

Do you believe in angels? Or, maybe I should put it this way. Do you believe in the extraordinary presence of God, in one way or another? I do. Perhaps you do too. The Bible says that we sometimes entertain angels, unawares (Heb 13:2). Once, Dean and I were in Milan, Italy ready to fly out the next day. It was late and we were trying to find our hotel, which was near the airport on a remote road. We got hopelessly lost, circling around and around through the same small village area. No one spoke English. Having asked several people who were unable to help us, we stopped at a gas station to try and get our bearings. All the stations there are unmanned.

Suddenly a car pulled up with two young men in it. Dean asked them if they knew where this hotel was. In perfect English they said yes. They said, "Follow us, we'll show you the way. It will be easier." And we followed them around twists and turns on small back roads for what seemed like at least ten miles. How they found it, we'll never know, and as they waved to us in the night, we just had a sense that they were angels sent by God to help us.

Advent means anticipating the mysterious yet miraculous work of God. It's really a look into the future. We not only prepare for the birth of Jesus, but also look forward to His second coming. That will be a miraculous occurrence. But we would be hard-pressed to tell this culture that, wouldn't we, for this is a culture that gets up at 5 AM to shop. This article was on the front page of yesterday's DMN. (Read about Wal-Mart worker who was killed by a crowd of 2,000 stampeding the doors at 4:55 AM.<sup>1</sup> This is a society which strives to shove religion out of the public square. So we've lost a sense of the spiritual realm, that there is a world all around us that is unseen but nevertheless there. For God is present all around us.

Would people ever flock to church if the church stayed open day and night for you to come and nourish your spiritual life – fill yourself with God; to pray and worship and study the Bible. It even sounds odd and uncomfortable, doesn't it? We are very secular, and unused to listening for the voice of God. Because of that sometimes it's a struggle to see God at work. Advent helps us to prepare for the spiritual side of life. It helps us think about God and listen for God's voice.

This week begins our study of the Gospel of Luke. Luke was a Gentile and lived in Antioch. He converted to Christianity about 15 years after Pentecost. A doctor by profession, he also became a missionary. He may have led the Philippian church.

Luke's gospel is simply beautiful. He wrote flawless Greek. But it's not just how he wrote – it's what he wrote. He tells of God's interest in all kinds of people – poor, rich, male and female. Luke talks about prayer and the Holy Spirit. Luke also believes in preparing us to understand just who Jesus is, especially in light of the Old Testament and God's plans that began with Abraham.

Therefore Luke begins by saying, "All these events that have happened are fulfillments. So we look back. What was prophesied, and by whom? As Anna told us, this first week of Advent centers on hope, the fulfillment of Isaiah's prophesy, "The people who walk in darkness will see a great light" (Is 9:2).

During the 400 years between the Old and New Testaments, no prophets prophesied. No preachers preached. It was a period of deep silence from God. Israel lost their independence and

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<sup>1</sup>Wal-Mart worker killed in stampede, The Dallas Morning News, November 29, 2008, 1A.

was a small territory in another empire. And so Isaiah's words, "For those who live in a land of deep darkness, a light will shine" fit the times well. Oppressed Israel needed the light of the Messiah.

Jesus' story, then, is a fantastic, astounding one of God entering our world to rescue us out of darkness. It begins with the birth of a prophet, a prophet who Jesus said was the greatest man who ever lived (Mt. 11:11). John the Baptist was his name, and his coming was announced by an angel. We saw a modern-day version of the announcement a few minutes ago; now let's read it. (READ Lk 1:5-23)

Having just finished with the story of Abraham, we should not be at all surprised that an angel begins the New Testament. It sounds familiar, doesn't it? That's because the story of Jesus is God's story, every detail carefully planned and woven together mysteriously, throughout the Old and New Testaments, a continuous story of God at work, unfolding for those who have eyes of faith.

Zachariah was a good man, a pastor who spent time near God; and yet he had problems in life – barrenness. Luke tells us he and Elizabeth prayed about it, to no avail. Piety does not seem to guarantee answers to prayer. Do you ever think you are simply not good enough for God to listen to your prayers? Rest assured that is not the case. Zachariah and Elizabeth experienced brokenness in life, despite their devotion to God. Simply put, not all prayers are answered.

