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WHO ARE YOU IN THE CHRISTMAS STORY? ... THE ANGELS

Luke 1:11-20

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When my brothers and I were young, each year, my mother would put on a Christmas pageant, in our home, for her friends with us as the players. It inevitably began with a grand entrance, singing *We Three Kings*, wearing our regal garb of bathrobes, complete with paper crowns and scepters of plastic plungers. One year, my voice was changing, and I had a Silent Night solo in German, mind you. Let's just say, it was a once in a lifetime performance that no one ever wants repeated. The pageants lasted about 45 minutes. They included poetry, readings from Scrooge, and it all concluded with Luke 2 and then, singing *Joy to the World* together. It was all so very embarrassing. After 3 decades of this and we all had children, we were, *finally*, able to convince my mother that the production could now be passed down to the next generation. My daughter, Liz, and niece, Johanna, gleefully grasped the task and for several years, put on delightful pageants complete with dancing angels, and this time, pleasant and beautiful singing. And then they became teenagers... This opened the opportunity for a new director with a new vision. Enter son, Matthew. Through his vision, they became Cecil B. DeMille fully, scripted plays with ensemble casts. Each year an original drama with more generations, more players, and more betrayal until the final performance which was a fully costumed play *Redemption in Rome*. It was a blowout performance never to be repeated. And since then, we have all been too scattered to gather the family together again.

As I reflect on these dramas, the part the stays with me the most was the song *Friendly Beasts*. In reading your Advent Devotional stories, I see that one of you had the same experience. I would play the lamb, wearing a white furry *bath mat* for my wool, while singing *I am the sheep with the curly horn. I gave him my wool to keep him warm...* The song rotates through the animals each giving Jesus

a gift of hay, or milk, or whatever they could. And this year, I want us all to play a part. You will put yourself in the Christmas story. Maybe you will finally land that role you always wanted to play—Mary, the Star, the part your high school rival took that Christmas so long ago. Or perhaps, it's the role you are always stuck playing, Joseph with no lines, simply working hard and providing for others. Perhaps you feel like the shepherd the outsider, the one who no one wants around at Christmas.

And finally, the Angel, the one who brings good news of a great joy, the one who warns people of danger, the one who brings comfort in fear. Angels are strong in our heart and the Christmas hymns speak to our fascination with them, *Angels from the Realms of Glory ... It Came upon a Midnight Clear ... Angels We have heard on High ... The First Noel ... While Shepherds Watched their Flocks ... Hark! The Herald Angels Sing*. Our favorite hymns include angels because we love the part they play.

This morning we will explore the part they play in the Christmas story so perhaps you can take on that role in God's ever unfolding drama. Besides being a supernatural being, the defining characteristic of the angel is they are bearers of God's messages: The Christmas angels declare

Messages of salvation...*A savior is born...*
Messages of courage ...*do not be afraid...*
Messages of compassion and hope...*your prayer is answered...the Lord is with you.*

In the Christmas story, the Angels announce the births of both John and Jesus, and for Zechariah and Elizabeth, theirs is a message of compassion. Now, every birth is a gift, but the angel shares this news, in such a way, that it opens people up to see they are a blessing from God, a gift from above. This is what the Angel, Gabriel, does with Zechariah, saying, *your prayers have been heard*. The lack of a

child had left Elizabeth feeling profound shame and disgrace before her people. The angel let her know God heard Elizabeth and Zechariah's heartfelt pleas. In sharing good or bad news, you are an angel when you shape it with God's compassion. When life is hard, almost more than relief, people are looking for comfort and hope. They want to know that God is still there, listening and loving, no matter what happens. About year ago, a beloved member of this community passed away after a long hard-fought illness. For his wife, it was a tremendous burden and a heart-breaking loss. But someone, an angel if you will, sent her a message. It was Hebrews 13:5, "I will never leave or forsake you.", along with just a few words, "I am stamping this on my heart and claiming this promise for you!" This message, of God's care from a friend, during a very difficult time was a source of great angelic comfort. The times were hard, but the message brought hope and healing.

Next, we see the angel brings courage in the midst of fear. The Angel, Gabriel, gave 15-year-old Mary, a mighty heavy task to bear the savior of the world. Instantly, Gabriel could sense her unease and declares, *'Fear not for you have found favor with God.'* There are times in life we simply don't feel up to the task. Whether it is the stress of a deadline at work, an especially difficult relationship, having to care for a sick loved one that takes so much out of you, or the mundane chores of life (like driving the carpool line at school one more time) we feel as if we are going to snap in two. This is when temptation rears its head: We are tempted to quit. We are tempted to infidelity or cheating our clients. We are tempted to explode. We are tempted to give up because we fear we are too weak, that we don't have the physical strength, the emotional strength, or the strength of character. We feel like a failure. That we have nothing to offer. We just want to stop and say, *no more*. That is when the angel's in our life can save us. Gabriel told Mary the Lord is with you. The Lord is by your side. Go to your cousin, Elizabeth. You don't have to go it alone. Fear not, God has faith in you.

A few years ago, at a Montreat Conference, God sent an angel to a woman in the form of the devotion leader. The leader said to her, "Close your eyes and picture Jesus." At first, it seemed corny and hokey. The woman was a teacher; she pictured Jesus as a little boy. The leader then said, "Ask him to come over to you. Ask him a question." At this point the woman is thinking, "how ridiculous!", but she played along. She let her imagination flow. Since Jesus grew up to be a carpenter, the woman pictured this boy in the carpenter's shop, bare footed, covered in dust, and carving on a piece of wood – very intent on getting it just right. The woman asked him, "What are you making?" He replied, "This is you." She said, "You are working so hard on that; I must be a lot of trouble." And he said, "No, this is my joy."

The angels in our life let us know despite our weakness, our temptations, our failures, our desire to quit, to give up, all of our fears, that we are not worthy and despite all of that, not only is God right there, working on us, but far from being a burden, we are God's joy! How exciting it is to share God's Good News and let us all do it with the fervor and passion of the angels.

*Fear not,
....God has answered your prayers
...You have found favor with God,*

Amen.