



From the Community Pulpit

"The Angels' Journey of Love"

Text: Luke 2:1-14

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There is something about angels that is absolutely comforting and reassuring to us all. While we can never give an adequate report as to how angels do their work, or the ontological essence of angel-ness, there is something reaffirming, one could almost say sheer grace, whenever we see them depicted.

No one can ever forget the bumbling Clarence in *"It's a Wonderful Life."* In this annual Christmas season favorite, small-town banker and endless dreamer George Bailey (portrayed by James Stewart) thinks about ending his life, given how nothing has turned out as he had planned. His financial affairs and, indeed, he believes, his whole life are on the brink of ruin. But his guardian angel (Clarence) helps him discover a reason to live as he sees what the world would be like if he'd never been born. Now there's something in it for Clarence, too, since, if he can save George, Clarence will get his wings, and a bell, like they always do when angels get their wings, will ring.

Neither can anyone forget the specter angel in Tony Kushner's *"Angels Over America"* who compels us our compassion and a holy rage about what is happening to those affected by HIV and AIDS.

At our house, the Christmas tree is not completely trimmed until the cardboard angel sits atop our green beauty.

Angels, angels, angels, everywhere. And, of course they're here on Christmas Eve. Our text from Luke declares that angels made a journey of love. And, within Luke, there is, once more, something about angels that is absolutely comforting and reassuring to us all.

The Psalmist had hinted at these angels when he declared: *"What is humanity, [O God] that thou art mindful of us ... thou has made us little lower than the angels."*¹

The New Testament book of Hebrews inspires us always to show plenty of hospitality to strangers because, who knows, we may just be *"entertain[ing] angels unawares."*²

I believe that the most comforting and reassuring aspects about Luke's angelic presence, and the angels that come and visit the magi and Joseph in Matthew's account of the nativity, are the announcements they bring about God's gift to the world. They are all about love.

Love is at the Heart of Christmas

Love truly is at the heart of Christmas. Love compels the church's great music to gravitate toward expression at Christmas time. Love moves us to coo with warm affection when parents bring their babies before the congregation for blessing and dedication during this precious season. Love inspires us to act in congruence with our best selves, causing even the crustiest souls to become kind and gentle and generous.

Love is the motivation and destination behind all of our preparations and traditions during this sacred season. Love is what warms our homes and our hearts even in the middle of winter's icy chill.

Love is tough resistance in the face of any thing or force which would bruise or hurt or harm. Love is the peace that abides when we let go of old habits and outdated conventions that hinder creative growth in our individual and collective lives.

Love is baking a pie, writing a note, praying a prayer, organizing a worthy project, sitting in silent vigil at the bedside with patient, earnest hope: without love, such caring acts become mere drudgery.

Love makes all things complete. Love is telling children of your joy in them, complimenting someone about a new haircut, expressing thanks for someone's unique talents: without love, such transactions are mere rote rituals or, worse, sham-filled facades.

Love abides when we vigorously challenge one another to live out our highest ideals. Love is made manifest in the zip of an octogenarian's steps as she paces the mall with gladness and glee. Love is undeniably front and center in the face of any child of God who is unafraid to tell the truth.

Love is generative, moving us to seek and to offer forgiveness when estrangement has occurred.

Love is protective, prompting us to provide sheltering kindness for the least, the lost and the lonely among us.

Love can be discovered in the midst of everything the church does during Christmas time: in the transcendent music of the choir as they proffer their magnificent, healing presentations; in the words of scripture which prompt contentment, remembrance, and earth-shaking insights about the possibilities of new life; in the prayers of elders at table; in the sharing of communion with friends, family and strangers; in the sacrificial giving that is rendered for a world in need.

Love, God's love, love as it has been given to the world through the birth of a baby in Bethlehem long ago, love as it is being given to new hearts even now this evening – all of this love constitutes the reason for the season.

Now the love which the angels foretell has three wondrous, and yet strange aspects. It is first and foremost....

I. An Extravagant Love

The angels proclaim the good news of great joy to the shepherds, one of the least prominent, least significant, least prestigious groups of Judean culture at the time. "Unto you..." the angels

proclaim.³ And of all the people in the world to whom they could announce the "good news of a great joy", their offer of the grace of God's gospel of love is to the shepherds. Extravagance extraordinaire.

