THINGS ANGELS SAY – DO NOT BE AFRAID

INTRODUCTION:

We are going to review some of what we discussed last week.

The word ‘angel’ is most literally translated ‘messenger’. A primary function for angels in the Bible was to deliver specific words from God. So in this series about ‘Things Angels Say’ – what we are really focused on is the fact that angels say what God tells them to say, and if it is a word from God, it will never fail! We can learn from the many stories in the Scripture to take heart and believe according to the Word of God.

Many of our ideas and visual cues about angels are either extra-biblical or even anti-biblical. They come from some other source rather than the word of God. We will see lots of angel depictions, angel stories, angel decorations, etc. throughout the holidays, which I think is great. And I would like for us to pause and reflect that angels do in fact exist – they don’t fit in the same category as Frosty, Rudolph, and “The Night Before Christmas”.

The ‘real deal’ angels may not fit in all the ways we have seen them portrayed – but the Bible gives us plenty of compelling imagery and specific instances for our consideration about angels.

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Here is a review of some things that are true about angels, according to the Bible:

- Created by God and Christ.
- Worship God and Christ.
- Are ministering spirits.
- Communicate the will of God and Christ.
- Obey the will of God and Christ.
- Execute the purposes and the judgments of God.
- Celebrate the praises of God.
- The law was given by the ministration of angels.
- They are innumerable.
- They announced the conception, birth, resurrection, ascension, and second coming of Christ.
- They ministered to Christ.
- They are subject to Christ.
- They rejoice over every repentant sinner.
- They have charge over the children of God.
- They are NOT to be worshipped.
- They are examples of meekness.
- They are wise, mighty, and holy.

Our focus in the first week of Advent was “Nothing is Impossible with God.” Let’s say it together again – NOTHING IS IMPOSSIBLE WITH GOD! --- BOOM! Jesus himself said this, shifting the wording to “WITH GOD ALL THINGS ARE POSSIBLE!” - Let’s say it: “WITH GOD ALL THINGS ARE POSSIBLE! --- BOOM!” God shattered the impossibilities confronting us. We were helpless without a savior, and Jesus came to us through an impossible virgin birth in order to offer himself as the perfect sacrifice for our sin. His impossible birth opened the door for the rest of the gospel to be written. Because NOTHING IS IMPOSSIBLE WITH GOD!

This is a truth that must never escape us, or we will be unable to grab hold of today’s message. Perhaps the phrase most used by angels in the Bible is what we will look at today. Do you know what it is?
DO NOT BE AFRAID.

Our text today is from Luke 1:5-20. Let us stand together for the reading of God’s Word:

5 In the time of Herod king of Judea there was a priest named Zechariah, who belonged to the priestly division of Abijah; his wife Elizabeth was also a descendant of Aaron. Both of them were righteous in the sight of God, observing all the Lord’s commands and decrees blamelessly. But they were childless because Elizabeth was not able to conceive, and they were both very old.

8 Once when Zechariah’s division was on duty and he was serving as priest before God, he was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to go into the temple of the Lord and burn incense. And when the time for the burning of incense came, all the assembled worshipers were praying outside.

11 Then an angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing at the right side of the altar of incense. When Zechariah saw him, he was startled and was gripped with fear. But the angel said to him: “Do not be afraid, Zechariah; your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you are to call him John. He will be a joy and delight to you, and many will rejoice because of his birth, for he will be great in the sight of the Lord. He is never to take wine or other fermented drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit even before he is born. He will bring back many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God. And he will go on before the Lord, in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the parents to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous—to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.”

18 Zechariah asked the angel, “How can I be sure of this? I am an old man and my wife is well along in years.”

19 The angel said to him, “I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to tell you this good news. And now you will be silent and not able to speak until the day this happens, because you did not believe my words, which will come true at their appointed time.”

The Word of the Lord.
Thanks be to God.

Let us pray.

DO NOT BE AFRAID.

Let’s begin with setting the stage for this momentous day in Zechariah’s life. The scripture says that his division was on duty. This division was one of 24 groups of priests, drawn up in David’s time. (1 Chronicles 24:7-18) The priests in each division were on duty twice a year for a week at a time. Zechariah was of the division of Abijah. Commentators agree that the number of men in the priestly ranks was so large that no person was permitted to offer incense more than once in his lifetime. We also learn from this passage that Zechariah was old. It makes me wonder if he had decided he would not have a turn, since the lot had not yet fallen to him. But on this day, it did. His duty was to offer the incense. This took place daily, at the morning watch and the evening watch. We are not sure which time of day this was, but many scholars have concluded it was the evening. The incense for which Zechariah was responsible symbolized
the prayers of the entire nation. At that particular moment Zechariah was thus the focal point of the entire Jewish nation.\(^1\)

Now what do you think his state of mind was at this moment?

