

Sermon for Sunday, December 25, 1977, by Andrew A. Jumper, D.D., Senior Pastor
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"WHEN THE ANGELS SKIP OUT ON YOU"

Text: "And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them." St. Luke 2:20

It is hard to think of Christmas and not think of angels. Angels had played a big role in Christmas events. For example, before the birth of John the Baptist, who was to be the forerunner of Jesus, an angel announced to his father, Zechariah, that John would be born. Joseph had an angel of the Lord appear to him to tell him not to be afraid to take Mary as his wife. Later on, when Herod was attempting to kill the baby Jesus, the Bible tells us that an angel appeared to Joseph and told him to flee to Egypt with Mary and the baby Jesus. Mary, herself, as we read in the Christmas story, has the angel Gabriel come and tell her what God is going to do. And the shepherds out in the fields saw the angels and heard them announce the birth of the Messiah. Then the Bible tells us there was suddenly a host of angels praising God.

But angels skip out on you. They don't stick around. For example, after making the announcement to the shepherds, the Bible says of the angels, "...the angels went from them into heaven." Again, when the angel appeared to Mary and Mary surrendered her life to God's will, the Bible then says, "And the angel departed from her."

Actually, if you will study the New Testament, in every case where angels are reported, as soon as real trouble starts, they disappear. Look for example, at St. Peter. Peter is in prison. His crime at this point is nothing worse than preaching about Jesus. But the angel comes, leads him out of the prison. Now Peter is an escaped prisoner. His crime is compounded. And what does the Bible say? It says, "and immediately the angel left him."

Have you ever heard anyone say something like this, "She has a voice like an angel"? Or, "He sounded like an angel"? Have you ever wondered what an angel sounds like? Well, I've done some research, and I can tell you how an angel sounds. An angel sounds just like my mother did when I was about eight years old and she was teaching me discipline. Let me illustrate. A moment ago I mentioned Peter in prison. There he is being closely guarded by soldiers, one on either side of him, and he is locked in chains. It is night and Peter is asleep. Then, when the angel appears he sounds just like my mother! Listen to what the Bible says, "he struck him on the side and woke him up saying, 'Get up quickly.'" Mother sounded just like that. And the Bible says, "And the angel said to him, 'Dress yourself and put on your shoes.'" And then he says, "And it said to him, 'Wrap your coat around you and follow me.'"

Believe me, my mother had the voice of an angel. "Get up--get dressed--get going." That's just how the angels sound. When Gideon saw the angel, the angel said, "Gideon, get up and go." When Elijah sat weeping in self pity under the broom tree, the angel came to him and said, "Elijah...get up and eat..." Phillip the evangelist saw an angel and the angel said to him, "Phillip, arise and go..." And that's just how the angels sound--"get up--hurry--get going." But the only problem is, once they get you up and going, the Bible always says that they skip out!

Well, that is what happened to the shepherds. The angels came and told them that the Messiah had been born in Bethlehem and the implication was that the shepherds were to go. So the Bible says, "... the shepherds said to one another, 'Let us go over to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has made know to us.'" But by then the angels had skipped out.

The first point I want to make is this: we shouldn't expect the angels to stand between us and life. Most of us would like it if they did. We would like for the very angels to come and stand between us and trouble, between us and sorrow. We would like for the angels to come and change our family, change our circumstances, change our lives for good. But the angels never do that. The Bible tells us that when Jesus prayed in the garden of Gethsamene an angel came and ministered to him. But then the time came to climb the hill of Calvary, when the time came to endure the pain and disaster of the cross, there was no angel to stand between Jesus and death. No, that was something he had to do himself. So with us. The very angels may come to tell us of good news, but when life is lived out in this world, no angels are around.

So, how are we to live our lives when the angels go? How are we to endure heart-ache, tragedy, death, sickness and pain? Well, the Bible tells us that the angels gave us two gifts. First, the angels tell us that God brings peace to the world. "Glory to God in the highest," they sang, "and on earth peace..." Is there trouble in your heart today? God can give you peace. A lady once asked Dr. Norman Vincent Peale how she could face life now that her husband had died. Dr. Peale replied, "Practice affirming three times every day this sentence, 'The peace of God is flooding my mind, my body, my life.'" Then he added, "God will give you that peace to keep on going."

