

Rev. Carrie Bail  
Advent IV/Christmas Sunday  
December 18, 2016  
First Congregational Church  
Burlington, VT

Part I: Word of God for All Ages

Hi! I hope you are having a wonderful Christmas season and if you remember, I was just a lowly sheep last Sunday because you kids did all the work of telling the Christmas story once again. You did such a wonderful job it brought joy to all of us.

Today I'm borrowing some of the props from last week because I need them to tell you about three characters that we'll hear about when today's Bible lessons are read, and I want you to listen for them, ok??

The first one is King Ahaz. (Put on crown) He's actually not one of the kings in the story last week because he lived about 700 years before Christmas during the time of the prophet Isaiah. I'm just using the crown so that you'll know he was a King, the king of Judea after the Jews had split into two countries, Judea and Israel. King Ahaz's kingdom was in a tough spot because he had to choose between becoming an ally of the great empire of Assyria, or joining together with some other small individual countries like Israel and Syria to resist.

Along came a prophet named Isaiah, and Isaiah said: don't join either side. Don't fight. Just trust in God and follow God's ways. And if you don't believe I'm speaking for God, then why don't you ask God to send a sign to prove it??

That bothered King Ahaz because he had already made up his own mind, and he didn't want God messing it up. So he puts on a fake show about how religious he is. He tells Isaiah, "We're not supposed to put God to the test by asking for a sign!!" But

he's a liar: he is a macho guy, who believes in his own power and might and his own political solutions to saving his Kingdom, and he's just making an excuse to refuse God's advice.

Isaiah tells him the sign anyway: There will be a baby born to a young maiden and since you don't believe in God's word, before that baby grows up your country will be destroyed. Not a very happy ending to that story.

Now: I switch hats and move ahead about 700 years. Let me tell you about Joseph, the man who is going to get married to Mary, the mother of Jesus. Like all good Jews, Joseph has heard the Bible story of Isaiah's sign from God, this sign that there will be a baby born to a young maiden.

But Joseph wasn't thinking very holy thoughts when he first heard about Mary's baby! He had been engaged to her for a long time, which was as good as being married in those days. And he knew that he was not the father of her baby. He was upset AND worried, because he really cared about Mary, and he didn't want to see her punished by the men of the Law. So he thought he would just get a quiet divorce and let her family send her someplace far away to have the baby. What a kind and compassionate man he was! He went to sleep with that decision in his mind.

Now it's time for the third hat, the angel. Angels know they have to deliver their message in the right way for each person they visit. For Mary, the angel came right in the middle of the day.

But when the angel wanted to say something to Joseph – he's a guy, after all – it came in the form of a dream instead of a vision, to make sure that Joseph really believed it.

This angel came and said to Joseph: God wants you to get married to Mary. The baby that is going to be born has come to her through God's miracle and he's going to need a father to raise him up well. So go ahead and get married; everything will be all right.

Solid, dependable, faithful Joseph gets the message of the dream; he understands God's sign to him (unlike King Ahaz, who was too proud and too powerful to understand). Joseph decides to be obedient to God, and makes the hard choice, the sacrifice. He knows that this story is bigger than he is and that God will work through the baby to save all the people. And he's willing to say yes.

So: all of us, whether King or carpenter, shepherd or magi, child or adult, should be open to whatever signs God wants to give to us, and be ready to follow in the way God wants us to go.

Prayer:

(Children go back to their seats for scripture and hymn)

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So, now I'm just going to expand a little on what I said to the children for the rest of you adults. You are wondering, perhaps, why I have chosen to keep on wearing the angel's halo.

Angels, you should know from reading about them in the Bible, are just messengers, perhaps with a direct and personal message for an individual, but perhaps with a message for everyone, whether by singing "Gloria" over the manger in Bethlehem or simply by preaching from the pulpit at the annual Christmas Sunday. Today I am the Christmas messenger.

I suppose you are thinking that I don't look much like an angel: my robe is not white, and I don't have any wings, and my halo is made of cheap tinsel and not actual light.

You do realize that your idea of what an angel is a very Eurocentric medieval image influenced by decades of little blonde baby angels. (And yes, they are adorable.) It's certainly not like the angel that Joseph or Mary would've recognized. In the OT angels just look like every other middle-easterner, just some stranger passing by. Think of the angels that Abraham entertained under the oak tree. They were not remarkable for what they looked like, but for the message they brought.

