

Today's gospel lesson presents something of a time warp. Did you notice? Today is the ninth day of Christmas, the eighth day after our Savior Jesus was born. Epiphany, the day when the wise men arrive to worship Jesus, is four days away. Yet our gospel lesson begins, "Now after the wise men had left, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream..." Wait a minute, "What wise men?" And an angel. Really?

Luckily, we all know about the wise men. I even saw a television show about them just before Christmas—maybe you saw it also. This program explained how it could be that Persian astronomers could have seen and interpreted the signs of Jesus' birth in the heavens and have come to Bethlehem to worship the baby Jesus.

I LOVE it every time science catches up with the Bible. When I was a teen science pooh-pooed there being an unusual star visible in the sky, a star which moved the way that the Bible describes. Now, it turns out that there are three ways to scientifically account for the star that the wise men saw. My favorite is that there was a rare conjunction—an alignment—of the planets Jupiter and Saturn which occurred not once but three times in the year 6 BCE whose bright appearances in the sky would have been exactly as the Bible described. The star and the wise men are signs that lead us to Jesus.

Today's gospel lesson is, above all, a proclamation that the whole Old Testament—all of Israel's salvation history—is a sure sign pointing directly to Jesus. The gospel explains how it is that the Holy Family ended up in Nazareth, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem, and having come "out of Egypt," all as foretold by the Jewish prophets of old. When I was a teen I thought that this all-too-pat narrative which connected the Messianic prophecies to Jesus was a sure sign that the story was made up. It's easy to see the parallels: Herod is the Pharaoh of Egypt of the OLD salvation story who killed all the boy babies to try to rid the world of Jesus, its deliverer. This makes Jesus the new Moses, come to deliver his people from slavery and sorrow. There were angels at the original Passover, when God spared the baby Israelite boys long ago, as there are angels in attendance saving the toddler Jesus. How could we not see the parallels? The signs—all signs—point us to Jesus, our redeemer. However, now that I am no longer a teen I believe this birth narrative to be true. How could Christ's birth not have fulfilled the prophecies about him? I love it every time my own thinking catches up with the Bible.

Science cannot—at present—explain the angel of the Lord who delivered messages from God to Joseph while he was sleeping. I wonder what YOU think about angels. Many faithful Christians think that angels are merely a metaphor for an insight we have about the divine. Many other faithful Christians think of angels in a psychoanalytic way, as projections of the unconscious psyche. And yet most Christians are convinced that angels exist—actual honest-to-God ministering spirits and divine messengers of God. Chances are that you believe in angels, even without a scientific explanation for them; a 2007 Gallop poll showed that 75% of Americans believe in angels,¹ up from 69% in 1993.²

Whatever you think about angels, for the last nine days we have joined the angels in singing our joy at Jesus' birth. As much as I want dwell on the joy of Christ Jesus' coming into the world, I am sorry to tell you that we have to visit the other side of Christmas to find all the signs that point to Jesus. In today's gospel lesson, the angel who appeared to Joseph told him to leave the country pronto because Herod wanted to kill Jesus. This is not angels singing from the highest heavens anymore. Christmas Day is over, God has become human, yet all is not calm and all is definitely not right. Herod, the king of all Judea, is rebelling at God-made-flesh, whom Herod believes threatens his power.

My aim here is not to depress you, but we are definitely on the other side of Christmas. If the coming of the Christ child was supposed to fix all of creation, why do people still have to flee death in the middle of the night? And why are thoroughly bad guys like Herod still king? Herod killed two of his OWN children—sons whom he thought threatened his throne.³ He also killed all the young boy babies in Bethlehem for the same reason. Jesus might have been one of those dead children, had not the angel told Joseph to flee, and had Joseph not obeyed. God is born of Mary, to redeem us from pain and sin and death, and Joseph protects him, so why does evil STILL exist?

I don't have the answer to that question. No one does, although a lot of people have tried to give an answer. GOD doesn't even TRY to explain it, at least not with words. God's explanation is this: Jesus, God-made-flesh, God casting his lot with us, dwelling with us forever. Jesus is what God has to say in the

¹ http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WjlsVHY-CXM&feature=player_embedded

² *Time* magazine, "Angels Among Us," Dec. 27, 1993, <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,979893,00.html>.

³ Raymond Edward Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah : A Commentary on the Infancy Narratives in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke*, New updat ed. (New York: Doubleday, 1993), 226.

face of suffering and death. God says, “I am with you.” Forest Service Chaplain Kate Braestrup—who has seen a lot of sorrow, pain, and death—gives us a simple test for finding God in any bad situation in which we find ourselves. “If you want to KNOW where God is ...,” she says, “look for love.”⁴ Where there is love, there is God. Love is God saying, “I am with you.” Love is the final sign which points to Jesus.

Of course, we prefer to be protected from all danger and suffering and sorrow, and to never have to die. I am reminded of a line the famous Old Testament scholar Gerhard von Rad wrote about the Israelites in the wilderness because it applies equally to us today: “God had them in his grasp holding them tight, even as they wriggled to get free, all the while protesting that they were unprotected.”⁵ Our lives—your life and my life—are the wilderness, where we are being formed as God’s people. And just like the Israelites of old, God’s Incarnation as Jesus makes it possible for us to enter the Promised Land—the land here on earth where love reigns AND the life in heaven which awaits us after death. From the vantage point of the other side of Christmas it appears that our sorrows somehow break open our hearts, enabling us to hear and to comprehend God’s message of love divine. And God’s love somehow completes us, making us whole.

