

“Myth, Angels, and Story”

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Scriptures:

Isaiah 63:7-9; Luke 2:8-14; Hebrews 13:1-3

Isaiah 63:9 I will tell about the kind deeds the Lord has done. They deserve praise! The Lord has shown mercy to the people of Israel; he has been kind and good. 8 The Lord rescued his people, and said, “They are mine. They won’t betray me.” 9 It troubled the Lord to see them in trouble, and his angel saved them. The Lord was truly merciful, so he rescued his people. He took them in his arms and carried them all those years.

Luke 2:8 That night in the fields near Bethlehem some shepherds were guarding their sheep. 9 All at once an angel came down to them from the Lord, and the brightness of the Lord’s glory flashed around them. The shepherds were frightened. 10 But the angel said, “Don’t be afraid! I have good news for you, which will make everyone happy. 11 This very day in King David’s hometown a Savior was born for you. He is Christ the Lord. 12 You will know who he is, because you will find him dressed in baby clothes and lying on a bed of hay.” 13 Suddenly many other angels came down from heaven and joined in praising God. They said: 14 “Praise God in heaven! Peace on earth to everyone who pleases God.”

Hebrews 13:1 Keep being concerned about each other as the Lord’s followers should. 2 Be sure to welcome strangers into your home. By doing this, some people have welcomed angels as guests, without even knowing it. 3 Remember the Lord’s people who are in jail and be concerned for them. Don’t forget those who are suffering, but imagine that you are there with them.

Sermon:

We live in a day of fascination with technology and data and concrete evidence; and western civilization has now deprived us of the benefit of communication by story and myth and folklore. We have relegated myth to the last seat on the bus – “it’s probably not true, oh that’s just a myth, well it’s only a story.” If you look up myth in Wikipedia, it’s “a traditional story to explain some phenomenon; a widely held but false belief or idea.”

My ancestors would shake their heads in dismay. When I was studying theology, a myth was considered a story utilized to convey a deep truth or phenomenon applied when other methods proved inadequate. On the bus of truthhood, myth had a front seat. And on my own personal spiritual and life journey, the most profound explanations, moral truths, spiritual consciousness and social truth have always been best understood and assimilated through story.

Metaphor propels truth beyond the parameters of science and technology. When Jesus was asked the toughest questions, questions by priests, by pharisees, by the disciples, by some dude sitting on a rock just wanting an answer – He almost always said, “let me tell you a story.” The New Testament is full of parables of Jesus told as simple stories to convey the best answers.

In fact, most early literature was first told and handed down by oral tradition we call it – by story. Our texts are full of a rich heritage of story: The rich young ruler, the good Samaritan, the prodigal son, and on and on. If you want to know the real truth, tell a good story. That kind of truth surpasses the logic of traditional cause and effect thinking, of ordinary discourse. Mythology connects our conscious awareness to the power of spiritual understanding.

So it is with angels. It's why we have angels. For me, an angel is a spiritual energy, insight, or vision that intrudes and interrupts my ordinary awareness. An angel serves to jar us into an alternate view. A spiritual wisdom over conventional wisdom. And angels nearly always arrive suddenly and unexpectedly. You never get a google notification that an angel is about to appear. They are masters of surprise.

As we celebrate angels this Christmas season, I invite you into a world where mystery is more appealing than certainty. Where myth is more fulfilling than evidence. A journey where the angelic stories hold the most profound truth. That's the truth that gives us hope; truth that inspires an even more powerful commitment to our ministry of hospitality. This is the truth that holds the power to change lives and change our very consciousness.

Our Advent theme is not just symbols of hospitality, it is about hope; it is about the potential of hospitality to open spiritual avenues of hope against the prevailing challenges of being human.

Psychologist Rick Snyder studied the concept of hope extensively. He said this: "Hope is not an emotion. Hope is a cognitive, behavioral process that we learn when we experience adversity, when we have relationships that are trustworthy, and when we have faith in our ability to get out of a jam." Hospitality sets the stage!

So, what are angels? There is a unique and exquisite reference to an angel in the book of Job, of all places. (Job 33:19-24a)

"Man is chastened with pain upon his bed, and with continual strife in his bones; so that his life hates bread and his appetite dainty food. His flesh is so wasted away that it cannot be seen; and his bones which were not seen, stick out. His soul draws near the Pit, and his life near to death. If there be for him an angel, a mediator, one in a thousand, to declare to man what is right for him; and he is gracious to him, and says, 'Deliver him from going down into the Pit.'

Job in his pain prayed for an angel as a mediator.

There have been a few times in my life when I have wondered. Could there be an angel somewhere who could just tell me what is right for me right now? A mediator between me and the source of my life! I should perhaps look more often for the angels in my own experience. I know I have had some. I have experienced mediators.

On the lighter side, angels can sometimes have interesting assignments too. There was the day God was a little concerned about the nature of humanity down on earth. So, he sent one of his most reliable angels down to check on things. About a week later the angel came back with the report. Sure enough, the angel told God, "it's in bad shape down there. About 95% of the folks are doing bad stuff. Only about 5% of the people are decent down there."

Well God could not believe it. So, he sent another angel for a second opinion. Three days later that angel came back and said the same thing: 95% bad, only 5% good. Then the angel said, I have a suggestion: I think you should send an email to the 5% to give them some encouragement; give them a blessing for staying so true to the faith.

God thought a minute: that's a good idea. So, God sent an email to the 5%. Do you know what the email said? (long pause, no response) You didn't get one?

