlehem, the place of God's miracle occurring and were challenged to see how we could share with others the blessings of heaven. Today we focus on some of the men surrounding the birth story. We will use the carol "Angels We Have Heard on High" to examine this theme. Through their activities related to Jesus' birth we hear a renewed challenge to share, rejoice and to care.

The carol begins, "Angels we have heard on high sweetly singing o'er the plains." I don't know about you but when I think about angels I don't usually think of them as being male. We often think of them as they were depicted in the Renaissance period, as cute little cherubs. Many artists portray angels as women in long flowing dresses and mighty wings. Yet some were definitely male. Gabriel, who was sent by God to share the news of Jesus' birth with Mary and later with Joseph, was male! Later, as the other archangels were named, they too were given masculine names. Yet, we hear, "sweetly singing" and decided the angels that appeared to the shepherds were female. Is that because it is hard to think of men singing sweetly? I, like you, have seen, in every Christmas pageant I have watched, the angels being little girls with tinsel halos. This may have colored my thinking around this part of the birth story.

Hear what the early Jews would have been thinking when they heard that Gabriel appeared to Mary. In Jewish lore Gabriel was known as a warrior against wickedness. That is a different image than you usually have of the angel sent by God to Mary and later to Joseph. Angels were seen as intermediaries between God and human kind. They were messengers sharing God's word. They were agents carrying out God's commands. This is why angels came as messengers to the shepherds. They were to share the good news that God was on the move. The promised coming of the messiah was happening.

Now that we understand that at least some in the heavenly chorus were male what does their coming say to us. Part of what I hear it saying is that we are still called to be angels. The root of that word in Hebrew means messenger. So the first question this carol should make us ask as we sing it is: "How can we share the good news with those around us this season?" Perhaps the more important first question is what would constitute good news for most people today?

I believe the good news people want to hear is that someone is in charge! At times, it feels as if life is a jumble of reactive choices, most of them negative. At times it seems as if we crash and bang from one poor decision to the next. This view causes us to have a very pessimistic view on life and, even more, to question whether or not God cares. The angel's words, "Fear not" are still words of comfort and reassurance. The shepherds were not to fear the angels because they were bringing good news. The news was that God cares, that God loves us, and that God was sending Jesus to help us. With this in mind we have a job to do in sharing this good news with others.

The shepherds help us know how. When we think about those Shepherds keeping watch over their flocks, those in the field were most likely male. This doesn't mean that there were not women who tended sheep but in that time and culture it just wasn't acceptable for a woman to be out at night alone, or worse with men. One of the shepherds might have brought along his wife to do the cooking but since most of the time they pastured their flocks near towns, the women would have more likely brought them their food each day.

The song talks about their jubilee. Originally the word signified the ram's horn which was blown to gather the people for grand religious festivals. It came to mean a time of liberation. The shepherd's jubilation contains both the joyousness of the season and the hopes of this season. There was joy because God was at work. The promised Messiah had been born. There was joy because even shepherds were included. There was hope because a time of liberation might be at hand.

How can we share the joy and hope of this season with others? This is how we become angelic messengers. I think of a story I read about a woman who visited at a

care facility. She had gotten to know some of the residents really well. Christmas was approaching and she came to understand that some of them were sad that they could not get out and buy a gift for their loved ones. She went and purchased some small gifts, perfume for women, socks and ties for men, some pencils and pads of paper for children. She brought this to the facility along with some wrapping paper. The people picked out something for their daughter, son or grandchild. She helped them wrap it and wrote down a note they dictated. They were so excited that they would have something to share with their family when they came to visit. That is a way of sharing joy. I am sure you can think of a way of sharing joy this season with someone who is not feeling so positive. Another person visited with a friend struggling with cancer. The future was anything but sure. She set a date a few months out for them to go to lunch. It was a symbol of hope, that there would be a time past all of the negatives of the treatment. I am sure you can think of ways of sharing a bit of hope and joy with one who is feeling hopeless.

Finally, Joseph is also a symbol of the good news of God for the world, and how we can share it. In the carol it says "Mary, Joseph lend your aide." Over time certain attributes have been given to Joseph. He is seen to be virtuous, merciful, and helpful. These come from our brief glimpse of him in the Bible. There it calls him a righteous man, or one who is striving to live a virtuous and godly life. It also talks about how, when he learned that Mary was pregnant, he was going to quietly step aside. He could have had her stoned to death for violating the terms of betrothal. Often, a young woman would get in a family way with the young man she loved to stop being married to an older man that her father had picked. She hoped he would be merciful and quietly break the marriage contract, just what Joseph planned to do. He was also faithful. When he heard the voice of the angel, he followed without question, whether that was to marry Mary or go to Egypt. And he has always been pictured as helpful. This might have come about because he brought Mary with him to Bethlehem in a late stage of her pregnancy. He didn't have to. Maybe he was given this attribute of helpfulness because when Jesus talked about God he often used the familiar form of father. A warm feeling about fathers would come from his experiences with Joseph growing up. Virtuous, faithful, merciful and helpful; are all good traits to have, and to also share with others.

Are there ways you can be a messenger of God this season in these ways? Perhaps you can help out a friend. Maybe you finally forgive someone and release that long lost pain. Perhaps you put faith activities higher on your busy agenda. All of this and more is good news we are to impart.

When we lived in Idaho we had a neighbor Mike. Mike had a small antique tractor that he had fitted with a snow plow. Mike loved to use that tractor. All winter long, whenever it snowed, Mike would be up early plowing out the driveways of all the neighbors. Because I was one of the few who worked, he always did mine first and his was the last. He would never accept payment but didn't turn down a plate of fudge. Mike didn't always make it to church, but he was one of the most caring and helpful people I ever knew. He shared, by his actions, the good news of the season.

This carol reminds us that the Christmas message is one to be shared, and we must do the sharing! We are to share the joy of this season through words, and actions. We are to be filled with the potentials of this day and year, for even now we hear the echoes of the angels sharing the good news of salvation.