

Let's see now... there's Johnny Angel; Teen Angel; Charlie's Angels; Snow Angels; Touched by an Angel; the Littlest Angel; Angel of the Morning; Angel to Watch Over Me; Earth Angel; Arms of an Angel; Angels on Horseback; the Blue Angels; and, of course, the Los Angeles Angels of Anaheim (just to name a few). There are angel pictures in our office cubicles, angels hanging from our rear-view mirrors, angel lapel pins, and angel coffee mugs. If there is a blank surface anywhere, you can bet it's been covered at least once by an angel. Angel mania, it appears, has swept the nation.

All of this hype about angels, however, doesn't come without a darker side. For, despite the fact that we all seem so fascinated by those heavenly beings, when the question is asked directly as to whether or not we actually believe in the winged creatures – especially when it is asked of us so-called “rational” clear-thinking Episcopalians – there is usually a slight pause, followed by a somewhat-less-than-convincing, “Well, yah, I'm sure – I guess.”

I think that at least a part of the problem lies in the definitions. You know, if you look up the word “angel” in the dictionary, it doesn't mean “a person wearing a long white dress with a pair of oversize golden wings, surrounded by a warm glowing light.” On the contrary, the word “angel” simply means “a messenger from God.”

Well, if you put it that way, then when the question is asked, “Do I believe in angels?” the answer is simple. You bet I do... because I've encountered them

numerous times in my life. In fact, the issue in my life is not so much whether God has sent messengers my way, as much as it is whether or not I've noticed their presence when they're often standing right in front of me. For me, the greatest lesson in encountering angels in the scriptures comes not in a story about angels at all, but rather in the Letter to the Hebrews, where St. Paul writes, "Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it."

Well, just as our lives are filled with talk of angels, so too were the lives of so many people in the scriptures. The first appearance of an angel in the Bible happens just 16 chapters into the very first book of the bible. In Genesis 16:7, an angel appears to Hagar, the slave of Abraham and Sarah, telling her that she would give birth to a son, and that she was to name in Ishmael. Ishmael, as many of you perhaps know, is the person through whom the Islamic world traces its heritage to Abraham, and so, in many ways, the first angel of the Bible heralds the beginning of the Muslim faith.

Angels continue to appear throughout the biblical narrative – to Abraham, telling him not to sacrifice his son Isaac; to Jacob, ascending a ladder into heaven; to Moses, beside a burning bush; to Balaam's donkey in the Book of Numbers (one of the funniest stories in all the Bible); to Gideon, as he was threshing wheat; to Samson's mother, foretelling his miraculous birth; to Elijah, as he lay beneath a broom tree; to Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, as they sat in a fiery furnace – the list goes on and on.

Angels play no small part in the Christmas story we've heard so much of these past few weeks as well – from their appearances separately to Mary and to

Joseph, foretelling the birth of Jesus; to their appearance in the fields announcing the savior's birth to the shepherds; to their encounter with the magi, warning them to return home by a different route. And today's gospel lesson is no exception. In it, Joseph has not one, but two encounters with an angel – encounters which will change his life, and the life of his family, forever – first in a dream telling him to take his family away to Egypt, and then again in a dream telling him that it was now safe to return once again to his homeland.

You may have noticed, however, that we skipped a few verses of the 2nd chapter of Matthew's gospel, reading verses 13-15, and then jumping ahead to verses 19-23. It is because today's gospel – when told in its entirety – is one of the most gruesome stories in all the scriptures. In fact, it's filled with such gory detail, that the compilers of our lectionary left out the worst part, for fear that we'd have to post some kind of disclaimer at the beginning of our service like they sometimes do at the beginning of a television program, stating, "Viewer discretion advised. May not be suitable for young children." You see, right here in the middle of the Christmas season... right here in the middle of the Christmas story – even before we've had a chance to bid farewell to the Magi – we receive news of one of the most disturbing episodes in all of the Bible. The verses which were omitted from this morning's gospel lesson read like this:

When Herod saw that he had been tricked by the wise men, he was infuriated, and he sent and killed all the children in and around Bethlehem who were two years old or under, according to the time that he had learned from the wise men. Then was fulfilled what had been spoken through the prophet Jeremiah: 'A voice was heard in Ramah, wailing and loud lamentation, Rachel weeping for her children; she refused to be consoled, because they are no more.'