ENCOURAGE RESPONSES

Some words/phrases that come to me are:
- Alert
- Humbled
- Appreciative
- Attention to detail
- Excited
- And something along the lines of, “Lord, please don’t let me mess this up!”

DO NOT BE AFRAID.

And in the middle of his priestly duty, an angel suddenly appears.

DO NOT BE AFRAID. Easy for you to say! In most scenarios, it sounds like the angel just ‘appears’. But hey, don’t be afraid!

So, let’s talk about being afraid for a bit.

One level of afraid is being startled. Who can remember being startled? It involves a literal physical sensation in your very depths, right! We have a black walnut tree in the yard that is quite tall. I don’t know how old it is, but we have been here almost thirty years, and it was a big tree when we first moved here. Several of its branches used to hang over our home, directly over our bedroom. Every year in the months of August and September, the walnuts begin dropping off the tree. Well you’ve guessed it – many a time I have been severely startled awake by the booming sound of walnuts falling on the roof in the middle of the night. I don’t know how far they fell from, but they make a terrific noise. It is startling enough when you’re awake, but from a deep sleep, it takes a few deep breaths to recover.

Many of the instances where an angel says, “Do not be afraid”, they are calming someone who is startled. Jesus did this too. Matthew tells us (in chapter 17) that Peter, James and John fell on their faces to the ground when they saw Jesus transfigured and talking with Moses and Elijah. Jesus came and touched them. “Get up,” he said. “Don’t be afraid.” This imagery is beautiful to me - I imagine that being such a tender thing, Jesus himself calming his terrified friends. He also said “Do not be afraid” when he kind of startled them by walking toward them in the middle of the night, in the middle of a storm, in the middle of the sea. “Take courage! It is I. Don’t be afraid.” This imagery is ridiculous to me – what other response is even possible in such a scenario? Don’t be afraid – humbug! Of course, those who know this story know what happens next. Peter ventures – well if it is really you, ask me to get out of the boat and walk on the water with you. WHAT?!

Which moves me to talk about some other types of being afraid.

This is from Holman’s Illustrated Bible Dictionary\(^2\) –

\(\text{Fear is a natural emotional response to a perceived threat to one’s security or general welfare. It ranges in degree of intensity from a sense of anxiety or worry to one of utter terror. It can be a useful emotion when it leads to appropriate caution or measures that would guard one’s welfare.}\)


On the other hand, fear can be a hindrance to the enjoyment of life if it is induced by delusion or if it lingers and overpowers other more positive emotions such as love and joy, perhaps leading to an inability to engage in the normal activities of life. In the Bible, however, fear is perhaps more often than in popular culture regarded not as pure emotion but as wise behavior.

As we continue in this discussion, I’d like to pause and say: we all have fears of varying types and degrees. Some are natural, some are irrational. Some are manageable, some are life-controlling. I ask you to lean in here and allow the Holy Spirit to illuminate God’s word to you today. You know what fears it may be time for you to overcome. Let this word become a living word to you – DO NOT BE AFRAID.

The concept of fear is referred to in the Bible hundreds of times. We first see it as an emotion in Genesis 3, when Adam and Eve are discovered hiding in the garden. They were afraid. The OT word group most often associated with fear means ‘to fear, honor, terror, awe, and worship.’ In the NT, it most often relates ‘to fear, reverence, or respect.’ A very crucial understanding of fear Biblically is the difference between the fear of the Lord, and the fear of man.

Proverbs declares that the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. Again from Holman:

*The proper attitude of believers toward God is often said to be respect, reverence, or awe rather than fear. The biblical terminology, however, is the same, and God’s character remains unchanged. The description of God often translated “awesome” is literally “fearful” or “fearful”. Confining the believer’s attitude toward God to ‘reverence’ or ‘awe’ rather than ‘fear’ may lose sight of those aspects of the divine character that compel obedience—His perfect holiness and righteousness and His unlimited knowledge and power. Knowing that God’s wrath has been satisfied in Christ relieves the believer from the fear of condemnation but not from accountability to a holy God... ‘Fear’ and ‘love’ are both terms found in ancient Near Eastern literature associated with covenant loyalty. To fear God is to have allegiance to Him and consequently to His instructions thus affecting one’s values, convictions, and behavior.*

Jesus said, “If you love me, you will keep my commandments.”

So let us look at Zechariah in this context. As we discussed, he was in the middle of a once-in-a-lifetime experience. This was a solemn and awe-inspiring moment. Zechariah was “righteous in the sight of God, observing all the Lord’s commands and decrees blamelessly.” He had a proper fear of the Lord. However, when he saw the angel of the Lord, the scripture says he was ‘startled and gripped with fear.’ And then Gabriel says: Do not be afraid, Zechariah; your prayer has been heard. Gabriel continues to speak for five more verses. And Zechariah’s response seems rather ordinary and what one might expect: “How can I be sure of this? I am an old man and my wife is well along in years.”

