

**Pilgrim Church of Duxbury
December 24, 2016
Rev. Peggy O'Connor
Luke 2:1-7
Calling All Angels**

"In those days," this is how the story of the birth of Jesus begins in Luke's Gospel. They tell us that we are about to hear something that happened long ago...and that it was something remarkable. So we perk up our ears and listen with interest. Like children who wonder at stories about their own birth and their parents' lives before they themselves were born, we wonder at this timeless story about the birth of Jesus. Although we know it well, we lean in to hear it again when we hear the opening words, "In those days". They pull us into another time and place ...and that place is holy.

Stories are powerful things. They take us to foreign places. They introduce us to new ideas and people. They expand us. They enrich our lives. Most of us, when reading or hearing a story, tend to identify with one character more than others. Usually this is because we see ourselves in them. So, when you hear the Christmas story...(not just tonight's passage but the whole story)...who do you identify with? The list is long: Zechariah, Elizabeth, Mary, Joseph, the Emperor, the inn keeper, the shepherds, the magi, and of course the angels. My guess is that none of you decided on the angels. After all, they are otherworldly, winged beings. It would be hard to

think of oneself as an angel let alone identifying with one. But this is exactly what I want us to do tonight.

Angels abound in the Christmas story. The first angel appeared to Zechariah when he was serving on the altar in the temple. The angel told him that his wife, Elizabeth, although well past the age of bearing a child, would become pregnant and give birth to a son. Zechariah, unable to conceive of this possibility for his wife, denied that she could ever conceive. The second angel appeared to Mary to tell her of God's plan for her and to obtain her permission for the plan...permission that, given Zechariah's reaction was not guaranteed. The next angel came to Joseph, who was about to quietly scuttle his wedding plans with Mary, to convince him to stay the course...to marry her and raise God's son with her...a dicey plan that was by no means a sure bet. Nine months later, right after Jesus' birth, an angel appeared to shepherds in the fields telling them of the birth...and urging them to go find him...which would mean leaving their flocks unattended...and then a choir of angels sang. And lastly, an angel appears in the dreams of the magi after they had found the Christ child, and telling them to go home by another way so that Herod would not find the child.

Together, the angels have the largest role...the most lines...and could be seen as the stars of the story. Without them the story line would not develop and move ahead. Without the angels this would be an earthly story not a heavenly one. Without the angels this would be an everyday story

about the struggles of ordinary people whose lives would never intersect in such meaningful and life altering ways. And so, we would do well to ask ourselves about those angels. What are we to make of them? What are they to us and we to them?

For Jews, Christians and Muslims angels are heavenly beings who are charged with being God's messengers. They are described in the Bible and depicted in paintings as people, albeit celestial people, clothed in long flowing robes and adorned with wings and halos. While they look somewhat like us, they are very different from us.

Angels live in or near heaven and spend their time singing God's praises until they get an assignment to bring a message to earth. Then they fly down from heaven, find the person or people who are to receive the message and deliver it...in person or in a dream.

In the Christmas story, angels help keep God's plan alive and on track. Despite human disbelief, Elizabeth gets pregnant and in time gives birth to John the Baptist. Despite the shock of the news that God wants her to bear God's own son, Mary agrees. Despite Joseph's desire to quietly break off his engagement to Mary, he sticks by her. Despite the shepherds solemn vow to never abandon their sheep, they go to see the baby and then, having been so touched and inspired, they tell everyone they meet about him. And, despite their desire to go home the way they had come, the Magi go another way...a way they did not know...so to protect the new born king. And all

because of angels. Angels are what make the difference in this story...again and again. Without them, this would be just another sad tale about an unwed couple, on the road, having a baby in a place no one would choose. It would be a tragic story of a bad start to a life of hardship.

Thankfully, there are angels in the Christmas story because they shine light on the hand of God in the story... which transforms it into something altogether different and new. On this night, with the help of angels, hope and love and peace and joy are born in the form of a baby. And because of this, the hearts and minds of many were changed...and still are being changed 2000 years later.

So we still need angels today. God's work is not done. But where are they? Does God still send angel messengers to us? I cannot say that I have ever seen an angel, at least one with wings and a halo other than in paintings. But I can say that I believe that we are surrounded by angels...indeed...I believe we are all called to be angels, albeit wingless ones.

In their book entitled *Healing the Purpose of Your Life*, Dennis, Sheila and Matthew Linn propose that every one of us has a special reason for being here. They expand on the notion that was first voiced by Agnes Sanford in her autobiography entitled *Sealed Orders*. She used that title to express her belief that each of us comes into the world with sealed orders from God. Those "orders" are our special purpose in life. They are not tasks to be completed, says Agnes, but they are the special gifts that God has

given to each of us. Our task is to discover, nurture and then share these gifts with the world. These are God's gifts, which coming through each of us, are gifts for and to the world. These gifts animate us and everything we do.

By sharing the gifts we have been given...not for our own purposes but for Gods...we sharing something of God with everyone with whom we come into contact. In doing so, we are sharing God. In do so, like angels, we help to change the world for the better. Perhaps it is just in tiny increments but the size of each change or adjustment is unimportant because there could be hundreds of millions being made every instant.

Could be. These are the pivotal words. There could be...but only if we all believe that with God and through God we can accomplish God's purpose for our lives and our world. And only if we believe that each of us, yes each of us, is part of the plan. And only if we accept our role as a wingless angel.

I don't know about you but when I hear the Christmas story read on Christmas Eve it seems that everything stops...everything within me and outside of me seems to hang suspended in time and space and I am transported into a place that is neither here nor there...a place that bridges now and then...a place that connects the profane and the holy. I become aware of possibilities that seem impossible and yet are as real as real can be: the possibility of really loving others without judgement or envy or jealousy or any of the other things that get in the way of love; the possibility of a world at peace that promotes peace; the joy of sharing life and all the

good things in life without the desire to have more than anyone else; and sharing the hope that is based not on worldly dreams and values but on God's plan and God's values.

These are the gifts that the story holds out to all of us. These are the Gifts of God for the people of God...brought to us by angels. Now...let us be today's angels. Let us spread the message of God's love. Let us share God's vision of a world at peace and the people of the world living with hope, peace, love and joy.