Charles Jaekle, an Episcopal priest who founded The Pastoral Counseling and Consultation Centers of Greater Washington, has counseled many people who have met angels. He says that every person who has encountered an angel had experienced a personal crisis prior to the encounter: a scary medical diagnosis, a life-threatening accident, a failing marriage, a lost job, or some other extraordinary or stressful event or situation. The crisis they experienced precipitated a fissure in their lives, a disorientation, and an angel met them—as Father Charles says, “...at the boundary of their human capacities, bearing God’s message of love and compassion and solidarity with us.”⁶

If our wounds open our hearts so that we can hear angels speaking to us, their messages from God REQUIRE A RESPONSE. In today’s gospel lesson Joseph’s response was immediate: he got up in the

⁴ Kate Braestrup, *Here if You Need Me : A True Story*, 1 Back Bay pbk ed. (New York: Back Bay Books, 2008; 2007), 187.

⁵ Gerhard von Rad, *Old Testament Theology* [Theologie des Alten Testaments.] (Louisville Ky.: Westminster John Knox, 2001; 1962).

⁶ Charles R. Jaekle, *Angels, their Mission, and Message* (Harrisburg, PA: Morehouse Pub., 1995), 12.

middle of the night and took Jesus and Mary to safety. What might an angel of the Lord lead us to do, if we were to meet one today? I want to share three examples with you of a response to meeting an angel.

An angel saved a woman I knew—I'll call her Rose—from drowning when she was a teenager. Because Rose is no longer living I have not obtained her permission to share her story with you, and Rose is not her real name; however, I know that she would be delighted to know that her story lives on in each of you. Rose was blind both before and after she met an angel; the angel did not cure her blindness. However, as a result of meeting this angel Rose was convinced that her death, when it came, would glorify God. I had occasion just a few years after she told me this story—nearly fifty years after the incident had occurred—to observe her courageous witness for Christ to the grave and beyond when she died of a rare and aggressive form of cancer. At Rose's funeral her fellow lectors, intercessors, Stephen Ministers, and vestry members were joined by her fellow volunteer leaders of the National Federation of the Blind and some of the many people whom Rose had helped to cope with their new blindness. This was besides her leading our Commonwealth of Virginia's Department for the Blind and Vision Impaired. Rose's death, as her life, was indeed a powerful witness for Christ.

Alexis Bilindabagaboo, the Anglican Bishop of Gahini in Rwanda, is convinced that he, too, met an angel. Alexis is a Tutsi, one of the few in power to have survived the genocide in Rwanda in 1994 in which the Hutus killed over 800,000 Tutsis. He says that three times Hutu soldiers came with the express purpose of killing him. Each time, when they came to a particular spot—a spot where others had met angels—the soldiers became confused and left.⁷ Like Rose, Alexis believes that an angel saved his life. And in life he found new purpose. He established a foundation to care for over 8,000 Tutsi children who had miraculously survived the genocide of their parents and families and friends. Alexis' encounter with an angel helped him to realize his God-given purpose in life, to become the bishop who is “father of the fatherless.”

I once met an angel. The angel didn't save my life, but he did save me from despair. Somehow I had gotten the idea that God hated me. But the angel I met bathed me in God's message of love and told me

⁷ Alexis Bilindabagaboo and Alan Nichols, *Rescued by Angels : The Story of Miracles during the Rwandan Genocide* (Brunswick East, Vic.: Acorn Press, Ltd., 2001), 118.

that I am who and what God created me to be. This experience helped lead me to find a new purpose in life, sharing God's message with you. The message that I heard, the one I share, is this: "We are all, you and I, beautiful children of God, and worthy of God's love. Holy, holy, holy!"

Angels from the realms of glory not only are signs pointing to Jesus, they help us to find our way to him. All three of these stories share a common theme: Rose and Alexis and I each met an angel, and hearing the message that the angel brought from God helped us each to become more authentically the person we were created to be. Angels help us to reach through our apparent brokenness to share God's message with others like ourselves in a way that we would not have been able to otherwise do. In a sense, we join the angels in leading others to Christmas, awaiting that day when all of creation will be made fully whole.

We have come a long way today, following the angels back from the other side of Christmas. The messages that angels of the Lord deliver, the gifts that they bear, the ones that God transmits on all channels is this: "You are Holy! Holy! Holy!" and "I love you," and "I am with you always, at Christmas and beyond."

Today, as we "raise our voices with Angels and Archangels and with all the company of heaven, to forever sing God's praise,"⁸ we remember:

Love came down at Christmas, love all lovely, love divine;
love was born at Christmas: star and angels gave the sign.

Love shall be our token; love be yours and love be mine,
Love to God and to all people, love for plea and gift and sign.⁹

⁸ Holy Eucharist, Rite 2, Great Thanksgiving, <http://www.bcponline.org/HE/hesub.html>.

⁹ Christina Rossetti, "Love came down at Christmas," Christmas carol, 1885.
