

THE ANGELS

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How many of you believe in angels? How many of you are open and receptive to angels guiding you and directing you? And open to their level of assistance in your life?

See, I believe that one of the things that is just absolutely true is that the degree that we want to be blessed is the degree that we are open to receiving help. That, because we have free will, that each and every one of us has a God-given right to be as miserable as we need to be. [Congregants laugh] Right?

And we get to do it completely on our own! If you don't want any divine assistance; if you don't want any help; if you don't want God to work on your behalf, you can absolutely decide to shut it down. Because you have free will. You were created in the image and likeness of God, but you actually have to be open to that divine assistance. You have to be willing to ask for help. You have to be willing to allow God to really come into your life and to allow the angels to do their ... their good stuff. Because it's good stuff.

You know, the Christmas story is a story of angels. Angels proclaimed what was about to happen. The angels spoke to people. The angels invited people to see a bigger possibility. And, over and over again, what I want you to see is that that divine activity that the angels represent in all of us is absolutely available to each and every one of us. That the angels will speak to you if you want to be spoken to. The angels will assist you and guide you and direct you and heal you to the degree that you are open and receptive to that level of assistance.

But like, you know ... we can pretend like we're three years old and say, *"No! I'm going to do it on my own. No, thanks! This is my deal. This is my life. I get to create it any way I want it."* And you can just say, *"No."*

In my house, when I was growing up as a child, we had this blue angel on top of our tree. It wasn't a plane, it was actually a, it was a blue angel: blue hair, blue wings. Blue angel. And she was always on top of our tree. And I don't know where we got her or how that came to be, but we had this blue angel, and every year it wasn't Christmas until the blue angel was on top of the tree.

Last year when my mom passed, we were going through her stuff. And in one of the boxes, there she was. And I mean, she was looking a little nasty. [Congregants laugh] I mean, she's been around a long time, right? That's one old blue angel!

And, you know, my brother and I looked at each other, because at some level we felt like we should say, *"Well, I want her."* And my sister said, *"Well, I do want her."* And we both thought, *"Oh, thank God!"* [Congregants laugh] Right?

So now the first ... you know, last Christmas, when she went back -- because she lives in England -- when she went back to England after mom's passing, she sent us a picture and the blue angel was on top of the tree. And all was right in the universe because the blue angel was doing her holy work.

So tonight, we're going to share two stories out of the Bible. And each one of us has our own relationship with the Bible. And today, these two stories share the importance of the angel proclaiming the Christmas Story. And not only the Christmas Story, but what the Christmas story means in our lives today.

See, I believe from a spiritual point of view, there's really three aspects of the Bible as biblical teaching. The first aspect -- that kind of is the foundation of Bible teaching -- is it's a people telling their story. It's history. But it's not history like you would read in a book; it's people telling their stories. And if you tell

the stories of your life, are you usually the hero or the villain? Most of us want to tell the story from our point of view, and we tell it in a way that makes us look at least adequately good, right?

And so, when we read the Bible, it's the people telling their stories of their journey: of their walk; of their walk of faith; of going through all the things that they were going through and telling the story of that.

The next level is a moral teaching. And when we read the Bible, we see a truly elevated view of a moral teaching. When we read it in the Old Testament, we read a lot in the beginning, especially the eye for an eye. And the moral teaching is: if somebody's done you wrong, you have every right to do them -- in fact, you have a responsibility to do them -- wrong back.

And as we read the Bible from beginning to end, we read when Jesus comes in, he changes the moral perspective. He teaches us to love even those people that would persecute us. To be generous to those even that would do ill for us. And the moral teaching evolves. And what it talks about is how we are to be in community and how we're to be together in a spiritual teaching.

And then the third aspect of the Bible -- and I think the most profound -- is the spiritual teachings. And these spiritual teachings are not literal. When people say that the Bible is the "literal Word of God," all the spiritual teachings aren't literal. When we read that the kingdom of heaven is like yeast placed in bread, that's not literally true; it's spiritually true. If it was literally true, then only bakers would get to heaven, right? [Congregants laugh] It is spiritually true.