Today's text from Isaiah 63 is a fascinating reference to an angel. First, the steadfast love of God is affirmed; then the abundance of his mercy is remembered; the presence of the Lord as savior; and in all of Israel's affliction, the Lord himself was afflicted, and the ANGEL of his presence saved them. The allegory is penetrating

to me. It's as if there is an angel of saving energy, chi, life force. The angel of God's presence. As if there could be an angel of taser gun effectiveness, stimulating a spiritual salvation. That adds a new dimension to the concept of angels – "pure presence of saving power!".

The story of the birth of Jesus as told in Luke 2 is classic. Angel as messenger. Here comes an angel in full glory and whatever the glory of the Lord is, it proved so bright it scared them all. And the angel assured them it was all for good cause and they could find the babe in the manger. And then suddenly (again, no advance notice) the angel was joined by a heavenly host. Imagery to confound the mind. A whole bunch of little cherubs in robes with wings and praising voices, right? Peace on earth!!

Then we have angels as the personification of God. A being representing God's presence in our existential reality. They are frequently presented as ministering spirits among us. Angels are not cosmic forms. They are not presented as physical in the traditional way. They sometimes appear to be received by our physical senses such as see, feel, hear, know.

But the angels of the bible do not seem to be presented as cosmic beings. They are usually presented as a spiritual presence or a vision or manifestation of God's presence. It seems like the concept of angel is intentionally left vague so as to enhance the mystery of the intent of the visit.

The purpose of an angel visit is always a spiritual lesson. It is communication of a truth by metaphor. So, we have angels who come as mediators, as spiritual life forces, as messengers of God's activity, and as personified agents of God himself. God's guardianship over us. It is the proverbial Guardian Angel.

When I was a little boy at home our farm was across the road from a railroad terminal. They had steam engines that needed to take on fresh loads of coal. While the train was stopped for a few hours, the hobos of the day jumped off the train and crossed the road to our house to ask for a handout. My grandmother was well known for making a few sandwiches to send on the way. For reasons now unknown to me, there was never mention of danger in my family.

And that text from Hebrews 13 has always intrigued me. While we are taught now that strangers often impose danger or misfortune, we could instead use the verse in Hebrews as a tag line for the ministry here at this little church that did: "Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for thereby some have entertained angels unawares. Remember those who are in jail, as if in jail yourself, and those who are ill-treated like the addicts and the afflicted and the homeless; since you are in the body right with them."

So now we envision angels as agents of communication about hospitality. Angels are agents of God's healing authority. And this text makes it clear that angelic dialogue is a two-way street. When we offer hospitality to the distressed, we are offering it to the same Jesus that was born in a manger.

My imagination runs wild when I wonder if I have been touched by an angel in recent days?

They were right about being unaware. The identity of those angels is held close and private for a reason. We will never know the cosmic identity of the angels that receive our hospitality.

But we have been assured that those who receive, do paradoxically minister back to us as angels and agents of God's mercy, grace, and love. The whole process is an intentional mystery, irony, and paradox.

All of the mythology around angels serves to launch my spirit to higher ground. It is a vision of hope for the kingdom on earth. The anabaptist groups of history have a long faith tradition known as "no force in religion." Mennonites, Friends, Amish, Brethren – all share a common doctrine that faith is an internal process, not a

dogma to be imposed. So it is with hospitality. It cannot be forced; it is simply offered. And once received, a dialogue emerges. There have been many dialogues executed here over hospitality. Strangers have become friends, referrals have been made, hungry have been fed, homes have been furnished, all the parties have been changed.

There was an old lumberjack from Washington State. In his last years he went to live with his daughter. He had lost the strength and the abilities of his younger days. In fact, he was miserable and grumpy. His daughter didn't know what to do.

She read about how dogs can help to be companions to the elderly. So, she went to the local animal shelter. There was an older dog there, not cute or handsome, but scraggly and undernourished. She was going to pass on him but learned it was his last day before euthanasia. She decided to take him home!

She showed him to his dad. Dad said, "didn't ask for a dog. I don't want him." But the dog had other plans. He just sat there looking sadly at the old lumberjack. Finally, dad knelt down to pet the dog and got a good face licking. It was a strange few minutes, until finally the old logger hugged the dog with tears on his cheeks. He named the dog Cheyenne.

After that day they were inseparable; went everywhere together, walks, park, fishing. The old lumberjack came back to his old self. He laughed and had purpose. He thanked his daughter. This went on for three years. Then one day she entered his room to find he had passed in his sleep. Cheyenne was curled up beside him. The coroner came, arrangements were made. Only two days later the daughter found the dog asleep on the logger's bed, lifeless. That weekend, at the funeral of the old strong lumberjack, the preacher read from Hebrews 13. And it was all something about an angel named Cheyenne.

There are spirits of healing in many forms when we open ourselves to the possibility that myth, angels and story carry new hope and truth to amazing levels.

When we offer hospitality to the community, yes there is a danger. What if we experience change not anticipated? What if we become open to new ways of perceiving? What if our very own chi, life force is altered with new beams of light?

Angels are agents of change, spiritual forces designated to disrupt the ordinary. I happen to believe in angels.

The day that judge in Denver ruled in favor of our Mennonite hospitality to the poor, there was an angel in the courtroom. Surrounded by government attorneys, secular ACLU lawyers, a secular court ruled that no principality or power should prevent the offer of lockers as an act of hospitality to strangers in need. There was an angel in the courtroom.

Luke 2:10

And the angel said to them, do not be afraid; for to you is born this day in the city of David, a savior, who is Christ the Lord. And this will be a sign for you: you will find the babe wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger. And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of heavenly host praising God and saying, "Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace." And that, my friends, is the greatest story ever told.