

## HERALD ANGELS

Have you ever known yourself to be powerless – known your absolute need of God? I mean you *personally* – not some generic, play-acting question. It is the narrow gate, the entryWAY. Nobody actually connects to the Lord of Christmas through any other gate or entryway. So I just thought I would ask: Have you ever known yourself to be powerless – known your absolute need of God?

I don't really know how many people go through the narrow gate, since most people do not go through the narrow gate with other people watching. They do not go through it on any given day – like December 25th, or on their birthday, or at baptism, or in some prefabricated or formulaic fashion – coming down the aisle at some human's invitation. It might be at any of these times, of course, but never because we figured it out or set up the timing. Being powerless also means we are not in control. We cannot pick a season or a year, here on earth, and say: "Oh fine! At last! Now we'll all go through the narrow gate, like the Christmas celebrations pretend. Now, finally, it's God's world again: Peace On Earth. The Separation has ended. The story of Eden is completed, the curses are reversed, and we have all come back into the Garden, this time on the far end of free choice – knowing what we are doing, and happy to be God's children – all of us obedient and adoring, on purpose."

I don't really know, but it seems to me that a fairly small percentage of the human race (at any given moment in history, including this one) knows or admits to powerlessness – to an absolute need of God. I don't know about you, but I try really hard not to get into such a place – not to have to come through the gate in such a fashion. After all, it seems like it would take a lot away from the relationship. Nothing on the human level works out very well if I get that desperate. And if I come to God powerless – knowing my absolute need – it is like the free will is gone. I cannot come with my head held high, offering a mature friendship and allegiance. In powerlessness – humility, it used to be called – I have no bargaining chips. Barely able to breathe, crawling and desperate, we come through the narrow gate – knowing we cannot survive unless He cares and comes to meet us. And the damnable thing (well, in reality, quite the reverse) is that this is when the light floods in, and grace descends. We never really hear the carols, hear the angel anthems, feel the peace, feel the light flooding in – find true identity and purpose – until we come powerless ... until we come in true humility.

New generations keep getting born. Israel is torn with strife. The “City of Peace” is far from peaceful, as are many other places we could name. Overpopulation is still more devastating than war. The ecological systems are still threatened, and so are many lovely animal species, including humankind. If the truth be told, I even know of strife in some homes in my own neighborhood and community, if you can imagine. Even this blessed and beloved community of Christ – what we call our church, which in its better moments is about as good as it gets in this realm – even here we have constant ebb and flow, quarrel and growth, faith mixed with error and evil.

Shall I go on to my own home, and my own self? I will if you will. Is there any work left for Jesus to do here? Is there any reason for Christmas to continue seeking an audience in our world? Why do we keep pretending? Who is left to fool? We are going to play Santa Claus and make it all come out right? We have that kind of power if we just all get together and try really hard? Be really good? The narrow gate, for all the scorn with which we view it coming toward it, is wondrous indeed when we pass through. I do not need a new program or a new cause. I do not need to read another book or find another job, another wife, or another place to live. I do not need to get another college degree. I NEED A SAVIOR. *“And the angel said unto them, ‘Be not afraid; for behold, I bring you good news of a great joy which will come to all the people; for to you is born this day in the city of David [a really good friend, a new boss, a soul mate, a winning lottery ticket, a cure for cancer, a protection against all your enemies? We never fully get it, do we?] ... a SAVIOR, who is Christ the Lord.”* (Luke 2:10) What do Saviors do? Well, this one transforms *us*, leaving the world pretty much the way it was before. Very annoying – unless we actually go through that narrow gate.

Maybe we have sung enough carols for this year. It will be nice, in a way, to get the tree out of the living room, the needles off the floor. Soon it will be time to clean up, get organized, get ready for another year – get back to our duties and responsibilities. What then? Is that it? Is it over?

Those who know anything about Christmas know it is not about an ending – not in this world. It is about a beginning – the beginning of God with us. Christmas is about our waking up to God’s presence with us. For the most part, that happens one at a time. For the most part, that happens to us in a seemingly endless series of layer-after-layer awakenings – us waking up to the Great Reality of His presence here.

