

*Sing the Angels' Song*

Whitefish UMC

Christmas Eve, 2010

9:00 p.m.

- † A beautiful old Christmas legend tells of how God called the angels of heaven together one day for a special choir rehearsal. God told them that they would learn a special song ... a song that they would sing at a very significant occasion. The angels went to work on it. They rehearsed long and hard... with great focus and intensity. In fact, some of the angels grumbled a bit... but God insisted on a very high standard for the heavenly choir.
- † As time passed, the choir improved in tone, in rhythm, and in quality. Finally God announced that they were ready... but then, God shocked them a bit. God told them that they would sing the song only once... and only on one night. There would be just one performance of this great song they had worked on so diligently. Again, some of the angels grumbled. The song was so extraordinarily beautiful and they had it down pat now... surely, they could sing it many, many times. God only smiled and told them that when the time came, they would understand.
- † Then one night, God called them together. God gathered them above a field just outside of Bethlehem. "It's time," God said to them... and the angels sang their song. O my, did they sing it! "Glory to God in the highest... and on earth peace and good will toward all..." And as the angels sang, they knew there would never be another night like this one, and that there would never be another birth like this birth in Bethlehem.

- † When the angels returned to heaven, God reminded them that they would not formally sing that song again as an angelic choir, but if they wanted to, they could hum the song occasionally as individuals. One angel was bold enough to step forward and ask God why. Why could they not sing that majestic anthem again? They did it so well. It felt so right. Why couldn't they sing that great song anymore? "Because," God explained, "my son has been born... and now earth must do the singing!"
- † Once each year, Christmas comes around again to remind us of that... God's Son has come to earth... and now we must do the singing! And look at how we have tried. Without question, one of the best and most beloved parts of the celebration of Christmas is the music! The good news of Christmas is so awesome, so full of wonder, that it's not enough to just talk about it. We have to burst forth in song. We have to sing it.
- † Over the centuries, some of the most marvelous music ever written glorifies the birth of the Christ child. Think of Handel, Bach, Tallis, Benjamin Britten, Beethoven, Mozart, Rutter—each composed magnificent testimonies to the wonder and joy of Jesus' birth. But these composers possess rare gifts—how can ordinary mortals expect to sing the songs of the angels?
- † Let's consider the nature of angels. As Gordon Atkingosn, writing for Salon.com as RealLivePreacher says, angels appear, now and again, in the pages of the bible. They are bringers of tidings and aid. You can forget those pictures of fluffy white characters with halos and wings. Real angels mostly scare the hell out of people. And then sometimes they look like regular people, and no one recognizes them at all.

- † The writer of Hebrews thought this a serious enough matter that he gave this dire warning: "You better be kind to strangers, because some have entertained angels and never known it."
- † Atkinson tells this story, imagining what might have happened: On the night Joseph and Mary lay despairing in a Bethlehem street, in fact, at the moment of their deepest need, an angel happened to be walking through that very town. His name was Elias, and he had no idea he was an angel. He would have been shocked had anyone suggested such a thing.
- † But he WAS an angel. Very much an angel on this night. Every shepherd in and around Bethlehem knew Elias and his wife Esther. Elias had been a shepherd himself in his younger days, back when his bones could handle the walking and the hard work. He was retired, you might say. He and Esther lived in a modest little home on the edge of town.
- † Elias lived a quiet life now, doing odd jobs and tending to the birthing of lambs. He and Esther still kept busy, but in different ways. There were grandchildren constantly underfoot, friends who dropped by to chat, and animals to care for. Sometimes Elias would visit the shepherds in the field. He liked to sit by the fire and tell them stories of the old days.
- † On this particular night he had visited a young shepherd's home to check on an ailing lamb. They fed him for his trouble, and with his belly full he was in a good mood, whistling as he walked home. He rounded a corner and almost stumbled over Joseph cradling Mary in his lap in the middle of a narrow lane.
- † "Hey, watch out there young fella. Why you out here in the middle of the street?" Joseph was startled to hear a voice and jumped to his feet. He grabbed Elias by his robes. "Please, help us. My wife is having the baby...right now. And we're from far away, out of town. And I guess we

don't know anyone, so do you know anyone?" Elias knelt to get a closer look at Mary. "Hold on there, now. You're from out of town, you say? Ain't you got nobody to help ya?"

† "No, no. That's what I'm saying. We don't have anyone. We thought we did, but...I have money, only it's not here. It'll be here in a couple weeks, I promise, but suddenly the baby was coming, and I couldn't find anyone or anyplace. Look, none of that matters now, only just, do you know someone who can help us? The baby is COMING, see?"

† Elias laid a hand on Mary's belly and looked down, almost like he was listening. She was between contractions, breathing hard, but alert. He watched her seriously for a moment, then smiled and looked up at Joseph. "This here's your first, ain't it?" Joseph nodded. Elias laughed. "Hee, I can always tell." He looked back at Mary, serious again. "Okay darlin, you tell old Elias. How long has the pain been real bad?"

† Mary thought for a moment. "A couple of hours, I guess." "Okay, listen now. This is important. Has any water come pourin outa ya?" Mary was embarrassed and shook her head. Joseph looked alarmed and bent down to look closely at Mary. "We'd of seen that, right?" "Hell yes, you'd uh seen it. I think you WOULD see a bucket uh water come pourin down her legs, wouldn'cha?"

