

A Place for the Singing of Angels

A Sermon preached by the Rev. J. Thomas Buchanan on December 24, 2021

Friendship Presbyterian Church

In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. All went to their own towns to be registered. Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger." And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying,

*"Glory to God in the highest heaven,
and on earth peace among those whom he favors!"*

When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us." So, they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them. (Luke 2:1-20, NRSV)

The great spiritual writer and theologian Howard Thurman once wrote that "There must be always remaining in everyone's life some place for the singing of angels." He meant that for our lives to be fully *human*, that – in the midst of it all – we *must* make space to hear their song, which suffuses our lives with Beauty, Grace, and Wonder ... transforming us ... healing us and saving us.

I suspect that for most of us, there was a time in our lives when hearing their song came more easily than it does now. For me, this is almost literally true. I remember being in church as a four-year old and watching the choir process down the center aisle and – not understanding in a grown-up way that they were ordinary people in robes – I thought they were *angels*. I believed that there were *angels* in our church every Sunday. I truly did.

It's hard to think about such times and not feel a conflict. On the one hand, I can't think about the angels that made up my home-church choir without smiling; on the other, I wonder why I hardly hear angels sing anymore. Maybe you know something about this conflict too.

The busyness of our lives is part of it, especially this time of the year. We hardly feel like we have the time to stop and listen! And there's the world too, as lost and confused as it has ever been, with so much suffering, so much *needless* suffering, so much cruelty ... COVID. And then there's what we have lost and those *whom* we've lost, and we may feel the pain of absence above all other sensations, in a season that we're told is supposed to be about tidings of comfort and joy.

No, the angels' song is often hard to hear ... the glory, hard to see. And so now, tonight, we gather and approach the Christmas story once again ... the story of Mary and Joseph, and the baby Jesus, and shepherds, and angels. It may take us back for one fleeting, nostalgic moment, like a bedtime story we loved hearing again and again when we were young. But then we remember that we're grown up now, and we've heard this bedtime story so many times. *Life* can hit us hard, and often the angels seem to have flown away.

And so, it would be easy to hear this story again with our jaded ears and imagine it as an *Escape*. In fact, we may *want* to have it bear us up, so that we *can* escape and rise *above* this world – above the busyness, above the mess, if only for a short time. But as we've seen over this Advent season, when we open ourselves to the story again – hearing it again as for the first time – it would bring us back down to earth.

It tells us of the birth of Jesus, the *true* Savior of the world. He is born in the midst of a world which the almighty Caesars claimed as their own, to poor Jewish peasants who in the Caesars' world didn't matter.

The child Jesus is declared the Prince of Peace, but a prince born not to a Princess, Empress, or heiress, but to a poor, unwed girl ... a pregnant, teenage girl with a story which very few would believe. He is declared the Messiah, the Lord, though a Lord born not to the privileged in a comfortable home, but a child of refugees who would soon be seeking asylum ... one for whose birth there was no proper room.

He is one whose birth is declared by the angelic messengers of Heaven, though not to the *winners* of the Empire, but to the *losers*, to the outcasts, to throw-away people like smelly shepherds. And it is *their ears alone* which hear the angels sing.

The shepherds then resolve to go find him, and they know how to recognize him, for they know that the Lord of all will not be found in a gilded cradle, but wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in straw in an animal feeding trough! The greatest gift of all is to be found in the most surprising places.

The wondrous mystery of this night to which we bear witness is that the God who moves the stars is *not* remote, not far from us. In the Christ child, God enters our history and comes *among* us. God makes home here, and so the angels' song rises from the *very midst* of the world. And that is what makes all the difference, for as Thurman put it so well, "Despite all the crassness of life, despite all the hardness of life, despite all of the harsh discords of life, life is saved by the singing of angels."

We so often don't hear their song, but the song rises all the same. But when it *is* heard ... when it *does* break through our numbness, fear, despair ... what follows is a richly sustaining hope that, in spite of it all, love and life *will* have the final word. And it can break through in the most amazing ways.

One of my favorite true stories is of what happened along the western front on Christmas Eve and Christmas Day 1914, in the trenches of Belgium and France, during the First World War. Fought over 100 years ago, the "Great War" and its roots and causes are little known these days, but what we do know seems terrible enough. In the four years between 1914 and 1918, it killed or wounded more than 25 million people – and (in the popular mind, at least) for less apparent purpose than with any other war before or since. Yet even in the midst of this earthly hell, one of the most remarkable episodes of human history came during the first Christmas of the war, a few brief hours during which as many as *100,000* men (on both sides) laid down their arms, emerged from their trenches, and shared carols, food, games, and comradeship.