So we have to be discerning spiritually. And we have to open our spiritual lives to really understand the deeper meaning -- the metaphysical meaning -- that's involved in the Bible, and what it means in our lives.

So tonight, we're going to look at these two stories. And they are the stories of Mary and Joseph and how the angels speak to both of them. But it's different! And there are commonalities and I'm going to highlight those things that are common in both stories, but it's a very different experience.

So, I'm going to begin with Luke 1, beginning with Verse 26:

Six months after Elizabeth knew she was going to become a mother, Gabriel -- the angel Gabriel -- was sent from God to Nazareth. Nazareth with a town in the country of Galilee. And he went to a woman who had never been with a man, and her name was Mary. And she was promised to be married to a man named Joseph. And Joseph was of the family and lineage of David.

And the angel came to her and said, "You are honored very much, and you are favored among women, and the Lord is with you. And he has chosen you among women."

And when she saw the angel, she was troubled by his words. And she thought, "What does this mean?" And the angel said to her, "Mary, do not be afraid, for you have found favor with God. See, you will become a mother and have a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus. And he will be great. He will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him this place where his earthly father, David, sat. And he will be king over the house of Jacob, and his nation will have no end."

And Mary said to the angel, "How is this going to happen? I've never been with a man." And the angel said to her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will cover you. And the Holy Child you will give birth to will be called the Son of God. See, your cousin Elizabeth, for she is old, and yet she is going to give birth. She was not able to have children before, but she's now in her sixth month. So God can do all things!"

And Mary said to the angel, "I am willing to be used by the Lord. Let it happen to me as you have said." And the angel went away.

So, what's the message for our lives?

The first message -- and I think there's four that I want to point out tonight. I think the first message is that **God will give you a vision for your life** -- for what's going on in your life -- that's bigger than you can now believe in, and will ask you to believe in it anyway.

Like, when the angel whispers in your ear, it's not a vision that you already have! It's not a vision that's easy for you to accept. It is a vision and a possibility for your life that is greater than you've yet conceived and inviting you to step into more than you've ever been before. And that's the journey here. That's the journey of actually listening to the angels and being inspired to a higher realm of being, a higher level of life.

So, the angel comes to Mary and gives her a possibility. And she has to really have the faith to say, "*Thy will be done.*" Because she can say, "*I'm out.*" And yet her soul actually hears the goodness -- hears God -- in that message, and actually says yes to this possibility. And because she is willing to participate in this vision, she is asked to believe and she believes.

But she does question it, the second teaching point. **She has permission to question it and ask, "How is this possible?"** Because our rational mind ... oftentimes when we get a divine vision for our life, it doesn't make sense. A rational mind cannot understand how all the pieces are going to fit together. You know, every time I've experienced a miracle in one way or another, it's never made sense until after it happened.

You know, one of the stories that I often tell is a young person came and was going to go in for surgery. And the surgery ... he had a large tumor in his abdomen. And he was going in; he asked me to pray. The surgery was a week out. We prayed; we prayed; we prayed. And on the day of the surgery, just before they took him in for surgery, they did another scan. And guess what? It was gone, right?

So for how many of us would that make sense? It wouldn't make sense at all, right? And the surgeon ... the only thing they could come up with was, "*Well, the first scan must have been wrong.*" Right? Because that's the only thing that made sense; from the rational mind, that's the only thing that made sense. You couldn't say, "*Well, we had a mass there last week and it's gone today.*"

But what I want you to see is that, when God gives you a vision for your life, sometimes we have to be able to suspend our disbelief to move into a higher level of good. That sometimes the good that God has for you does not make sense to what you think is possible ... because it's not possible for you, but it is possible for God!

So what level of life do you want to live at? We can live at the level that's possible for us, or we can live at the level that's possible for God. But to move to that level of life, it's not always easy. Because, over and over again, you have to be willing to check what you believe and hold on to a vision that is bigger than that.

Three. One of my favorite lines is in the stories when the angel says to her, "*God will cover you.*" And I love that imagery: that **God will cover you**. That whatever you're walking through; whatever you're going through; whatever's going on in your life, that we have the ability to ask to God to cover us in the Light and the Love and the Grace and the Power.

