

An Angel Brings Hope with a Sign of God's Presence in the Newly Born Christ Child

Luke 2:8–11

In January this year, took my parents to Antigua Guatemala, a colonial city, which is also the remains of the first Capital city on the Guatemalan Kingdom.

When we where there, we saw one of the attractions in the city, the Nativity Story. The “Guatemalan Nativity” is called, a three--dimensional exhibition of the scenes of the stories of the birth of Jesus as celebrated in the Guatemalan traditions. The whole exhibit was done in the diorama technique, which uses tridimensional models of human figures, animals, and other objects, to represent historical scenes.

The exhibit begins with the local traditions, then moves to what could have happened back in those days of the first Christmas. Each scene inspires a sense of awe, but when the climax of the birth approaches, that was something else, especially when the angels spoke to the shepherds. With light effects, it helped you being transported to the moment. It was a special thing to not only envision what the shepherds heard at the announcement of the birth of Jesus, but feeling like being there. Was very special!

Angels are indeed very special in the Nativity story. But we wonder and ponder as we have been doing it during the last few weeks in the season Advent. We have heard through these weeks that a particular angel comes as a messenger, a heavenly messenger, with a simple but powerful word straight from the Almighty. And, as you remember the story, an angel appears to a group of shepherds in the field to give them a

message. The message this time involves a sign, a sign to reveal, to guide—and to give hope!

This is the story, and this the text of our meditation this morning, the Gospel of Mathew chapter 2, verses 8 to eleven, where hear: “And in the same region there were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. ⁹ And an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were filled with fear. ¹⁰ And the angel said to them, “Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. ¹¹ For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, who is Christ the Lord.” This is the word of the Lord.

Here we are told that the Angel brings hope in a sign telling the shepherds where they might find the promised Savior . . . and today, where we might find God’s enduring presence among us.

There in the field appearing to the shepherds, and along with this angel, an entire “multitude of the heavenly host.” The angel brings hope! To the Shepherds and to the rest of the world.

But why the shepherds, why not the king and all of those in authority? Why not the religious leaders? It is because of the importance of the announcement. It is given to those who are otherwise insignificant in the religious and political sphere. Aside from the impact the appearing of the angel may have caused to the shepherds, the impact of the message starts with these words: “Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord” (Lk 2:10-11).

“A Savior, who is Christ the Lord.” What an honor to bear that message! And a surprise! Especially that God would make such an announcement to lowly, often despised shepherds. But where would these

men find such an infant in all the “city of David”? in the mansions and palaces of the rich and powerful? Would they see him surrounded by powerful armies in a parade coming proudly through their city? Would his cradle be bathed in a bright holy light shining out in the darkness? If God had indeed come among them, how would they know?

So, the angel gives them a “sign.” Now, it is true that Hope is only kept alive if only we have directions, if we know where we’re going, if we know we’ll find what we need to find, if we’re shown where to find where God is at work. That’s why God promised long ago, a sign, as the prophet Isaiah foretold to King Ahaz: “Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Behold the virgin shall conceive and bear a son” (Is 7:14).

To have a sign from God is indeed a marvelous thing! And in the Gospel of John, we hear of “signs” that bear witness to the Sign, Jesus, of who he was and why he came. Some identify seven of these witness signs. He miraculously changes water into wine at a wedding, showing a command of creation and a desire for joy (Jn 2:1–12). He heals an official’s son who is deadly ill, reversing sin’s curse (4:46–54). He heals again, this time a paralytic at the Bethesda pool (5:1–17). He feeds five thousand with only five barley loaves and two fish, showing himself to be the great provider (6:1–14). He walks on the surface of the Sea of Galilee at night during a storm (6:15–21). He restores sight to a man born blind (9:1–7). Then, as a final great sign pointing to the greater miracle to come, he raises his friend Lazarus from the grave (11:1–45). All signs that God gave, are active in Jesus, that the kingdom of God has indeed broken into our time and space. And it is also a wonderful think to allow God’s sign to have their way with us. It is better that way!

As you see, the Jews demanded a “sign” from Jesus to prove who he was, only that they wanted it in their own way. It was obvious they wanted something else, something different. But Jesus points them instead, to the crucifixion and resurrection which are the true signs of God’s love and work. But they missed the sign (Jn 2:18). People often miss the real sign and claim they will not believe unless they see “signs and wonders” (Jn 4:48) too. The sign stood before them, but they always missed it, because they didn’t understand it.