As Hal Luccock used to say, "The best gifts of love are those that show a lovely lack of common sense."⁴

And this gift of the Messiah for the likes of shepherds is totally lacking in common sense.

I once heard a comedian speak about Christ's extravagant love, that which he would show in his adult years, particularly at the crucifixion. The comedian said that Christ being born, and then living, teaching, healing, and then being willing to die for all of the sins of the world was truly extravagant. The comedian said, "That's what I call picking up the tab for the whole table." I think the comedian would agree, God's extravagant love in the birth of Christ is totally lacking in common sense.

Next, note with me that the angels tell about ...

II. A Love that Upsets our Expectations

This is the heart of the Christmas message about God. "The essence of God is not power but vulnerable love."⁵

This is what the angels declare to the shepherds: "This shall be a sign for you: you will find a babe wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger."⁶ Nothing like what they may have been led to believe a Messiah should be like. Nothing like what the traditions had taught them and countless others in Israel's tradition about how ultimate power is given expression.

Presbyterian minister John Buchanan says it well: "The original Christmas gift was certainly impractical – a baby, born in a cow stall. What people wanted was a king like David who would unify the nation, rally the troops, drive out the occupying Romans and re-establish the monarchy. That's what a Messiah is supposed to do – make things right by defeating God's enemies, establish a new order of things based on real power....

"God's gift of love was not what people expected or wanted at the time... [And we, too,

would sometimes prefer] a God who confirms our own ideas and who puts our opponents – who we assume are God’s opponents – in their place.

“That original gift challenges us in profound ways. No wonder we don’t expect it [The] Christian idea is that the essence of God is not what we expect or want – power – but vulnerable love.... [The] Christian idea is that there is absolute truth in the newborn lying in a manger – truth about God, truth about the nature of power, truth about you and me, truth that could transform the world.”⁷

Lastly, note with me that this love of which the angels tell is

III.A Reassuring, Unconditional Love

The angel begins the heavenly declaration with the words, “Be not afraid.”⁸ The same as the angel Gabriel spoke to Mary. The same as the Great I Am would have us hear and receive this evening. “Don’t be afraid. Don’t be afraid.” And then the multitude of the heavenly host close the proclamation with the words “... and on earth peace good will among those whom he favors.”⁹ Peace.

And please note that there are no conditions, no qualifications no hair-splittings about the announcement. It is proffered straightaway, with reassuring unconditional love. Two great, loving, unconditional reassurances: “Don’t be afraid.” “Peace.”

The Blaisdells

Whenever Christmas comes around, I go to the Blaisdells. Maybe not literally, but figuratively and imaginatively and spiritually, at the very least. Their home became a welcoming haven, and ultimately my home, at various crucially significant stages of my life, and most especially at Christmas.

I recall spending several Christmases in the warmth of their home in Ft. Worth during the halcyon days of college. And I can remember like it was yesterday, one holiday time during my graduate school tenure, driving in the dead of night from Nashville to Ft. Worth, through wretched weather, enduring one of the wheels literally falling off my car, just so I could be in the Blaisdell’s living

room on Christmas morning.

Chuck Blaisdell remains one of my dearest friends on the face of the earth. We’ve known each other since the topsy-turvy days of high school CYF conferences. When I arrived at TCU in Ft. Worth, it was through Chuck that I met his parents Hazel and Dick and their home would become a joyful dwelling place for me.

Sunday afternoons at the Blaisdells meant the Dallas Cowboys and brisket. Thanksgiving meant turkey (and at least a week’s worth of turkey soup) and games of Risk and Monopoly until the wee hours. And Christmas meant grace and comfort and cherry tarts. (To this day, cherry tarts are a necessary portion of my personal Christmas rituals.) And the blustery days of the Super Bowl weekend meant chili and a persistent debate about which of the stellar Cowboys teams was the greatest of all time.

