

“Hear the Angels Sing”
Sermon for Christmas Eve
December 24, 2011 – The Rev. Torrence Harman
Isaiah 9:2-7; Psalm 96; Titus 2:11-14; Luke 2:1-20

Tonight, on this holiest night of the year, do we hear the angels sing? Is this the only time of the year we are reminded to listen for the angel music?

The amazing thing is that Christmas is the only time in the entire Gospel story of the life of Jesus when angels sing. In the silence and darkness of a world gone awry, an angel of the Lord appears bringing choirs of angels to sing as new birth is taking place. On this holy night the angels sing us towards a manger where a baby’s cry breaks the darkness and new light is birthed into a waiting world.

Is not this night like the first day of creation, when God’s voice brought light into the world? Is not Christmas night another amazing moment of God’s creation – God’s re-creation of the world. A time to watch for new light coming to shine its transforming light into a dark world? As God plunges his hands and heart into darkness to draw forth light yet again, God’s angels sing a savior into being.

And yet, there is, as there always seems to be when angels appear, fear. Mortals terrified, as usual, at the sight of heavenly, God-sent beings. Aren’t God’s messengers, his principle angels, getting tired of saying the same old words over and over again? “Fear not. Do not be afraid.” Fear always seems to initially get between the heavenly presence and the good news that presence brings. But maybe it takes a startling, even terrifying event, to wake us up, like it did some shepherds on a long ago hillside.

Fear is not always a bad thing. Consider that fear may be a gift from God. One of those emotional gifts that cause us to stop, to consider what’s going on, to focus on what’s happening inside of us and what’s happening “out there.” Fear is something that makes us “Stop, Look, Listen!” Fear can paralyze, but it is also a powerful motivator. It is what can give us a shot of adrenaline to focus on the “here and now.” It puts all our senses on “ALERT!” It can spur us into action.

On a long ago night the appearance of the holy, of angels bringing a heavenly message, galvanized a group of shepherds. On that night they were doing the same old thing they did every night, watching over the sheep. Perhaps they needed to be shocked, terrified by something to be alert to the message of that special night. Something needed to startle those shepherds, to make them open their eyes to see the angels, to make them hear what the angels were singing about. Something remarkable had to happen for them to hear the great, glad tidings. It was angel voices that summoned them to “come to Bethlehem and see” what a wonderful thing God was doing?

Are we tonight like the shepherds before the music started? Just how startling is yet another Christmas Eve in our lives. Are we really open to the breaking news – or is it just another Christmas holiday, the same as always? Have we become jaded to the story, oblivious to angel voices? Or are we here to consider that maybe, just maybe, this is a special night? Did you

come, after all, with hope that this might be the beginning of something new – for you and for the world?

How sad it is that this is the only time in the Gospel story when the writers of the story of Christ's life have angels sing. Perhaps this is because when humans wrote down the story, they were limited by their humanness. Despite their efforts to tell the story faithfully, to let themselves be guided by the Holy Spirit, despite their efforts to write truthfully, they were simply human after all. Though inspired by God, though inspired by the Spirit of God hovering over them, these storywriters were not able to tell the whole story.

Then again, maybe that was just part of God's plan: to have them leave the story unfinished, that generations to come might wonder just what did happen on one holy night and then be lured into the story. Maybe it was just part of God's plan to make us part of yet-to-be-completed Divine work. Us, a part of the unfolding Divine story? Isn't that enough to shock us into listening?

The story of light coming into the world is still evolving. Mystery remains. There is more of the story yet to come, because generation after generation of God's creation, including you and me, are being called, even sometimes dragged into God's story of love and salvation.

Tonight we have the opportunity to become part of the story. The angel voices say, "Come, come see the light and let it transform, let it work its wonder in you."

Creation is not a finished work. The tension of light and darkness coexisting in the world is ongoing. We are caught in that tension. "The light came into the world and the darkness did not overcome it." God's voice is always calling light into continual being. And the shocking good news is that God seems to want us to be part of this effort.

God has placed a bit of the light of creation in each of us. We are part of God's birthing process of bringing light out of what is dark. But we need to hear that message in order to be drawn into it.

Unfortunately, there is a lot of "noise" in our everyday world – noise that can deafen us to the voices of the angels and God's calling us to come and see and be filled with the light.

A couple of days ago I went to Richmond to meet some of the grandchildren at the mall to do some Christmas shopping and treat them to supper. My trip to Richmond takes almost two hours – each way. I looked forward to Christmas music to angelic voices singing the old familiar hymns on the radio as I traveled. I think I heard only one song that alluded to the true heart of Christmas. It was the song of "The Little Drummer Boy." However, most of the songs used the word "holiday(s)." Those that did use the words "Christmas" were about snowflakes, snowmen, reindeer on the roof, Santa, chestnuts in the fire, presents, being naughty or nice in order to get gifts, etc. etc. etc. I couldn't find a channel that offered the wonderful Christmas hymns that I love so much.

Music at the mall was the same. I felt we were being massaged with the subliminal Christmas message that we need material things to make us happy. Is not Santa Claus the hero of the season, destined to bring new life to a failing economy? It was a constant musical message designed to sell goods. The voices of the singers may have sounded angelic, but they

were peddling market goods, not the good news kind of “goods” that fill the heart long beyond the life span of any battery.

Christmas Eve is special. But it also carries expectations that can interfere with the Divine message of what can make for new and fulfilling life.

Too often we can't hear the angel message because worldly worries block the sound. Having made our lists, have we checked them over, twice or more? Have we covered everything we need to do before the Big Day? Sadly, Christmas can be a time of all too human reckoning. Have we wrapped all the presents that need wrapping? Has the postal service delivered everything we sent? Have we everything needed for the holiday feast? Will our families, friends and loved ones travel safely and arrive on time? Will the kids/grandkids be happy with what we have bought them? Will the credit card bill shock us when it arrives? We even bring into church worries that can interfere with the true message of Christmas. Is the Altar Guild worrying about how the flowers look? Is the minister worried about whether the sermon is too long or if people are listening or if the message is really what God wants voiced? Is the congregation checking watches, thinking of all that needs to be done at home before morning? Christmas can be so demanding!

But, in the midst of all that Christmas Eve raises, there is only one set of questions that really matter tonight:

- Have we heard the angel voices?
- Are we listening to the angels singing to us?
- Are we on our way to Bethlehem, to seek what is bathed in light?
- Will we respond to the angels as they beckon, “O come, O come all ye faithful. Come and behold him – the savior of the world, being born this Christmas morning.”
- Will Christmas morning find us searching for presents under a tree or kneeling at a manger, opening to the new light of the world, letting it enter in?
- And, finally, will we go forth from this holy night to wake on Christmas morning, star struck, light filled – that we may be used by the Divine to bring light and love into a world in desperate need of both?

May we respond to this holy night by joining our hearts and voices

with the angel choir as we go forth into the world singing, “Joy to the world, the savior comes!”