

Jeremiah 33:12-16

Psalm 68 [translation by Nan Merrill] *R: Birth us in Love, O Comforter.*

Poem: "Annunciation" by Denise Levertov

Luke 2:1-20

To Hear the Angels Sing
Christmas Vigil Liturgy December 24, 2009

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Have you ever noticed the first thing that the angels say when they appear? Here in our story to the shepherds, it is not "peace on earth, good will to all." That comes later. The first thing they say is: "Do not be afraid." In all the stories around the birth of Jesus we've heard throughout Advent, the first thing the angels say: "Do not fear, have no fear; be not afraid." To Zechariah, the expecting Father of John the Baptist, "Do not be afraid." To Mary, "Do not be afraid." To Joseph, "Do not fear."

And why should we fear angels - aren't they harbingers of good tidings, new birth, peace on earth, and good will to all? After all, they adorn our houses, they ornament our Christmas cards, they dance dangling mid-air beneath our branches, they delight the imagination and bring visions of sugarplums that dance in our heads. They remind us that there's something more than war and strife, suffering and labor - something more, something above it all, and something all around us bringing consolation, an invisible yet almost palpable world, - a truer, kinder world. And so, alighting atop our Christmas trees we give them pride of place. Hardly fearsome beings.

But angels have not always been angels. Well, angels have not always been understood in the way we envision them and market them today.

The word angel simply means messenger. Most biblical angels were messengers of God, much like a ruler might have an emissary. Angels were the word of God to the people. Angels acted as God. Angels were God on earth - God's word delivered to the people. Angels also made up that famous "heavenly host". Now, "heavenly host" sounds like a sweeping, surrounding band of divine harmonies - but that "host" was really an army that lived in the heavens, the skies, where God also was thought to be enthroned above. Angels of God, the heavenly hosts, were God's military might, the long arm of God; God's army - or perhaps they might be better understood as God's Air Force. Because for obvious, practical reasons, they needed wings: to fly from God to the earth, and then back again. We think of wings as the things of myths and fantasy, but really it was logistics - how do they get from there to here, from here back up there.

Now all of that is fine, but it still doesn't fully explain why they are to be feared. For some of you who have read good portions of the Bible, have you ever noticed that when this biblical God "visits" people, when God comes with the heavenly hosts and

when God sends messengers, it is not always with good news? You didn't always want God to "visit" you, in fact, it was more often than not better that God just leave you alone. More often than not, when God wanted to send you a message, God sent an army. God "visited" with the heavenly host when it was payback time. Many of the ancients understood God in terms of military might and political power: God was the ultimate author of destruction and of peace. Nations and empires were merely the pawns, the vehicles of God's message. When people speak in violence and war and vanquish, we tend to believe God does too. We often use God as a mirror instead of seeing through the mirror beyond ourselves.

With this new understanding of the heavenly beings, angels visiting at Christmas time brings a whole new meaning to the alleged "war on Christmas." The only Christmas-themed war I know is all these "angels" descending in all these stories. Of course the shepherds were afraid. God - the God who was to be feared - God's own forces were marching through the fields - wouldn't that strike fear into our hearts like that first loud jolt of an earthquake that wakes us from slumber, and paralyzes us? And the first thing to suffer on the road to war *was* the road to war. The path of destruction would have been the important land that surrounds the besieged city: the livelihood of the city, the fields and the animals, would be the first target, and thus also the lives of those who sustained it; the peasants, the laborers, the shepherds - the usual uncounted collateral damage of war. A war torn land was one that sheltered neither human beings nor animals, our prophet Jeremiah says. Of course the shepherds were afraid. How were they to know that in that day and at that time, this time, God was coming to make sure that there would again "be pasture for shepherds resting their flocks", as Jeremiah prophesied. "In the towns of the hill country, in all the places around Jerusalem, flocks would again pass under the hands of the one who counts them." A time when God would wage war no more. A time when everyone counts. I sometimes wonder if the shepherds were really praising and glorifying God out of utter relief. For this time God came not with a battle cry, but with a baby's cry. All are counted in God's census, all are registered with God.

If sweet-winged things strumming harp strings brought messages of peace, more peace and good-will it would make sense but have little value. The import of this passage is that it is an aggressor who says, "no more war." When it is the invader who disarms, when bow and arrow become harp and string, when fearsome *angels* bend near the earth to touch not arrows and bows but harps of gold, then that is news. And that is good news.

This story was a way of expressing the birth of a new understanding of God. God was born again. God gave up the fight and threw in the towel so that it might become swaddling cloths for the newborn child.

And did you notice what the angels did after they spread their news of good tidings to the shepherds? They retreated. They went back to the heavens, they went back to the skies. God retreated. God responded to the weary and wrong world with grace,

and with hope. God sent warriors to proclaim peace, and an army to deliver a child: God visited us to wage war no more.

And at this news, did you notice what the shepherds did? They went to church. Well... they ran to see this newborn child. They went to see this new thing being birthed. They went to see this God that counts those the world would ignore. They went to worship the One who, again and again, invites us to new ways of understanding God in the world; invites us to seek new dimensions of God's grace to all humankind

In the midst of the maddening pace of this world which knows war all too well, we come together to worship the One who holds all eternity in tender hands and in a vulnerable womb; the One who keeps birthing something new into our world; the One who is the author of all and whose hand counts every last one of us. The One who urges us to use our arrows as bows and our bows as strings to make sweet music. The One who changed the heavenly hosts into agents of consolation, into heralds that hover hope over our homes, into messengers that bring good news, into cosmic choirs, into *angels* that proclaim "peace on the earth, and good will to all."

But before we can hear the angels sing, we must first heed the angels' first words: Do not fear; be not afraid; don't let fear rule your hearts. Fear need be no more. And in releasing fear, we may be freed to find something new, something divine, being birthed in us tonight.