In time Chuck’s brothers Jim and Greg would also become like brothers to me. And despite time and distance, I cannot imagine anything I would not do for Chuck or his brothers or Dick if they asked me. (Whenever I am reunited with any of the Blaisdells, my heart echoes Jacob’s sentiment when he embraced Esau in reunion at long last: “..... truly to see your face is like seeing the face of God, with such favor have you received me.”¹⁰)

It was Hazel and Dick, as I said, who provided the strong, mysterious, and lasting attachment to Christmas for me. Among all the wonderful people whose hosting I have been privileged to enjoy, the Blaisdells were and remain the ultimate expression of what Christmas is all about: a treasuring of simple, lastingly good relationships, good events, good food; mercy and jubilation at the daily gifts life brings one and all; and warm, unconditional love.

Their affectionate affirmation was always abiding and gracious. Their joyous gratitude was always deep and profound. And their hospitality was irrefutably genuine.

I guess the way I would put it these days is as follows: the Blaisdells made a place for me in their hearts and in their home, and because of their tender mercies, I was born anew. How was and is

that possible? Because of the blessing of unconditional love.

What I received from the Blaisdells I would call "Blaisdell Blessedness" – as beautiful as new fallen snow, as exquisite as a baby's smile, as essential for a fully developed life as the air we breathe. However you name it – "Brown Blessedness," "Driscoll Blessedness," "Muiller Blessedness," "Allen Blessedness," "Smith Blessedness," "Thomas Blessedness," "Jones Blessedness," "Pecina Blessedness," "Melgoza Blessedness," "Mwewa Blessedness," "Simpson Blessedness," etc. – I know it surely must be as crucially essential to you as the "Blaisdell blessedness" was and is to me.

I hope and pray that everyone here this evening – as well all our friends and visitors and acquaintances, too – may experience some good portions of "Blaisdell Blessedness." For me, it is one of the best ways I know of to get close to a certain manger in Bethlehem.

And now because Reinhold Niebuhr is right¹¹ – that on Christmas Eve we want poetry more than we want prose – allow me to offer the following gift, as has been my custom for the past fifteen years, a new poem entitled "*Decembered Mercies*."

Decembered Mercies

(Christmas Eve 2007)

*On Januaried ground we stand
with twin-faced hesitation:
to return to the other pasture
or to plow new ground ahead.*

*A Februaried love is followed quick
with the ides of March and Marched ideas
that then birth cruel Apriled new growth and
and its unrepentant rains.*

*We swing around poles Mayed with ribbons and
revel in Juneteenthed freedom.
Our summer lows are summer hot,
accompanied by the fires of Julyed skies.*

*The Augustian days bring new resolve,
just as Septembered school days
lead into Octobered frosts, followed by
the deeps of Novembered nostalgia.*

*Then the best, the healing, the most pristine comes:
amidst landscapes of blue-tinted ice and snow,
silencing all but the fall of more snow, snow on snow,
and the gift of vulnerable love in the straw.*

*This is the time for Decembered mercies –
a baby born, instead of the boots of the tramping warrior;
a new light of peace when all was thought to be forsaken;
fresh furrows for any who had quit the cultivation.*

*This is the season for Decembered mercies –
forgiveness for what was thought to be unredeemed;
the taste of fresh bread and new wine;
a sprig of hope on a stump left for dead.*

*This is the moment for Decembered mercies –
embraces instead of harming,
kisses instead of wounding;
love made real, undying, without qualifying,*

*This is the song for Decembered mercies –
angel voices to shepherds' ears:
morning by morning new mercies to see;
blessings all yours, with ten thousand beside.*

May you know an abundance of "*Decembered Mercies*" tonight and every moment hereafter. Merry Christmas! I love you. AMEN.

NOTES

- 1 Psalm 8:5
- 2 Hebrews 13:16
3. Luke 2:11
- 4 Quoted by John Buchanan in *The Christian Century*, Dec. 11, 2007, p. 3
- 5 John Buchanan, *The Christian Century*, Dec. 11, 2007, p. 3
- 6 Luke 2:12
- 7 Buchanan, op. cit.
- 8 Luke 2:10
- 9 Luke 2:14
- 10 Genesis 33:10
- 11 Reinhold Niebuhr, "A Christmas Service in Retrospect," in *Essays in Applied Theology* (New York: Meridian, 1959), p. 29.