Yes, most of us need inner peace. Dr. George W. Crane once said, "There would be much less strain on men and women if they teamed up with God as a daily partner. Indeed, in that event, psychiatry would almost pass out of existence." And one of the last gifts that Jesus promised his disciples has to do with peace. Do you remember how he put it? He said, "Peace I leave with you, my peace I give unto you. Not as the world giveth give I unto you. Let not your heart be troubled, neither let it be afraid."

That's what the angels told the shepherds about--peace. Some poet has put it this way: "Peace on earth, with a world at war? Oh what were the angels singing for. That far-away night when the star shone down. With a glorious light on Bethlehem's town? Peace on earth, amid sorrow and loss? Yes, peace indeed at the foot of a cross! Peace in a world that is troubled and torn. Peace in each heart where the Saviour is born." Whatever problems are heavy in your heart, there can be peace if Jesus is invited in. But there was a second gift that the angels announced that night. It was the gift of joy. In one sense of the word, peace is negative. Peace implies rest from conflict, turmoil and trouble. But joy is positive. Joy is that emotion that wells up from the depths of the human heart and brings enjoyment of life, zest, and sparkle. As someone has put it, peace makes us stop wishing we were dead; joy makes us glad to be alive. Joy is that quality of life such as the Scotsman expressed when he stood up to testify what Jesus had done for him. "I'm happier now," he said, "when I'm not happy than I used to be when I was happy!"

"Fear not," said the angels to the shepherds, "for I bring you good tidings of great joy..." Yes, "fear not..." Did you know that fear is the basic ingredient of all our mental and emotional problems? When you reduce mental illness to its lowest common denominator, the bottom line is always fear. For example, when Adam and Eve disobeyed God and ate of the fruit of the forbidden tree, the Bible says that Adam's eyes were opened and he saw that he was naked. Then, when God came, Adam hid from God. He said to God, "I saw that I was naked and I was afraid..." Our brokenness brings fear. Yes, said the angels, don't be afraid for I bring you good tidings of a great joy.

Isn't this always the case when Jesus is in your heart? When the people of Samaria heard Phillip preach Jesus, the Bible says of them, "And there was great joy in that city." Again, when Paul told the Philippian jailer about Jesus and the jailer

believe, the Bible says, "and he rejoiced, believing in God." Or again, when the Etheopian Eunuch believed and was baptized, the Bible says of him, "...and he went on his way rejoicing."

Yes, God can do that for you this morning. First, he can bring peace to a troubled soul, but second, he can bring joy to your hearts. Phillips Brooks, a famous American preacher of a bygone era, wrote the beloved hymn, "O little Town of Bethlehem." One verse goes like this, "O holy Child of Bethlehem! Descend to us, we pray; Cast out our sin, and enter in, Be born in us today!" Yes, when Jesus is born in our hearts, he casts out our sin and brings peace to troubled hearts. But most of all he brings us joy. And even when the angels skip out, they leave behind those gifts.

Let me tell you the story of Frank Hinnant and his wife Adele. Early in their marriage their only son, David, died. Thereafter Frank would never celebrate Christmas. "Its for children," he would say. But one day when he was downtown during the Christmas season he saw an orphanage named "The Holy Innocents Home". Then he remembered the story of the children whom Herod had put to death. Do you remember the story in the Bible, how when the wisemen came to Herod and he knew that a king had been born. He sent his executioner to Bethlehem and every child under two was put to death. Frank began to research the story and the best scholars indicated that perhaps 20 children had died because of Herod's vain effort to kill the new born king. He wondered about the sorrow, the shock, the incredible sense of loss those families felt. Was there any joy or peace for them? He knew they felt as he did about the loss of his own son. That night when he went home he told Adele what he had done. "I gave that place some money. They are going to build a new wing with it." Adele was swept away by the kindness of this man she had loved so long, but she was unprepared for his next statement. "They are going to name the wing for David." It was the first time in 22 years that Adele had heard Frank mention that name of their only son. It made her do something she never did when Frank was around. She wept. Frank never told her about that moment. He never told her how, as he held her in his arms, he saw again something he had envisioned for the first time that afternoon. He saw a room full of children, 20 of them playing in a bright new wing at Holy Innocents. But, now, suddenly, instead of 20 there were 21. Peace and joy came into his heart for that 21st child was David. And when the angels skip out that's what they leave for us all.