Shield, after category, after area, after resentment slowly peel away as the light of Christmas gently penetrates our fear and guilt and hopelessness. The whole world is not yet singing back the song the angels sing, but always some of us are hearing the angels a little louder and more clearly than before. And always some of us are learning to sing a few more notes ourselves – maybe croakingly at first, but nonetheless. More and more we like the journey. We want the Prince of Peace to go on leading us out of old ruts and into His Kingdom, even if it does cause us increasing problems, at times, in this world. We *need* the change and *want* the transformation. That is the advantage of coming powerless. Humility, for all its faults, is no longer enamored of false promises.

Christmas has come. It is not over and it is not ending. So what's next? That's simple. That I can tell you. After Christmas, right about now, we start getting angels and shepherds. That's what the story says. Yeah! You want to think about that for a while? I sure do. I'm in no hurry to jump the gun or draw any final conclusions. Let's talk about angels and shepherds.

The first thing we have to do is cancel all the distance, escape clauses, and theological trenches between us and the real Christmas. Life is safe as long as we keep it theoretical, but it's not any fun. We might as well not even bother to talk about any of this unless we are going to end up talking business, talking reality, talking straight – and are willing to change. Are *you* going to be a shepherd or an angel this year? You have to be one or the other. You have not heard it yet, or you do not believe it yet, or it's just a December distraction, or you think it's only a game – if you are not going to *do anything* about Christmas. December 25th is not what we do about Christmas. Just like waving a flag on the 4th of July does not mean we saved the world for democracy. An anniversary present is not the same as a year of faithful love and devotion. It is only supposed to symbolize it. The celebrations are never the reality; they only try to point toward the reality. “That for which a thing is such, the thing itself is more such.” After the celebration – now, next, from now on – we must be making our response or it is only a fairy story, only make-believe. Do you want to be an angel, or a shepherd?

In my last parish, I happened to be talking to one of the young sons of our Sunday School the week before the Christmas pageant. Now, I have hated pageants ever since I was a little boy about his age and had to stand around itching, in burlap, doing absolutely nothing. But most of the churches I have served insist on doing pageants. Anyway,

my young friend led me to understand that he was not looking forward to the pageant at all. The teacher had told him that he was going to get to be an angel, but he didn't want to have to dress up like a little girl or act like a little girl.

Looking back, it was probably my opportunity to strike a blow for liberation from traditional sexist roles. But he was being so straight with me that I wanted to be straight with him. Somebody had been telling him wrong. There are no little-girl angels. Angels are male. I've read *The Book* from cover to cover quite a few times and there are quite a few different kinds of angels, but none of them are little girls. So I told him. Most angels are warrior-messengers of Almighty God. And they are so strong, fearless, and obedient that they will go anywhere and do anything God asks them to do, no matter what they have to face or how difficult or dangerous it is. You've heard the phrase, "Where angels fear to tread." That was a euphemism for emphasis – a joke. There is no such place! There is no place angels will not go if God sends them.

Then I missed it. I should have said, "In pageants, people act out the different parts of a great story. What's important about angels is that they are brave and obedient messengers of God. A little girl can pretend to be an angel just as much as a little boy can. What's important is to know that angels carry God's Message no matter where they are sent and no matter how dangerous it gets – no matter whether it's easy and fun, or hard and no fun at all. We all need to pretend to be angels so we can learn to be more like them."

Well, I didn't do it right. But I did see him in the pageant. And he must have heard some of it because you could tell by the way he looked and walked that he was no little-girl angel. He was a warrior-messenger of the Almighty God. He learned better than he was told. I hope all of you are about to learn better than you are going to be told, too. But that does not come from hearing less than you are told; it comes from hearing more.

Angels and shepherds are the first ones we see responding to Christmas in the Gospel of Luke. They are rejoicing. They are praising God. "*A multitude of the heavenly host praising God.*" (2:13) "*The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God.*" (2:20) Are you going to be an angel or a shepherd this year? A multitude of the earthly host griping and complaining about what's wrong or might go wrong ... Can we join that throng and keep Christmas?