You know, when we do our Prayer for Protection, there's that idea that we can be covered in the Holy Presence. And that, whatever you're walking through in your life right now, we have the ability to request that we be wrapped and enfolded in the pure goodness of God. And sometimes that's such an

intimate image: to be wrapped in God; to be covered in God; to be surrounded in God; to be enfolded in God. But the moment we are willing to be enfolded in God, the more that we are willing to receive that divine providence, that divine protection, that divine goodness.

And the fourth point is that the angels gave Mary evidence of the power of God. That the angel said, "Look at Elizabeth. She's pregnant; she's six months pregnant." Like, every time you don't believe, God can give you an example of the Power of God that is bigger than that. That, every time you want to believe that your life can be better, God will place somebody in your life who's already walked through it. And you can learn from their example. You can see how they moved their life from where it was to where they wanted it to be.

And that, over and over again, we get these images of possibilities. And if it's possible for one, is it possible for you? Yes! If anyone can take a higher step into a greater life, then it's possible for all of us. That, every time we question whether we can move to a higher level of good, God gives us evidence on the power of God.

Now reading from Matthew 1: 18-25, when the angel came to Joseph:

Now this is how the birth of Jesus the Messiah came about. His mother, Mary, was pledged to be married to Joseph. But before they had come together, she was found to be pregnant from the Holy Spirit. Because Joseph, her husband, was a faithful man of the law and yet did not want to expose his wife to public disgrace, he had in his mind to divorce her quietly.

But after he had considered this, the angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home with you as your wife, because what is conceived in her was from the Holy Spirit. And she will give birth to a son, and you will give him the name Jesus, because he is here to set the people free of their sins.

And all this took place to fulfill the law that had been said to the prophet: "The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son and he will be called Emmanuel, which means God with us."

When Joseph awoke, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him, and he took Mary home as his wife. But they did not consummate their marriage until she gave birth to a son. And he named him Jesus.

So, what's the teaching points for Joseph?

What I want you to see is: the way the angel came to Mary and Joseph was very different. How did the angel come to Mary? Was she awake or was she asleep? She was awake! Right? Now, when the angel came to Joseph, was he awake or asleep? He was asleep, right?

And I want you to see that. Because Joseph represents that masculine of us that's very rational. And so, the angel wanted to come and give Joseph a message that he was not -- when he was in his awake, rational mind -- was not able to hear or appreciate or receive. So, **the angel had to come to him in his sleep, when he was asleep and wide open to a message that his rational mind may not have been able to understand.** And so the angel came to him in his sleep, but even in his sleep he was open and receptive to what God was saying to him. But he had to be asleep!

And I want you to see in your own life, if the angel has a message for you -- if God has a message for you -- can you hold it in your conscious mind when you're awake, or does it have to come in sideways while you're asleep? For some of us, it's better if it comes sideways when we're asleep! Because we're so resistant to what God's trying to do in our life, God has to sneak it in the back door.

And some of us ... like, when the angels want to come and whisper in our ear, we hear it, and we know that it's the Word of God.

So when you look in your own life, when the angels want to speak to you, do you need to be asleep or can you be awake? Can you be open and receptive to what God wants to do in your life when you're conscious and awake? Or do you have to be asleep so that all your defenses have been shut down?

The second one is that **the angel gave him a vision and asked him to believe**. I love this, because the angel gave Joseph a vision that required that he park his male ego and believe, and to do it with an open heart. His goodness was apparent, right? He didn't want to expose his wife; he didn't want to disgrace his wife; he didn't want her to be stoned; or ... He didn't want any of that to happen to her, but he didn't really want this thing to go forward. And yet the angel came to him and said, *"Yes, this is of God; this is good, and this will bless you."* And hearing that, he was willing to change his ways.

See, the third teaching point that I want you to see is that sometimes -- especially in the religious understanding that we have in the world today -- religion is not always helping us live a bigger life in God. That **sometimes our religious traditions are actually getting in the way of what God wants to do in our life**. Sometimes we have religious practices that are actually limiting us.

And one of the things that Jesus did: he came to show us that the religious practices that are too small -- that don't allow the Holy Spirit to be fulfilled -- are being asked to be put away so that we can do what God is calling us to do now, not what the practice that has been going on for thousands of years.

