

Christmas 2019

Isaiah 9.1-6; Titus 2.11-14; Luke 2:1-14

Angels have been on my mind lately. For one thing, they've come up twice in conversation with my good friend Jeannie. She asked, "Do you believe in angels?" In my earlier adult years I would have voiced some skepticism. "You mean those sweet and serene winged creatures who fly around?" As a child I was taught many times over that each of us had a guardian angel. I couldn't quite grasp that. It was more sensible to make snow angels during winter snowfalls or to make paper angels at Christmas time.

Rich Rasi, our late beloved Dignity friend, presider, counselor, and activist – would often make reference in his homilies to having experienced "angel sightings": people, often strangers, who come into our lives unexpectedly but at just the right moment; an encounter transpires, a message is delivered – and we are left with amazement. The angelic is embedded in human encounters; indeed the angel comes with a human face; often you are the angel in the encounter, perhaps not even realizing it.

Angels appear unexpectedly, and do not linger; they deliver a message but they also entrust a task or challenge or a solution. They seem to appear in settings where both uncertainty and hope coexist. And then they are gone.

Angels are gentle yet fierce. I think of that powerful scene at the end of the first part of the play *Angels in America*, when you hear the fanning of wings and the descent of that huge angel who comes crashing through the ceiling of Prior Walter's bedroom. The angel would ultimately enable him to come to grips with his illness, AIDS, transforming his view of his illness and of himself in the world.

There are angel sightings in the gospel stories we read and heard this Advent season. Angels figure prominently in the infancy narratives. Both Mary and Joseph have angel encounters at crossroad moments where hard choices are waiting to be made.

In the gospel we just heard the angel appears to shepherds in the field, and announces: "There is a sign waiting for you, a sign that will contradict all your expectations yet fulfill your every hope: an infant wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger." And a whole chorus of angels appear as bearers of tidings of great joy, singing out the glory of God and announcing peace, peace to all God's favored ones.

Yet, the angel is not the story; the angel is the herald of an event with cosmic proportions. And as we hear the story, the evangelist intends we understand, it is now, it is **today**.

It is a new dawn, and it's an event that reverses all that society values and expects: the Savior comes not as a warrior or a monarch or mogul, but as a small, dependent, vulnerable child. In the radiant beauty of this night we know all humankind is beloved, and we, too, in our own vulnerability, our own smallness, our own brokenness, hear tidings of great joy. This good news is Emmanuel, that God is with us.

We live in an era where uncertainty and hope coexist. Our greatest fears give rise to our deepest hopes. We have just come through the great season of hope, Advent, and now we ponder and celebrate the birth of the one whose reign is without end. Christmas urges us and gives us reason to keep that hopeful heart.

To bring this all down to earth (which is what angels do), there is practical advice for us in the letter Paul writes to his colleague Titus: The grace of God has appeared. The grace of God trains us to live **temperately**, to live **justly**, and to live **devoutly** in THIS age as we await our blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of the great God and of our Savior Jesus Christ. So here is my take on each of these three challenges.

To live temperately: is to live without excess, take only what you need, share the bounty, do not abandon the poor, protect the planet we call our mother.

To live justly: is to challenge institutions that oppress, seek what is right and true, bring peace everywhere you go, bless the prophets and peacemakers.

To live devoutly: is to know that God dwells within you, so seek out and affirm beauty in all its expressions, celebrate the revelations of God's goodness in your life, be astounded by the universe, be embraced with hope. Pray.

When night descends gaze at the stars and listen for angels' songs. Through this season and into the next, be amazed by angelic announcements and angelic encounters.