The whole idea about angels is to get God's point across to the sometimes slow, disbelieving folk on earth. We don't HAVE to have an intermediary creature between us and God; not at all. But there are times when people just don't even make the effort to connect with God and to understand, and that's when we need angels.

Many very spiritual people - the mystics, the prophets, the serving saints – who are very close to God don't have any trouble at all in understanding God's purpose for their lives. For such folk, the barrier between everyday reality and God's truth is very thin; it doesn't take much to cross over.

And then there are the rest of us. The angel's job is especially important when the message is unbelievable. Remember Sarah listening to the angels talking with Abraham outside the tent: saying that she would have a son! At her age! What a joke! Except it wasn't.... it took a rather persistent angel to get that point across.

And then there was Mary. She had always been a very spiritual girl. Most of the time she didn't need any help communicating with God. But the message the angel had to bring to her was more than unbelievable: that "you will conceive and bear a son – without the cooperation of any human man – and he will be the savior to his people." Come on now, who wouldn't need a little help in believing that, especially given the real risks to her life and limb. Once she heard the words and understood how they fulfilled God's promise and plan, there was no problem. She was right with the program. "Let it be unto me according to your word."

It was a different story with Joseph: that was a tough angelic assignment: to tell him “your virgin wife-to-be is pregnant, it was God’s doing, and you should marry her anyway! “

Joseph was a really good man: he was just and righteous and did his very best to follow the Law of Moses. There wasn’t a more compassionate man in all of Judea at that time, and Mary’s parents were happy to have made such a good match for their daughter. Being engaged in those days had nothing to do with being “in love” – it was a convenient arrangement between families, providing for economic exchange and providing a solid background for raising a family.

So the angel’s message to Joseph was one that was completely unacceptable. No one was supposed to marry a spoiled woman and he was too honest to pretend otherwise. He had wrestled with the choices, before him and imagined only two: either bringing Mary in front of a court of law where she might be condemned to death OR divorcing her quietly and giving her “back” to her family of origin. Within his own mind, he had to make the second choice.

The angel comes to his dream that night to tell the truth, and only in that twilight between day and night would Joseph have been able to hear the news: that the baby belongs to God, and the power of God’s spirit would bring to birth in Mary Yeshua, the savior of the people. Hard to believe for a rational, law-abiding guy like Joseph: but he knew enough to believe the message from an angel!

The report of this encounter, that came down to us in the scripture sounds very straight forward: “Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary as your wife, for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit; she will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus”.

You've had dreams yourself. You know that the message is very rarely that clear and straightforward. We'll never know exactly what Joseph heard in that dream, but that's not important. What is important is that the angel's message made a BIG change in him.

Suddenly Joseph understood that being "good" and "righteous" sometimes means going beyond the actual letter of the law. There was a third option for him after all, and that was to go ahead with the marriage. That would protect Mary, it would protect the baby, and all it would take from him was a change of heart. No one else had to know a thing about it. It would look completely right to everyone on the outside of the story. It was only he, at that time, who had to open his heart to the very wild and creative possibility that God was planning to be born in this world, to become incarnate. And he had the incredible opportunity to care for and nurture that child growing up in his household.

It's funny: Joseph's angel dream is kind of like Advent itself. It was a sign, a little precursor, of Christ's human presence in the world. Before Jesus, the only thing the people had was the Law. Now, with Jesus' birth, we have Grace. We had God's gift of grace even though we didn't deserve it; and from it human beings learned the greatest Christmas lesson there is to learn: that the mightiest power on earth, greater than that of any king, is love and compassion.

And it all started with Joseph. Joseph who woke from a dream newly filled with the power of God's love. He was filled with compassion for his fiancé who had herself agreed to serve love by bringing the Savior into this world.

The Law is not the most important thing. Love is. God made a plan that changed everything, that put Love at the center. That good man Joseph from that night on had a new vision of what that "goodness" meant.

God picked the right people. God picked Mary who had a deep spiritual understanding and a readiness to serve. God picked Joseph, with all the qualities you would like to have in a son-in-law: he was devout, hard-working, practical, honest and dependable. But most importantly, Joseph had a heart of gold, a heart which opened like a Christmas flower to the love of God.

Let that be the angel's message which each one of us takes home for Christmas this year. First of all, that we might be open and believing when we hear God's word, in whatever form it comes. And secondly, that we might be as good and as humble and as righteous as we know how to be, putting in our heart's center the Love which is born at Christmastime.