What does God want to do in your life? It should not be limited by old ideas and old beliefs and old understandings and old practices. We need to open our minds and our hearts to what God wants to do in our lives today and be willing to receive that.

And then the final point that I think Joseph teaches us is to **expand our circle**. Joseph, in his mind, thought that his family was supposed to look like this. And what God invited him to do was to expand his circle so that it was bigger than he thought.

And many of us were raised in an environment that we thought that our group, our tribe, our people, our family were this. And through the course of our life, we've learned that our family, our tribe, our group is much bigger than we've ever been led to believe. And especially at Christmas! That sometimes, at Christmas, we think, *"Well, I want to celebrate with my people, with my tribe, with my group, with my family. And it's right here; this is it; this is them. We can draw a circle around them, and this is who we are."*

And yet, the spiritual practice is that all of us are brothers and sisters. All of us were created in the image and likeness of God. All of us are family; all of us are of the one tribe. All of us are expressions of the Divine. That every time we draw a circle and say, *"This is me and mine,"* God is saying, *"No! There's more. It's bigger. It's greater than we've ever been led to be."*

And sometimes we don't think we can love that big. Sometimes we don't think we have that much love in us for everyone. And yet that's the message of the story! Is that Joseph thought, *"This is mine. This is my family. This is my wife; this is how it's going to be."* And God said, *"No; you have to be willing to love in a bigger way, because the child you're going to be raising is going to require you to love in a bigger way. That, every time you think this is your people, your tribe, your village, he's going to invite you to step outside of that and love everyone as a child of God."*

Christmas isn't easy. It's really not, right? There's so many things that we get caught up in in Christmas. You know, there's so many activities and so many things that sometimes we forget that Christmas is about having a spiritual experience. And that we're really here to awaken: to allow the Christ child to be

born in and through us all. That Christmas isn't about all the outer stuff at the expense of not having the time and the energy to have a spiritual experience.

And if you look at the way that we celebrate Christmas, it's really quite profound. You know, we just finished this month -- 40 days' experience -- of gratitude. And if you look at the way that we celebrate the holidays this time of year, it's really amazing! It's that we spend 40 days celebrating, preparing and giving thanks. And as soon as we get into that spirit of gratitude, then we move into this time of giving birth to this Christ Spirit; giving birth to the glory of God that's within us. And then we go into this phase of giving birth in Christmas. And at Christmas we're invited to give birth to all that God is within us. And then the very next thing that happens a week later -- a week later we go into a new year where we get to actually practice that in a brand new way!

And that every year we have this process where we give thanks and then we awaken to the Christ, and then we go into a new year where we're invited to live it in a bigger, greater, more powerful way. And then over and over again we give thanks, we awaken, and then we have to live it. We give thanks and then we awaken and then we have to go live it.

And over and over again, there's a spiritual process that's always available to us. No matter who we are; no matter what our faith; no matter what our religion; we give thanks. And we awaken to the glory of God. And then we have to go live it in a brand new way: in a bigger your way and a greater way than we ever have before.

Tonight, I'm going to invite you to allow the angels to whisper to you. If it's safer for you to ask the angels as you're going to sleep, *"Okay, sneak a message in tonight."* [Congregants laugh] *"Like, sneak it in and give it to me when I'm open and receptive to hear it."*

But if you want to have an experience with the angels, you can actually do it when you wake up in the morning. Say, *"Angels lead me; guide me; direct me this day. Reveal all that I need to know. Show me all the good that is available to me. Give me a vision for my life and my world that's bigger than I've ever known before."* And as you step into this Christmas season, you do so allowing the angels to lead you.

Will you pray with me?

I invite you to open your mind, your heart, your soul to the activity of God. That today, we open the space for the angels: the legions and legions of angels that are ready to minister; to care for us; to heal us; to bless us; to walk with us; to guide us in all things. That there is so much divine assistance for each and every one of us. And the angels have a vision for you and your life that is greater than you've ever lived before.

And at Christmas, we open the space to hear what God wants to say to us now, and then to step into the new year that we may live it in the most powerful way.

So in all things we look to God and in all things we give thanks. And so it is. Amen