

Angels – bringers of good news...

In Luke's Advent and Christmas stories, angels bring good news to quite a number of people.

Some believe it, some don't... (Mary and the shepherds believe, Zechariah doesn't).

In the gospel of Matthew, the angels come mostly when people are asleep, and they give advice on what to do and where to go. (Remember Joseph's dream not to divorce Mary, the wise men's dream not to return to King Herod, and again Joseph's dream not to stay in Israel, not to return to Nazareth, but to escape to Egypt in order to save the newborn baby's life).

Angels bring good news.

Angels guide people.

Angels guard people, protect, rescue. (Remember Hagar in the desert?).

Angels open heaven – and I am sure you can immediately see the image of Jacob and the ladder.

Angels touch us and feed us, just as the angel did with Elijah under the broom tree.

Angels proclaim resurrection – and of course we all recall the women in the garden meeting an angel after Jesus' death.

Angels bless people – Jacob calls on his angel to bless Joseph and his sons.

There are of course many more things angels do, and many more things we could say about angels. But these are the seven that I decided I want to pass on at Ronny's and Priscilla's baptism.

Angels bring good news.

Angels guide ...

Angels guard...

Angels open heaven ...

Angels touch and feed ...

Angels proclaim resurrection ...

Angels are blessing...

These are the seven I thought most important for children to grow up with – and for their families to live with. Of course some of them are so undeniably part of this season that I couldn't have ignored them or left them out.

More obvious than any other angels in Advent are the bringers of good news. But that is not to say that the messengers of good news were necessarily received with champagne and cheering crowds.

Some human beings are so shocked by the appearance of any angel that they are quite unable to distinguish between the shock caused by the messenger and the actual, joyful news he or she brings.

Many appearances of angels in the Bible start with the angels saying "Do not be afraid", which must be frustrating for them, when they must be longing to deliver the message.

At the time of Jesus' birth, angels visit a group of shepherds sitting in a field and clearly terrify the wits out of the poor men.

The angel appeared in an enormous lot of light. And the shepherds had to struggle with the dazzling glare more than they could actually listen to the great news... they listened eventually – it just took them some time. Maybe – giving them an excuse – we can assume that first-century shepherds were not used to meeting angels all the time... were no specialists in religious, heavenly, divine things...?!

But there is another person in the Advent and Christmas stories who might have had more experience of such things. In the Women's Bible study a fortnight ago we shared this story of Zechariah, the priest, who surely ought to recognise an angel when he sees one.

Zechariah was a very respectable and religious man. He came from a long line of priests, and must have grown up with stories of angels. Yet one day, when it was his turn to be doing his priestly duty, he is suddenly confronted by an angel. And he is just as terrified as the shepherds.

To make matters worse: this man, deeply rooted in the Jewish faith, questions the angel. The angel has come to tell him that although he and his wife are a little old to have children, they are going to have a baby.

There are plenty of stories in the religious tradition in which Zechariah grew up, about angels bringing news of the conception of a special child. But still Zechariah does not make the connection.

Some interpreters of this story discover a note of anger in the Angel Gabriel's voice, when he explains who he is and - even more important - who sent him. Zechariah's punishment for his stupidity is that he is struck dumb until the child, whose existence he doubted, is born.

This child is to be John the Baptist, whose job it is to tell the world who Jesus is. John is one part of God's great plan to save the human race and change the world.

Another part of this divine plan is Mary.

Again it is the archangel Gabriel who visits her.

Busy times for him as he plays a leading role in the project: "Getting God born". God is doing something so unexpected that human beings are going to need a lot of help if they are to believe that this is true.

God is going to send his son, Jesus, to be born as a baby.

God the creator is going to live as part of his creation...

No wonder God needs angels to spread the news and to help people be open to it and understand it.

The archangel Gabriel visits Mary to tell her that she is about to become Jesus' mother. We don't know whether Gabriel looks the way we imagine an angel looks ... or what Mary may have imagined an angel looks like.

However, when he comes to Mary, she is in no doubt about what she is seeing.

But she does not immediately understand the message.

There is something very touching about this conversation between Mary and Gabriel. Gabriel is gentle and patient with this human girl. He knows how important this whole thing is to God. And he does not want to frighten Mary off.

He answers her questions as fully as he can. And he tries hard to find the words that will help her to understand just how important this baby is going to be. And Mary, Mary catches the vision and says “yes”.

(pause)

Remember that poem from one of my first Advent sermons at this church?

Annunciation by Denise Levertov

This was the minute no one speaks of,
when she could still refuse.

A breath unbreathed,
Spirit,
suspended,
waiting.

She did not cry, “I cannot, I am not worthy,”
nor, “I have not the strength.”

She did not submit with gritted teeth,
raging,
coerced.