Historians call it the Christmas Truce of 1914. It was very much unofficial and absolutely against orders, and command headquarters on both sides took strong steps to ensure that it could never happen again. But while it lasted, the truce was nothing less than magical.

Several factors combined to produce the conditions for it to happen. By December 1914, the men in the trenches were veterans, familiar enough with the realities of combat to have lost most of the idealism that they may have carried into war back in August, and most longed for an end to the bloodshed. The war, they had believed, would be over by Christmas, yet there they were in Christmas week still muddied, cold, and in battle.

On December 7, Pope Benedict XV begged for an official truce between the warring governments. He asked, "that the guns may fall silent at least upon the night the angels sang." But his attempt was officially rebuffed by all parties. But perhaps this sheer misery of daily life was enough to motivate troops to initiate the truce on their own.

Christmas Eve finally came. Several weeks of mild but miserably soaking weather gave way to a sudden, hard frost, creating a dusting of ice and snow along the front that was beautiful in its way. Private Albert Moren of the Second Queens Regiment recalled "a beautiful moonlit night, frost on the ground, white almost everywhere." The sights made men on both sides feel that something spiritual was taking place.

And then it began. It's hard to pin down exactly where. A huge range of different oral accounts, diary entries, and letters home make it near-impossible to know exactly where it began or how it spread, or if, by some curious power, it broke out simultaneously across the trenches. Nevertheless, what we do know is that some two-thirds of troops along the front — about 100,000 fighting men — laid down their arms.

Most accounts suggest the truce began with carol singing from the trenches, which the Germans had already decorated with candles by evening. British soldiers wrote of then hearing them sing a familiar carol,

*Stille Nacht, heilige Nacht
Alles schläft, einsam wacht ...*

To which they joined in, in English,

*Silent night, holy night
All is calm, all is bright ...*

Graham Williams of the Fifth London Rifle Brigade told of how the Germans would sing one of their carols and the Brits would join in, and of how when the Brits began singing "O Come All Ye Faithful," the Germans immediately joined in singing the same hymn to the Latin words *Adeste Fideles*. "Well, this is really a most extraordinary thing," he wrote. "Two nations both singing the same carol in the middle of a war." The artillery in the region fell silent.

The two sides sang all night and shouted Christmas greetings to each other. The next morning, Christmas morning, German soldiers emerged from their trenches in some places, calling out "Merry Christmas" in English. Allied soldiers came out too, greeting them in this "No Man's Land," the wide-open space separating the trenches of the opposing sides. Over the course of the day, troops exchanged gifts of cigarettes, food, alcohol, buttons, and hats. The truce also allowed both sides to finally bury their dead comrades, whose bodies had lain for weeks, and joint services were held.

One account mentions a British soldier getting his hair cut by his pre-war German barber; another mentions a pig-roast. Several mention impromptu kick-about with makeshift soccer balls, and even some real games with rules followed and time kept! In many sectors, the truce lasted through Christmas night, continuing even until New Year's Day in others.

It didn't last of course, and soon the war was on again, and there would be no further truce until the general armistice of November 1918. Many, perhaps close to the majority, of the thousands of men who celebrated Christmas 1914 together would not live long enough to see the return of peace.

But for those who did survive, the truce was something that they would never forget — a palpable moment of peace and humanity amidst one of the most violent events of human

history. It was a moment that would change them and give them something to live for, for in it they had tasted of a day to come when swords will be beaten into plowshares, and the whole earth filled with the glory of the Lord as the waters cover the sea. For a few priceless hours, over a silent, holy night, men once more knew what it was like to hear the angels sing.

May we, like them, find the courage to put down our own arms, that we too might defy the powers which call us to hatred and fear, and choose peace in the midst of the clamor and demands of the world. This timeless story of the infant Jesus ... of Mary and Joseph, of shepherds, of angels ... is for us too. Howard Thurman was right: "There must be always remaining in everyone's life some place for the singing of angels." And as we embrace this story and its truth as our own, may we too hear the singing again. May we too hear again the angelic proclamation, the greatest good news that has ever been and ever will be:

For unto you is born this day in the City of David, a Savior who is Christ the Lord.

To the glory of God! Amen.