What should you do if you really believe in, participate in, and wish to respond to Christmas? Do you feed the hungry? Do you work for world peace? Do you work harder at loving your neighbor? Do you give more money to worthy causes? Do you champion the oppressed? Do you try to help save Mother Earth? All of these things are important and need to be done. But they are not the first thing. They certainly are not the first response to Christmas. If they *are* the first response, it will come to nothing.

The first response is to rejoice – to praise God! If that is not our response, we have no glimmer of Christmas. If that is not our response, we do not yet know who this Child is, what God is doing, what manner of Being has come to earth to be with us. The first and continuing response to Christmas is to rejoice and praise God! Many things will come from that and through that. But that is prerequisite. Whenever my spirit stops rejoicing in the presence of Jesus Christ – whenever I stop praising God (because of his present love and future hope) – I should stop whatever I'm doing and wait until I recover Christmas. Anything I do outside of this praise will come to nothing. Actually, if it comes to nothing, I'll be lucky, because usually it is worse than that; more often it will work against the Kingdom, even if it wears the right colors and says the right slogans. Praise and rejoicing are paramount. They are the marks of the true Christmas. We cannot keep from praising God and rejoicing – if we recognize who Jesus is and know why He has come. (To separate true recognition from praise is a categorical impossibility.)

Are you going to be an angel or a shepherd in the coming year? Either way, the first and most important thing is to rejoice and praise God – to be aware enough of the coming of the Christ to be enormously grateful. If you lose that gratitude, that praise, stop whatever you are doing. Without the praise and gratitude, you can only make things worse. Wait until you know again that Christ is with you, to lead and to save.

Shepherds and angels both carry the Message. The Message is that Christ is with us. Mostly the Message is carried in and by the fact that they are rejoicing. If we wanted to look at it as a task, an assignment, or a responsibility, we could say that it is the job of the angels and the function of the shepherds to carry the Message, and their rejoicing is how they carry it. Your rejoicing is how you can carry it too. And when we stop rejoicing, how much of this Message can we carry? Hardly any of it. The words without the rejoicing – without the new awareness and conviction – go bad. Without the rejoicing, you can actually talk about

“forgiveness” yet make people feel guiltier than ever. It’s uncanny. (How well I know.)

I think of how much of my life I have spent working, straining, concentrating, planning, and organizing – so hard – to carry the Message. How I have wanted to help it go into effect, and to spread and heal and transform. And I’ve often thought to myself that *afterward* there will be time and reason to rejoice. After we have accomplished the task and reached the goal, *then* we can rejoice. What a dumb, blind fool! This Message is born in rejoicing and is carried in rejoicing, and until the presence of Christ with me – regardless of problems and circumstances – causes me to rejoice, I do not have any place or function in this story. Is it any different for you? We cannot wait until we get good or become an effective and seasoned disciple before we start rejoicing. Rejoicing is from the beginning – an integral part of the beginning. Rejoicing is a response to God’s presence, not a cry that we are winning. This is not a football game! All Christian tasks require rejoicing – from their very first breath. The score at the end of any particular day has nothing to do with it.

Are you going to be a shepherd or an angel this year? The real pageant is about to begin. You know that, don’t you? Some of us get to be in it – all of us who are willing to be. All of us who have realized that Christ is born: that Christ is come, present, here with us – actually here with us in this world – each and every day. We get to be in the real Christmas Pageant, starting now. Only, we don’t stand around in burlap sacks doing nothing. “O come, all ye faithful – bitching and moaning; frightened and protesting; angry and resentful ...” That is *not* how it goes.

What is the difference between shepherds and angels? **Shepherds return – they go home.** They take the Message to all the familiar places and familiar people – to where they have always been, and maybe to where it should always have been known but is not. **Angels are sent – they travel.** They carry the Message wherever they are sent – even to people who do not like it or do not really know it. Are you going to be a shepherd or an angel this year? Both are badly needed.

