

Hillcrest Congregational Church, UCC  
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December 20, 2009  
2 Samuel, Luke  
Do Not Be Afraid

“Do not be afraid.” It is interesting that this is the first thing that the angels say to the shepherds. When I read this scripture, two things come to mind for me. The first is: why would the angels tell the shepherds “do not be afraid”? The second is: when someone says, “Do not be afraid,” to me that is exactly what I am: afraid!

Today’s main characters are shepherds and angels. There is quite a bit we can know about shepherds because there are still shepherds in fields today. Stronger, skilled members of a family are needed for heavier chores, so shepherds are often the youngest, smallest person in the family. Sheep need a lot of grazing land and are herded out in rocky outlying areas not fit for growing crops. Shepherds keep track of the sheep, and protect them from injury and predators. It can be an isolated and rustic job, alternately cold, wet, and lonely, and hot and dusty. At night shepherds gather their herds together for safety, comfort, and strength in numbers. In the morning, the shepherds call their flocks, and the sheep recognize the shepherd’s voice, and follow their shepherd. But even though shepherds are important to their sheep and family, their job is not prestigious. It’s kind of ordinary.

So of all the people they could have come to, why would angels come to shepherds to bring them the good news? One reason may be found in the purpose Luke's particular Gospel. Only two Gospels (Matthew and Luke), have birth stories. When we read Matthew's Gospel birth story we find Magi are the witnesses. Matthew presents Jesus as a prophet and a king- the fulfillment of Jewish prophecy, a prophet in the line of Moses, a King in the line of David. Luke's witnesses are shepherds. Luke applies the life and ministry of Jesus to the whole world, including ordinary and even overlooked people, like shepherds.

We might know what shepherds look like. But what do angels look like? The Bible has some descriptions. Months ago we read from Daniel's vision. He describe a being with three sets of wings, one to fly with, one to cover the mouth, and one to cover the feet. Jacob sees heavenly beings going up and down a ladder, and wrestling with an angel changes him and his life completely. Abraham and Sarah host three men who tell them they will have children in their old age and they later learn the men were angels. And Mary and Joseph, and Mary's cousin Elizabeth's husband Zechariah also had angels come to tell them about miraculous conceptions. But what do angels look like?

In alternative translations of the scripture from today, we read that an angel stood before, or an angel appeared to the shepherds. Standing implies legs and feet like humans. The word appears gives the angel a more magical aura. When

Mickey and I read the scripture for his beautiful artwork, we talked about whether the angels were male or female, or had wings at all. Mickey's rendering of the angels' wings is so real, the children in the Day School wanted to touch them to feel the feathers. I ask you, have you seen an angel? What do they look like?

When we read the Biblical stories, some of us take them literally and see an angel standing or appearing before the people. Some of us see the stories as metaphors. Either way, what we can understand about the stories is something important happened. We can understand that although words can never be quite adequate, the experience portrayed contains the Truth with a capital T, and the words are attempts to convey the feeling and the soul deep meaning. God was experienced in such a way that lives were changed and transformed.

So what do angels look like in our lives? I know four angels. Eleanor Hauger brought one to the Women's Fellowship luncheon. She called her an angel because Adella cares for her family and her neighbors. She drives them places: doctor appointments, the grocery store, meetings, and checks on them, to make sure they are okay. An angelic message of love and care.

A second angel is the teenager who found \$200 in her backpack. She thought a girl at school may have mixed up their backpacks but was unable to contact her. By the time she got to school, the money had been reported stolen and she could have been accused of stealing it. But when she gave the girl the money

the girls said, "I know that you would never steal it." And the girl went with her to security to vouch for her. The officer asked her how long she had been at the school- four years. When he pulled up her record, there was not one detention, parking ticket, or report. He said, "Well obviously you would never steal." In an age where stories of problem teens abound: a hopeful angelic witness of good character.

A third angel came the night a gas pipe broke in a home at night. The family was sleeping and would have died, asphyxiated by the gas. But, instead of protecting herself, their cat came and forced the woman to wake up long enough to knock the receiver off the phone. When the 9-1-1 operator could not get an answer, a rescue crew was dispatched. Angelic protection in fur.

The fourth angel is a man who went the route of gangs and prisons before his life was changed and transformed. Now he happens to be a minister. He invites homeless people to sleep on the floor of the church building every night. During the day, he goes to the grocery store and buys food and puts it on the hood of his car. He then drives slowly through the streets, stopping whenever people see him to give them food. He does these ministries with no expectation or hope of return on his investment, no one is expected to become a member of the church. The people served will probably never have any money to tithe, and the roof of the

church building is open to the elements. But he provides angelic food and sanctuary.

These are simple, even ordinary, angel stories. It does not seem like much magic and heavenly host stuff here. Yet the feeling experienced and soul deep meaning in these moments have the power to change and transform lives.

In the Bible it seems that shepherds hang out a lot with angels. But shepherds are ordinary people, right? Yet think about who the shepherds are in the Bible: Abraham-becomes the father of generations too numerous to count- the people of three religions, Jacob-becomes Israel the beginning of the Jewish people, Moses- brought the people to the promised land, David- the prophet Samuel found him out herding sheep when he came to anoint him King. And the shepherds we met today in Luke's story were among the first to witness the Light and to take it to the people. These were ordinary people, yet it seems that the ordinary is changed and transformed when ordinary people open themselves up to be and become what God created them to be.

I was at a dinner the other night when the old controversy came up. One of the folks complained, and said that cashiers should be required to say Merry Christmas rather than Happy Holidays. I tried to explain why it was important that we all be considerate of other people's beliefs, and not force people to observe our

holidays/holy days. But later I realized that this discussion missed the whole point. Neither what cashiers say, nor people buying things are the point of the holy day.

I think it is more about shepherds and angels. I mean, when you were young and the Christmas pageant came around, did you get a chance to be a shepherd or an angel? If not, which would you choose to be?

Do not be afraid. You don't have to choose to be one or the other. Sometimes you can be an angel with a special message, and sometimes you can be a shepherd with a special mission. Either way, you are special. And, even if you are afraid, Emmanuel- God is with you, and you're not going to be asked to do anything, angel or shepherd that is not exactly who you were born to be.

The whole idea is to be open to the experience of God for which words can never be quite adequate: the Truth with a capital T. As we anticipate the birth of the Christ, and as we enter a new phase in the search process, I hope you will be exploring this openness, this experience both for yourself and for Hillcrest. For it is when we are open to be what God has created us to be that our ordinary lives are changed and transformed. And it is when we are open to what God has created us to be that our church can find anew the special message we have to bring and the special mission we are to be on. What exactly is that message and mission Hillcrest? Amen.

Now, as we enter our time of offering, I want to share pictures of some shepherds and angels I have found. [Pictures of people at Hillcrest!]