

## “Angels and Joy”

Sermon for 18 December 2016

Fourth Sunday in Advent

Texts: Nehemiah 8:4-12; Luke 15: Psalm 28:7; Luke 15:1-32

Joyful worship is the chief occupation of the angels and the saints forever. It's what we prepare for as saints on the earth. And, because heaven is depicted in Scripture as a diverse, but well-ordered work place, I will start with angels as co-workers of the saints. Then I will move to the assumption of their reality in the back of Jesus' parables of the lost sheep, lost coin and lost son.

Angels are co-residents of heaven—with the saints and with the godhead. They are found closest to the true center of everything which is an apt description of heaven. They are individual creations of God, spiritual beings who are pure, powerful and useful. Some are the guardians of all children, some are guides for the dying from this world to the next, some are warriors in the Lord's army (a standing army!), they are found organized in ranks and orders (there is a hierarchy of prominence, a chain of command as well as placement: proximity to the throne), some are agents of judgment and they are the end-time reapers who separate the wheat from the tares, some have guard duty (at Eden, at the empty tomb, around the temple of God), some are couriers, or messengers, or work as heralds and proclaimers. Angels are not divine; they are celestial. They look into, listen, study, examine, explore, investigate and have the emotions of wonder, anger, jealousy, love and adoration. They are conscious and cognizant, instruct-able and willful—they choose to do things, elect to obey and they are servants of the Most High. None of them appear to be lost, confused or pitiable—and definitely not cute and adorable as a knickknack (as in Hummel-like). Wings appear to be optional and harps are an accessory for certain circumstances! They may not be bound to appear in human form, but assume a likeness to, or shape as a man. The angels fill the realms of glory, the entire concourse of heaven, and Jacob's picture of a stairway to heaven, with angels ascending and descending with the Holy One of Israel at the head, is an apt picture of their activity between heaven and earth. They are found throughout Scriptures beginning to end. They are in the account of Eden, in the history of the Patriarchs and the Exodus. They were part of the annunciation and birth of Jesus, ministered to Him at the beginning and the end of his earthly ministry (the wilderness and the Garden of Gethsemane). They were there at the resurrection to declare the truth of Jesus' resurrection to bewildered women and disciples. They are praisers and worshippers first and foremost and their activity is first and foremost joyous!

**The LORD is my strength and my shield; my heart trusts in him, and I am helped: therefore my heart greatly rejoiceth; and with my song will I praise him.** Psalm 28:7 KJV

My heart **greatly rejoiceth, leaps for joy, is filled with joy, exults** are the verb phrases used in Psalm 28:7c in our various translations. I take this as my central theme for this Sunday in Advent: joy. And it is my intent to demonstrate how such joy and worship is the the chief occupation of saints and God's angels **in the highest court of heaven, in the truest center of everything**. I will not be dealing with Satan or the fallen angels with him in hell! So I want to emphasize that angels are key participants, co-

celebrants!, in that place of great exultation and everlasting joy. And this brings us to the second emphasis of today's message: the assumption that angels are part of the mental furniture in Jesus' worldview. Even when they aren't in the forefront, as in direct supernatural interventions, they are in the background. The first two parables in Luke 15 underscore this assertion.

**Now the tax collectors and sinners were all drawing near to Him. And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling, saying, "This man receives sinners and eats with them."** There it is: grumblers and rejoicers—the critics and the recipients of forgiveness. Didn't Jesus know that the best way to deal with sinners, the Pharisaical way, was not at all? Everyone knows don't they, that "He who touches pitch gets black—this is black as in the stain of pine resin, not a race term! (Ecclesiasticus 13:1: **He that toucheth pitch shall be defiled therewith; and he that hath fellowship with a proud man shall be like unto him.** (KJV) Shakespeare put it thus:

WATCHMAN: If we know him to be a thief, shall we not lay hands on him?

DOGBERRY: Truly, by your office you may, but I think they that touch pitch will be defiled. The most peaceable way for you, if you do take a thief, is to let him show himself what he is and steal out of your company. ("Much Ado About Nothing," Act 3.3.48-53)

The Pharisees' thought was, perhaps, that Jesus must be lacking in discretion; for in keeping bad company; *he must be one of them!* It was a form of guilt by association.