Gabriel’s response, however, suggests that Zechariah was not answering in simple common sense, but in actual unbelief. “I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to tell you this good news. And now you will be silent and not able to speak until the day this happens, because you did not believe my words, which will come true at their appointed time.” That response gives me a thrilling chill. Gabriel stands in the presence of God. Remember – angels say what God tells them to say! Whatever Zechariah’s doubts were, we learn that he followed through and God’s word to him indeed came true. A son was born to him and Elizabeth, and against the notions of family and friends, the child was named John.

In every instance of what we may consider a ‘Christmas angel appearance’ – the person or persons to whom the angel appears says: DO NOT BE AFRAID.
TO MARY: But the angel said to her, “Do not be afraid, Mary; you have found favor with God. You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you are to call him Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High.

TO JOSEPH: Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins.

TO THE SHEPHERDS: Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord.

I believe they are addressing much more than the momentary sense of being startled or being fearful of the supernatural appearance. Consider what each of them actually heard the angels say. What if the hearers had stayed afraid? There were consequences involved here. Following through on the angels’ message was going to be life changing. What if Zechariah responded in self-pity or depression? What if Mary had not said – “I am the Lord’s servant. May your word to me be fulfilled.” What if Joseph weighed the options and determined that God had asked too much of him? What if the shepherds hadn’t shared the Good News? DO NOT BE AFRAID!

Consider those to whom the angels spoke. What if their fear of the Lord hadn’t been stronger than their fear of man? What if their faith in God’s word to them had been weaker than their doubts? DO NOT BE AFRAID!

Remember, Jesus himself said DO NOT BE AFRAID! I believe Jesus is saying that to us, in this day, at this moment.

I think about Peter’s “ridiculous” response to Jesus when he saw him walking on water – ask me to come with you. Why would he do that? Maybe Peter’s greatest fear was missing out on what Jesus was doing. Not getting to be where Jesus was. Maybe his fear of the LORD rose up within him, overpowering his terror of the sea. Maybe when perfect love casts out fear, our passion to follow Jesus is so powerful that we push through those things that others fear, even if it is into the heart of a storm with nothing to stand on other than the word of Jesus. DO NOT BE AFRAID!

Fear and love are mentioned together frequently in the scripture. 1 Timothy 1:7 says: God has not given us a spirit of fear, but of power, love and a sound mind, or self-discipline. 1 John 4:18 says that perfect love drives out fear. This passage is talking about the fear that has to do with punishment, the kind of fear that Adam and Eve were experiencing after they sinned. If you are feeling that kind of fear, there is Good News! The very reason Jesus came is to set you free from sin. When we are unrepentant, and not reconciled to God, or if we are disobedient to him, the natural result is resentment and fear. But he came to drive out that fear with love, grace, mercy, redemption, goodness, kindness, open arms, the heart of a Good Shepherd, the power of the Prince of Peace, the patience of the Everlasting Father, the justice of the True and Righteous Judge. He is the one whom thousands upon thousands of angels praise and adore and worship and serve, always at his beck and call, ready to do his will. He is the one whom the angels stood watching, powerless, unable to move because He did not call them, so they watched him be beaten, bruised, whipped and crucified. And he is the one whom angels announced – DO NOT BE AFRAID! He is not here, He is Risen! DO NOT BE AFRAID! NOTHING IS IMPOSSIBLE WITH GOD! DO NOT BE AFRAID!
CONCLUSION:

It is not God’s plan for you to live in fear. Yes – we are to have the fear of the Lord. But that’s the only proper fear. Isaiah 8:12 says – Don’t fear what others fear. You are a child of God. We do not have to fear what others fear. FDR famously said, “The only thing we have to fear is fear itself.” I would counter that the only thing we have to fear is the lack of Godly fear. Those who do not fear God have much to tremble at – his word will not fail, it will come to pass. But those who love and fear God have nothing else to fear – because his word will not fail, it will come to pass! True fear of God equals unbounded courage.

As we conclude, let us return to Zechariah. The promised child was born, and once he was circumcised and named John, Zechariah was able to speak again, and he spoke this amazing prophecy, that I would like to share with you as a benediction.

67 His father Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and prophesied:

68 “Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel, because he has come to his people and redeemed them.

69 He has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David

70 (as he said through his holy prophets of long ago),

71 salvation from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us—

72 to show mercy to our ancestors and to remember his holy covenant,

73 the oath he swore to our father Abraham:

74 to rescue us from the hand of our enemies, and to enable us to serve him without fear

75 in holiness and righteousness before him all our days.

76 And you, my child, will be called a prophet of the Most High; for you will go on before the Lord to prepare the way for him,

77 to give his people the knowledge of salvation through the forgiveness of their sins,

78 because of the tender mercy of our God, by which the rising sun will come to us from heaven

79 to shine on those living in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the path of peace.”