We are not going to be either unless we rejoice – unless Christ’s presence fills our own hearts with joy and peace. Isn’t that a bummer?! I mean, in a way. I cannot just make myself rejoice because I decide that would be a good idea. In most ways, genuine rejoicing is out of my control. It comes from recognition. And yet, I know also that Christmas cannot

reach me unless I open to it. I cannot create it, but I *can* avoid it – shut myself off from it. I cannot pretend it, but I *can* decide to let it reach me. And once it reaches me, I realize how much I tried to hold it off.

That really is the difference between Santa Claus and Christ, isn't it? If we believe in Santa Claus and we all agree to give gifts and think of others and be more thoughtful, well, we actually create some of the reality we have envisioned. I do not sneer at that nearly as much as I used to. It can be pretty impressive, at its best. I have given and received some pretty wonderful presents in my time. Even *that* Christmas costs a lot. And it can be wonderful. And I know that a lot of people are sadder and lonelier than usual at Christmastime. Not all of it, but some of that is life trying to tell people that they need to change their ways. If people do not want to be sad and lonely at Christmastime, maybe they should start caring about somebody, and start working to show it.

Of course, it's not my job or my right to tell you anything about the secular Christmas, but as far as humanism goes, it has its points. I do not have any faith in Santa Claus, but I believe in Santa Claus more now than I ever did before in my life.

But with the Christ – with the real Christmas – something has happened entirely *beyond* us. It is bigger than we are! We do not produce it. We cannot control it. It is not responsive to our moods or whims. We cannot define it by the employment rate or prove it with wars starting or ending. It has impact but no direct bearing on our physical survival or condition. Yet it has massive and direct bearing on our spiritual condition and survival.

Peace with God. Awareness of love. Joy in the struggle. Gratitude for life, even in the midst of death. Serenity where there was terror. And nothing overtly has changed. Christ with us! God's Messiah.

It is not *our* Message! We do not make it up, or write it, or own it. It is not ours to change. We do not have to defend it. We can only rejoice in it, or reject it. If we rejoice, we carry it. And we do not carry it like a burden – like something we picked up or something we can lay down if we want to. If we rejoice, we carry it.

Are you going to be shepherds or angels this coming year? Are you getting tired of me asking that question? Good, because I'm getting tired of the way most of you are answering it. Most of you are getting ready

to be shepherds – *again*. What we need around here are more angels! Angels who both carry and proclaim. Angels who know they are sent. Angels who are not afraid to go anywhere God sends them – when it’s easy and fun, or when it’s hard and no fun. (Also when it’s hard and fun, or easy and no fun.)

There are lots of different kinds of angels. What kind of angels do we get at Christmas? What good is it to sing carols if we don’t pay any attention to them?! We get HERALD angels: Proclamation angels. Angels carrying a Message. It is not “‘Hark,’ the herald angels sing.” It is “HARK! The Herald Angels Sing!” They are singing and they are rejoicing, and they are not *just* singing and rejoicing. They are carrying a Message. Herald angels look for where it is dark; they watch for places where the hope is dim or forgotten; they are on patrol looking for the places where doubt is overwhelming, or fear is taking charge. Those first shepherds that the angels came to had not been decorating trees or wrapping presents, you know. They were on the low end of the pay scale in Roman-occupied territory – caught between the temple and taxes; watching sheep between Bethlehem and Jerusalem that were on their way to be sacrificed. Maybe you don’t want to be evANGELists (another word for herald angels, by the way) because you don’t know anybody who has doubts or dark times. You don’t know anybody who needs light or encouragement or support? You don’t know anybody who needs to turn from anxiety and fear to rejoicing? Are you serious?!

I think the truth is that a lot of you are trying to be herald angels already but you don’t think of it that way. This cuts half your power and makes it a lot harder for the Spirit to bring even more power into play. Some of you try to be herald angels but only think that you have sent yourselves. There is not enough rejoicing in that. Let the Message take hold. Let the Spirit fill you. Rejoice and go where you are sent. Be herald angels on purpose, and in full awareness that it comes from a Source far greater than you.

Are you going to be a shepherd or an angel this coming year?