Perhaps didn’t understand it because how the sign came. It was, it is surprisingly simple and seemingly common, so ordinary, because Jesus came as one of us. Who would take a newborn child in a manger as a great sign of God? Who would notice it? It is just a child, a defenceless baby Wrapped in swaddling cloths! Nothing else! Not bathed in glorious rays of light? But it is the same today, isn’t it? So many still look for pompous “signs and wonders” to assure them of God’s work and presence, missing the one sure sign. How many become lost in their own emotions looking for and needing something spectacular and walk right past the God in front of them?

God knows that that is what people do. As they did then. So, God sends an angel, his personal, heavenly messenger, to show them that this is where God will reveal himself. An angel who speaks with God’s own authority that they should look nowhere else but see in the face of this ordinary little one the very Savior of the world, the Messiah, God in human flesh. And even in its apparent simplicity, this “sign” would be “good news of great joy” to those who found it.

The shepherds get it, they did as were told, found the sign in Bethlehem and then told the world of the “sign,” and many “wondered” and

marveled at what they told them (Lk 2:18). Something happened in them, they were now changed men. And changed men praise God, Luke says they returned “glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them” (2:20). They had seen God’s given “sign.” In faith, they see it: God among them. Even when it seem unbelievable, the fact is that this tiny little newborn child will one day grow to become the deliverer of the world from sin, death, and the power of hell. They may not yet grasp how he’ll accomplish this—by his suffering, death, and resurrection—but they know he will deliver them, because God’s messenger proclaimed it and faith accepted and received it.

And now they have true hope. So many in our world today wonder where God is. So much of what we live feels godless and forsaken. And because God so often appears hidden under suffering, people are distracted by the evil and hardship and see only darkness and emptiness. Because God reveals himself in common ways, they are put off and wait for another more impressive, convincing sign. The baby in a manger becomes the man hanging from the cross—one looking weak and helpless, the other looking weaker and more helpless. Neither a very impressive sign. They want a God who would be confirming their human wants and reasons. Anything else seems illogical. Take Baptism for example, water without the Word of God is only water, Luther reminds us. But combined with God’s Word it is a saving water. As you see any sign apart from the divine Word leaves us looking for more and leaves us lost.

To truly hope, we must have the assurance of God’s presence in Christ. Nothing else brings real and lasting hope. And we must be able to find that Christ in the midst of the broken, torn-up world, a common world where God’s presence is not always immediately obvious. That’s were

must go to. Actually, not don't find him, for he is not lost, but we are. Yet we can't see him, because we are hoping for different signs to appear. We are hearing the wrong message, the wrong proclamation, we are given the wrong sign. So through the fog of doubt and the false screens of evil's deceptions we must allow the Sign to speak to us. We must be able to see him despite our fears and our hesitation to believe the seeming impossible. But we must also listen to the message of heaven as we see the sign the messenger reveals.

But to do that we must remember that we must see God in the human flesh, living among us, amid our fallen world (Jn 1:14). We encounter God by looking outside of our own hearts, beyond our own ideas and wishful desires. We need to listen not to the voice in our heads, but to the voice of the angel who speaks from heaven by God's direction and with God's authority. And we need to see God in the promised "sign" of his presence the angel reveals.

The angel still speaks today, after all the word angel, means messenger. And even though preacher of today have no wings, or otherwise, they are just like one of us, they serve as messengers proclaiming the Sign. So, listen to the words God has commissioned them to share. Look past the man. And as you hold within your hands the very body of Christ crucified in the bread you eat, and as your lips taste the very blood Christ shed on the cross in the wine you drink, you see again the "sign" that the angel revealed: Jesus, God made flesh. This is the same one who once laid in a manger newly born. This is the true presence of God who has come not just to the earth, but to our space and our time, wrapped in our very human flesh, in our hands and on our lips and in our

ears. Where is God? He is here among us where the angel said he would be. The sign of the Word made flesh.

And that, again, is the heart of hope. As we began our Advent journey, we began with beings that are so much a part of the holiday season we may fail to notice them for who they really are: divine messengers, preachers of God's Holy Word.

Throughout this season, however, we saw that they brought not just any message, but messages that encouraged true hope by addressing first the enemies of hope: doubt and fear. We heard them echo the eternal voice of God by assuring us that with God nothing is impossible, as Gabriel announced the miracle of his birth. We then sang with a multitude of the heavenly host last night as they announced a true peace for all who believe in this newly born Prince of Peace. Finally, today we are drawn to the precise place where this hope is to be found and realized: the Word enfleshed in Jesus.

Hope looks to the future; it does not remain in the present or lost in the past. What we have seen and heard then, and even today, will provide a true light for the days to come. Hope can never be disappointed. Hope, even in the worst of times, endures. It endures because it is in Christ, the eternal Son of God, revealed before us to see and hear and worship.

In his name. Amen.