That's right. It is the slaughter of the little children, the massacre of the Holy Innocents. Right here, as we are still enjoying the last bit of buzz of the Christmas season, we encounter one of the most horrific scenes of carnage imaginable. Because Herod couldn't determine which child might be the one upon whom the star rose, because he couldn't know for sure which child might be a threat to his rule, he simply killed them all... willing to risk a little bit of collateral damage to ensure his legacy.

I don't like this part of the story. And yet, to me, it is just as important as the shepherds and the stable, the innkeeper and the magi, and yes, even the angels. For it is a reminder that even as the Light was coming into the world, the forces of darkness were already at work trying to destroy that Light, to plunge the world back into darkness once again. It's a part of the Christmas story we try to ignore, we try to push away, we try to downplay and skim over and work around. Nobody wants to talk about the hard stuff, the sad stuff, the tragic stuff. But whether or not we want to deal with it, still it remains. Like all of life, Christmas comes as a package. And we don't get to pick and choose which parts of the package we want to open.

Now, you might find that difficult news to hear... maybe discouraging... maybe even a little depressing. But I find this to be the most liberating, the most freeing, the most compelling – and maybe even the most meaningful – part of what Christmas means to me. You see, the message of Christmas is not that, with God along for the ride, everything will be easy. The message of Christmas... is that God is along for the ride. And whether that ride is sometimes easy or sometimes difficult... whether you feel like that ride is being taken with your nearest and

dearest family and friends, or whether you feel like you're all alone on the journey... whether that ride is taking you to the ultimate pinnacle of success or satisfaction or security, or whether you find that ride taking you to dark and scary places not of your own choosing... in each case and in every case, God is along for the ride.

Despite the best efforts which so many of us try to put forth to get people to believe the contrary, I know that these are not easy times for many of us in our community and in our congregation. Some of you are out of work. Some of you are desperately trying to figure out how to make ends meet. Some of you are facing struggles at home – with spouses, or kids, or parents. Some of you are burdened by health issues – either your own or the health of someone you love. The hope – and the promise – of Christmas is that God will be with us through it all. And the hope – and the promise – of the Christmas story is that God's messengers, the angels, will be present to show us the way.

Do I believe in angels? I believe with all my heart that angels are among us, those messengers from God... just as they were with the shepherds in the fields; just as they were with the Magi as they first came bearing their gifts and then went home by another route; just as they were with Joseph and Mary and the baby Jesus as they fled from the stable into the foreign land of Egypt; just as they were with the Bethlehem babies who fell beneath the swords of Herod's army... angels reminding them, and us, that God is along for the ride.

Back in the summer of 1982, as a part of my seminary training, I spent 10 weeks working as a chaplain in a hospital in St. Paul, Minnesota. I was young... and scared... and absolutely certain that I was totally unprepared for whatever

might come my way as a chaplain. As you might imagine, the hardest part of that job was when I was on-call and responsible for the overnight shift, and the pager would invariably go off at 2 or 3 in the morning, waking me from a fitful sleep that some kind of tragedy had befallen some family, and they now needed the services of the chaplain in the Emergency Room, or the maternity ward, or the Intensive or Cardiac Care Unit. Early on that summer, I developed the routine as a part of my own prayer time at the end of the day to recite one of the prayers from our service of Compline in the Prayer Book... a routine which stays with me to this day. That prayer starts out like this:

“Keep watch, dear Lord, with those who work, or weep, or watch this night, and give your angels charge over those who sleep.”

Give your angels charge, O God, over each one of us, that we might hear your messengers – and that we might be your messengers – bringing the Good News... that God is With Us... that the Light has come into the world... and that the Darkness will not overcome it.

Amen.