† He looked once more at Mary and then stood up, rubbing his hands together. "Nah, you kids got time. Now listen here, sweetheart. You sit still a moment, till you get to feelin like you could stand. When the pain comes again, you squeeze your man's hand hard, and go ahead and scream. It don't make NO matter how loud neither, understand? And when you're ready, we'll get you up and walkin. I'm takin you home. My Esther'll take care of ya. I guess she's birthed, I don't know, hundreds of babies."

- † He looked away and upwards, with his lips moving like he was figuring numbers. "Yeah, got to be HUNDREDS, by now." A sudden rush of violent relief unloosed something in Joseph. He lost control of himself for a moment, and his body shook with racking sobs. Elias looked away politely.
- † When he was finished, Joseph took a couple of deep breaths and said, "Thank you, Elias. I don't even know how to... You came at just the right moment. We didn't, uh...I don't know what we were gonna do. I don't know anything about babies or..." Elias cut Joseph off with a wave of his hand. "Well, now you forget all that. We didn't have much choice, did we? We couldn't let little missy have her baby in the middle of this ALLEY, now could we?" He snorted. "Course not!"
- † He said, "we." He said it, and Joseph thought he had never heard a word more beautiful. They were alone, but Elias came, and now they were "we."
- † Joseph got his donkey and pack, and they began walking to Elias' home. It was a terrible journey. Every so often the contractions would come, and Mary would have to sit down in the street and find a way to get through the pain. Elias rolled up a piece of cloth for her to bite on and told her to breathe a lot. While they were walking, he told her about Esther to keep her mind off her misery.
- † "Don't you worry, little one. Like I said, Esther's birthed hundreds uh children. She loves em. AND she's got a soft spot for young mothers, too. Specially first timers. She'll take good care uh you. Like she was your own mother." Tears welled up in Mary's eyes when Elias said, "your own mother." She looked at Joseph, who nodded sadly, bit his lip, and looked away.
- † The walk only took an hour, but it seemed like forever.

- † At last they came within sight of Elias' home. It was a simple, one-room house with a flat roof. A woman was silhouetted in the doorway, holding a lamp. Elias left Mary with Joseph and ran to the door. He spoke briefly with the woman, then turned back and shouted, "This is Esther." The woman nodded at them and took charge.
- † "Esther, help me get this young woman...what's your name, sweetheart?" "It's Mary," Joseph said. "Yes, thank you dear... help me get Mary into the house.
- † Joseph started to follow, but Elias caught him by the sleeve. "Hey there, young fella. You and I'll stay out here. Come over to my shed; we'll sit and have some wine. You listen here, now. Mary'll be fine. She's in Esther's hands, and Esther...well...Esther knows all what to do."
- † Elias looked at the door to his house, now closed, and nodded with pride and confidence."I promise you this, there's no better place in all the world for your Mary to be than right here."
- † Perhaps, then, the song of the angels is not so much a song as a way of living. Garrison Keillor writes about a Nebraska angel in New York City. Keillor was in a deli on 10th Avenue, where an elegant young woman was managing a herd of eight teenage boys, ordering them breakfast from the lady behind the counter.
- † "The boys spoke Spanish, which the young woman translated for the counter lady." Keillor is standing, observing, waiting his turn—a little impatiently, I imagine. The boys—it dawns on him—are mildly challenged, congenitally or maybe because of brain damage. The young woman is their hired shepherd. A teacher's aide—probably at minimum wage—she is lovely, green-eyed, dark-haired; her wool scarf says "Nebraska"; her English sounds Midwestern.

- † The boys want muffins for breakfast, except one boy, who earnestly desires a sesame bagel, toasted, with cream cheese, but the deli is out of sesame, and this is a cruel disappointment to him. He really was counting on it. When you are fourteen and so desperately vulnerable in the big city, you do pin your hopes on certain small pleasures.
- † His face crumples and he is about to melt, and the elegant, green-eyed woman puts her head down next to his, where he sits slumped on the deli stool. Her pale cheek against his cheek, she murmurs to him, and a string of his enormous tears runs onto her face, and she wipes it away and says something in Spanish which makes him laugh.
- † A girl from the prairie, using her Spanish to care for damaged boys in a callous world, where the poor and powerless get short shrift. . . . She's my Christmas angel. (*Chicago Tribune*, 22 December 2009)
- † You are starting to get the point, aren't you? The song of the angels repeats the sounding joy whenever human love appears in the ordinary lives of ordinary people. The song is sung whenever unexpected grace and kindness and joy break in.
- † In our church community the song of the angels has resounded lustily these past weeks—in the quiet beauty of a guitar concert that raised thousands of dollars for Neighbors in Need, in the community gathered here to offer Music for Life in support of a family experiencing great suffering, in Salvation Army bell-ringing and giving, in support of the Heifer Project for sustainable development around the world.
- † The song of the angels was heard at Colonial Manor yesterday when cookies and carols and conversation were shared with those who can no longer make it to church. And of course, we heard the song of the angels in our Christmas pageant at 5:00 p.m.

- † But you can sing the songs of the angels, too. Whenever you, thanks to the birth of Jesus, find something born in you that is stronger, braver, gladder and kinder and holier than you ever would have known without him—you sing the songs of the angels.
- † Sing, then, this night and each day—sing with your lives, you angels.  
Amen.

Sources:

Gordon Atkinson, “A Christmas Story You’ve Never Heard,”

<http://www.thewitness.org>

John Buchanan quoting Garrison Keillor, <http://www.fourthchurch.org>

James W. Moore, “Let Us Go Over to Bethlehem,” <http://www.sermons.com>