Bravest of all humans,
consent illumined her.
And courage opened her
utterly... *(excerpt)*

Mary could have said “no”, but Gabriel has done his work well, and God has chosen Mary carefully.

The angels have to spend a lot of time reassuring people in this period before Jesus is born.

It must have been quite a hard balancing act for the angels. On the one hand, they needed to appear in all their majesty, so that people could really see that they were angels and take their message seriously. But on the other hand, they did not want to frighten people so badly that they passed out or ran away.

Most of the Advent and Xmas angels have to start their messages by saying “Do not be afraid”, just as Gabriel does to Mary.

May they do this to us, too; and hopefully not only in Advent and Xmas time.
Do not be afraid...

and maybe they would even add, as Gabriel did in Mary’s case

«Do not be afraid, for you have found favour with God.

The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you... For nothing will be impossible with God.»

...and give us this gorgeous promise of God’s presence in our lives, if we only say “yes” to the task to which God is calling us.

Some months later, when Jesus is born, the angels are again saying “Do not panic” – this time to this group of shepherds. Ordinary people – ordinary lives; or even more: very lowly people... and very very poor lives?!

Nevertheless: do not be afraid...

And then there is all this talk about great joy, about salvation and about peace on earth.

These angels in the dark fields outside Bethlehem must have done their job well too, because as soon as the angels disappear, the shepherds set off to find the baby... to do as they are told.

The angels are part of God's work to bring the human world and God's world back together. Jesus is going to be God's way of living in the world of human beings, and so of making a permanent connection again between human beings and God.

Jesus is the one who later in his life says of children that each of them has an angel in heaven who always sees the face of God (Matt 18:10). And this is where Jewish and Christian tradition take the idea of the guardian angel from.

When we baptized Ronny and Priscilla, we did it with this beautiful verse from Psalm 91:

***“For God will command his angels concerning you
to guard you in all your ways.
On their hands they will lift you up,
so that you will not strike your foot against a stone.”***

These words should be given to every child... to every person, don't you agree? They talk about protection and guidance. And this is of course what we wish and hope for Ronny and Priscilla, for all our children – well actually, for all of us... ...that we will be protected... in all our ways... on those we can walk together (parents with children f.i.), and on those which we have to walk on our own... or must let our loved ones walk on their own...

The older our children get, the more paths they will walk alone... or at least without us. We will never be able to accompany and protect them always and everywhere. And therefore it is absolutely essential to know that there will be others – angels – people of God – God himself – to guard them, to lift them up and bear them in his arms...

...protection all around, care from above and below... everywhere between heaven and earth – through the angels...

This is very comforting, especially because we all know that there will be stones in every person's life against which our feet will eventually strike. We know that life is not always nice and easy. We know that sometimes the angels are not protecting us from difficult situations, but rather seeing us through them. They are in it with us – in harsh times – to make sure that our soul, our self, remains safe and sound. They are there with us in the tough times and help us to cope and survive and carry on.

When we talk about angels for our children, it is important to realise that angels are no guarantee that our children will be kept away from harm. But they are able to show us how even a journey through pain and harm can lead back into life. Angels can help us come to terms with the painful parts of our human life and discover the tracks of the saving angels in the middle of sad and dark times.

Angels come into our hopeless situations, watch over us, protect us, and open our eyes to the path that leads to life.

In many angel stories it becomes clear that the angels never abandon us, but are constant companions along the way – offering protection and comfort – just when the feeling of being all alone is the greatest.

“Angels’ tracks” can be found in everybody’s life. They provide healing. They make it always possible to go on... despite the injuries and hardships and catastrophes. They help us to stay healthy and walk on the path that leads to life!

The idea that every child has an angel can relieve the pressure and strain on parents; can help us let our children go... let them become who they are meant to be... (just imagine, what this must have been for Mary...) without worrying or panicking too much.

Do not be afraid –

is God’s message to parents and children at all times.

It is God’s message to the shepherds at Xmas, and to Mary and Zechariah when God wants to be born with the help of his people in Advent.

May we be able, as Mary and the shepherds were, to hear and see and understand the angels who come to us. May we believe the message they have for us. And may we follow the call they bring us.

And may we – in all that – always hear the “do not be afraid – you have found favour with God.”

You have found favour with God when you baptize your children and raise them in a Christian church family. You have found favour when you help and serve others, chosen - not by you but by God - to be your sisters and brothers...

You have found favour... so do not be afraid.

Travel in these coming days and weeks, return to your home country, meet your friends and family, give birth to your first child, enjoy the smiles of children, overcome your weakness, recover from your sickness, look forward to the joy of Xmas, be an instrument of God’s peace, stand up for justice, sing joyful songs, share with others, pray for them and with them, love the world and help God to be born in this season.

Do not be afraid.

Amen.