Sometimes disappointments distance us from God. Sometimes we mistakenly believe if we live right things will go well. Or, when bad things happen to us, we conclude God is not here or God has no power so we keep God at arm's length. We think we will protect ourselves from God that way. God is not always seen as helpful. This book, *The Shack*, is about a man who did just that – kept God in the picture but at arm's length – because of childhood disappointments and then a devastating tragedy as an adult. (I'll return to this book in a few moments.)

I wonder if that is how it was for Zachariah. He went about his job as a priest. He was supposed to be close to God, but when an angel showed up, he was completely unprepared. I suppose we would all be terrified if an angel showed up. We are not used to angels popping into our lives.

Afternoon incense was at 3:00 PM. It was prayer-time. Life was not secular then. Every day the people gathered in the courtyards to participate in prayer. They were waiting for the priest to pray for them and then bless them after he burned the incense. Connection with God was that much a part of life.

There were 18,000 priests and so being chosen to offer incense would have only happened once in a lifetime. It would have been a career highlight. Zachariah went to the altar of incense which was placed in front of the curtain that tore when Jesus was resurrected. That was the curtain that hid the Holy of Holies, the place where God dwelt. Zachariah lit the incense and then prostrated himself (laid down on the floor) before God, interceding by saying this prayer: "May the merciful God enter the holy place and accept with favor the offering of his people." The incense and the prayers rose to God as a pleasing aroma. And God personally saves those prayers, every one of them.

That's when the angel appeared. It wasn't a vision. It wasn't a dream. The words used tell us the angel actually appeared and Zachariah could see him.

Gabriel, the angel was special. His name means "God is my hero." Isn't that just great? Gabriel is famous in the Bible for announcing big things – in Daniel he tells about end time events; here he announced this new age of Christ. He's excited about the message. Zachariah's prayers are being answered. He should be ecstatic. You're having a baby; the baby has a special assignment and is under the direct care of God. John will be Spirit-filled and powerful, like Elijah. He will reconcile parents and children. He will turn people away from sin and to God. The angel goes on and on about what a really cool blessing this is.

But Zachariah does not believe the angel's words. Gabriel's words, even though he's God's right-hand angel, aren't enough. He wants certainty. The barrier – his and Elizabeth's old age – is too great. Zachariah did not trust the supernatural voice. He was used to his disappointment with God. Zachariah is stuck where he is and the angel's words fall on deaf ears.

He didn't say, "You are kidding!" or "Wow, all this stuff must be true." Or "He'll be like Elijah, really?"

Zachariah's a priest, supposed to believe; he's standing in the very center of the temple, the place where God's presence resides, on the greatest day of his life and he says –

"Give me a sign. This can't be; I'm too old!"

The angel said, "I can't believe you don't believe me. Okay, so because you can't hear the message, you won't hear for awhile, or speak." His lack of faith caused consequences. God's consequences actually lead us to where we need to be. So when things happen in your life, always look for how God is working through those consequences to draw you to more faith.

Zachariah would observe and think for a few months since he couldn't hear or speak. Aloneness would be imposed on him. For a religious leader that is quite a loss. But he most likely didn't have a great deal of faithful things to say anyway because he was stuck in disappointment. So God gave him a gift. He would observe for awhile. Silence helped him know without a doubt that what the angel said was true. He would observe people's need for God. He would observe people's longing for God. He would watch Elizabeth's growing belly and joy. He would play the angel's words over and over. He would see God as real and really doing something.

Doubt veils our ability to see God easily. It makes you look primarily at our own shortcomings. Do you see your deficiencies, thinking they prevent God from using you? Zachariah would say, don't do that. When we doubt we miss the joy; miss the good news; miss the mystery of God's activity; and miss the miraculous.

In this book, *The Shack*, a man named Mack developed a huge rift with God after a personal tragedy. Then he received a note from God inviting him to meet with God at a shack in the woods. Mack struggled. Does God pass notes? Or is God reduced to words on the page of a

Bible, mediated by preachers? The tragedy had made him sick of God, yet he wanted to know if God could make a real difference. So he took God up on the offer. He went to the shack to meet with God. And God was there.

In the ups and downs of our lives, in the unanswered prayers, God does not leave us alone. But you have to be open to God's voice. Rejoice. The One who came still comes. The One who spoke still speaks." Let's take some time to listen for God's voice this Advent season. Let's allow God to mysteriously put Himself on our human level and give Himself to us.

AMEN