

Zechariah and the Angel
November 27, 2011
Luke 1:5-25

Today begins the season of Advent, a season of anticipation and waiting. This will be my twenty-second Advent and not once have I given much thought to the subject of angels. Four times in the gospels, angels make birth announcements and there just so happens to be four Sundays in Advent. So this year I am stepping out of my comfort zone to explore these mysterious messengers and the good news they bring.

Anyone who reads Guideposts has read angel stories, but I confess I have always been a bit of a skeptic. Scripture speaks of their existence. Some are human, some are supernatural, all are messengers of God. Scripture is also just vague enough on the subject of angels that we humans have portrayed them in art and film in ways that make sense to us. The beloved Clarence from "It's a Wonderful Life" functions as a guardian angel with magical powers to the troubled George Bailey, while "Charlie's Angels" rush in to save the day with guns and high-heels.

Given that the theme is angels, we asked folks to share their angels for our Christmas display. To look at them you might think that all angels are females with long flowing hair, wear white, and have halos and wings. Even though this portrayal of angels is a bit cliché, the idea that there are benevolent creatures that carry messages from God is comforting. Although first encounters are portrayed as terrifying. It is hard to imagine why the first words out of the mouths of such lovely creatures is always, "Be not afraid," but it is.

We don't mind touching stories and sweet figurines, but how many of us really believe they exist, let alone visit us? For many of us it is easier to think of kind souls as angels rather than messengers that completely re-orientate our lives. I can remember one person in particular who came up to me one day and said, "I've just seen angels." He had been to see his mother, who suffers from Alzheimers, and he was moved by the compassion and attention extended to her by her caregivers. They were the angels of which he spoke.

The truth is that I don't know what to think about angels. This Advent I am vowing to keep an open mind. What I do know is that angels play an important part in the story of God coming to us. They all bring good news, but to at least two couples they completely turn their lives upside down. So with an open mind and a soften heart I tell their stories.

The first couple is Zechariah and Elizabeth, the proud parents of John the Baptist and their story opens the Gospel of Luke. Zechariah was a priest. He and Elizabeth both kept the commandments and were blameless, except maybe for nursing the open wound of being childless. It was their grief and their shame that they lived into old age without even one child. All their prayers seemed to fall to the ground with a thud.

Part of Zechariah's responsibility as a priest was to go to the Temple in Jerusalem for one week, every six months, to assume priestly responsibilities. One of those responsibilities was the privilege of offering incense. This took place at a special golden altar which was in front of the heavy veil that walled off the Holy of Holies where God was known to dwell. The incense rising was symbolic of the prayers of the people rising up to God. Twice a day the incense was burned and the priest that performed this function was chosen by lot. Zechariah was more than 60 years old before he was chosen. It truly was a once-in-a-lifetime experience because a priest could only be chosen once.

So here is a man that spent most of his life praying – and praying for one thing in particular – a prayer that went unanswered – who was now going to perform the sacred, symbolic ritual that represented prayer going up to God. The ritual involved two other priests who ceremoniously moved hot coals from the altar of sacrifice to the altar of incense, but we get the impression from the story that the moment he sprinkled that wonderful concoction on those hot coals, he was all alone.

It's hard to know what he expected. You know, we pray, we go to church, but for the most part it seems like a one-sided affair. We do all the talking and stand up when we are supposed to. We may even step out of our comfort zone and perform special duties when called upon. But I don't know that we really expect much to happen. What a shame....

Zechariah knelt there, watching the smoke rise up, drinking in the moment as the others waited in the temple courts. They waited and waited, growing more concerned with each passing moment. He was in there much longer than expected.

If Zechariah and the others thought he could just walk in, do his thing, and leave – they were all mistaken because right there – right there in church or all places – a messenger of God showed up and Zechariah's fright tells us that this angel was not expected. And like all angels, this angel had to calm the recipient of his message down with the words, "Don't be afraid, Zechariah" I'm guessing there was a long pause at this point – a long pause for Zechariah to gather his wits enough to hear what the angel was about to say.

"Your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you will name him John. You will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, for he will be great in the sight of the Lord. He must never drink wine or strong drink; even before his birth he will be filled with the Holy Spirit. He will turn many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God. With the spirit and power of Elijah he will go before him, to turn the hearts of parents to their children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous, to make ready a people prepared for the Lord."

You'd think that Zechariah might hold that incense jar in his hand and say to himself, "Holy cow! This stuff really works!" No, his response was far more skeptical. He was not so sure about what the angel was telling him, maybe because it seemed so far-fetched. Elizabeth was too old. He was too old. His prayer was too old. "How will I know that this is so?"

Really! He waits his whole life for a moment like this and that is the best he could do? Instead of saying, "Gee, thanks!" he questions the angel, which, by the way, is not the best way to get on the good side of an angel. It wasn't that he didn't want to believe, he just wanted some proof. He was an intellectual man, a priest for God's sake! Who would ever believe that he was visited by an angel?

The angel, now identified as Gabriel, informs Zechariah that it is not his place to question an angel that dwells in the presence of God. And because he didn't believe Gabriel rendered him mute, unable to speak, and told him he would remain that way until it happened.

Imagine the scene as Zechariah finally emerged from the altar area. All he could do is flail his arms indicating that something happened in there, but what, he couldn't tell. He couldn't speak. Dumbstruck by his own arrogance he went home to see how God would make it so...

You would think, Zechariah, of all people, would be receptive to a messenger from God. You would think a priest would believe that God answers prayer. You would think that he would believe without question that God can bring new life out of an old couple. But it turns out he is the most skeptical of all those the angels visit. And maybe that is what happens to us religious folk. We get so accustomed to going through the motions, saying the right words, going to church, praying our prayers...we so fill our lives with the stuff we are supposed to do that we leave no room for God – our lives become calloused to mystery and awe – our hearts become so hard we cease to believe that God sends messengers with good news – we miss the good news all together.

I think that is what happened to Zechariah. He got so used to going to church, week after week, stuck in his routines, without much happening, he'd kind of given up on God doing much of anything. And I am guessing that is where most of us are. Not really expecting much; going to church to make someone else happy or because it is what you do. It isn't even within our realm of possibility that God or one of God's messengers might show up one of these Sundays with a message for us.

Every now and then I will walk into the sanctuary when it is completely dark and I wonder what it would be like to see a light or hear a voice. I'd like to think I have an open mind to such things. But more often than not, I believe that God most often speaks in a still small voice, through folks like you and me. Either way, however it happens, the good news of this season is that God comes to us and abides with us in more ways than we can imagine. May we all hear God's message of good news for us this Advent Season.