So Jesus embarks on a three-fold parable response: about a lost sheep, a lost coin and a lost son to underscore the point that he came *to call not the righteous but lost sinners*. For those who are healthy obviously have no need of a physician:

**12 But when he heard it, he said, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. 3 Go and learn what this means: 'I desire mercy, and not sacrifice.' For I came not to call the righteous, but sinners."** (Matthew 9:12-13)

However, as we revisit this familiar parable set, let us not miss, skip over Jesus' *repetitive* declaration in two parables: **I tell you there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance** (v. 7) and **Just so I tell you, there is more joy before the angels of God over one sinner who repents** (v.10). Leading up to this grand conclusion in the third: **It is fitting to celebrate and be glad, for this your brother was dead and is alive; he was lost and is found.** (v. 32)

It is important not to be over-impressed with the chapter divisions in the narrative, as you know, because Luke 16:1-9, the parable of the unjust manager, shares a lot with these three preceding parables. In this last, the purpose for being shrewd with the master's finances was that through the reduction of debts, through forgiveness, as it were, **to make friends for yourselves by means of unrighteous wealth**. Why? **So that when it fails** (as monetary systems are bound to do—eventually) **they** (your new found friends!) **may receive you** (be there to welcome you joyfully) **into the eternal dwellings**, or heaven where angels dwell! It is also feasible that the kindness shown, the love manifested

and the forgiveness modeled may be instrumental in leading the former debtors to become Godly men in consequence! *Men, who were obedient to the commandment to love their neighbors, might choose to forgive debts freely.* The identical destination, heaven, of all these parables one and two—and a terrestrial prototype, mimicked on earth (in the family reunion imagery), ties all these parables together. A setting or reconciliation and reunion accords well with heavenly fellowship, eternal dwellings ***where there is great joy and exultation in the presence of God!*** The four parables form a literary whole, or unit.

So with the parables: the sheep owner who shows concern, legitimate and proper concern for the one lost sheep as owner, or the true shepherd, as well as the woman who had ten pieces of silver and misplaced one—both *search for their missing property*. The shepherd sets to one side the ninety-nine safe sheep, similarly the nine stored coins. Men do understand what it means to look for their lost property as a priority. Mere contentment with what you have left *makes no sense at all!* The jubilant inclusion of friends and neighbors in celebration, after what was lost has been restored, is further proof of my assertion—everyone gets this: finding lost property stimulates joy on earth, and in heaven.

But the Pharisees and the scribes, grumble and choose to sit this one out; they do not see the sinners at Jesus' house as **brothers needing restoration!** They deem them to be "a cultural contaminant, human refuse, a source of religious defilement, a social and religiously dangerous class—a basket of spiritual "deplorable's." ***We should see at least three divisive problems associated stigmatizing sinners with social/religious avoidance.*** First, there is the denial that one's own sin is a problem. That could both lead to pride and betray a clear lack of humility. Second, condemnation fosters an unhappy, joyless hypocrisy. And third, it betrays a lack of awareness that we, if we reached out and restored a lost sinner, would be adding to the joy in heaven! Imagine: a mere mortal increasing the joy in heaven!! *Why doesn't that positive, "eternal" goal excite us more? Why isn't making an eternal difference the extra motivation we need for increasing outreach and witness, and of prayers to be used in that way?!* ***Pleasing God is always a great plan!*** Joy in heaven (there) over spiritual recovery (here) demonstrates a reality of responsiveness between heaven and earth. And it is through the angels that this word, *this news*, travels from earth to the throne room of God! ***Jesus says that this occurs.***

Property, wealth (savings?) and sonship are markers of the progression Jesus utilizes to underscore the reason for His mission to sinners. Note the dual movement: there's an increase of value with a deepening of personal import: losing a son (who is presumed 'dead') is a heavier concern than a missing sheep, or a lost coin. *Yet heaven attends to all three happy outcomes!* Jesus de-commodifies and re-personalizes life for his audience. **The Pharisees, who were lovers of money, heard all these things and they ridiculed him. "You are those who justify yourselves before men, but God knows your hearts. For what is exalted among men is an abomination in the sight of God."** (Luke 16:14-15) Ouch.

In this the Pharisees much resembled the crowd of mourners outside the house of Jairus, after his daughter had died: Matthew 9:18 **While he was saying these things to them, behold, a ruler came in and knelt before him, saying, "My daughter has just died, but come and lay your hand on her, and she will live."** . . . 23 **And when Jesus came to the ruler's house and saw the flute players and the crowd making a commotion, 24 he said, "Go away, for the girl is not dead but sleeping."** And they

**laughed at him.** (as in mocked, or ridiculed Him!) 25 **But when the crowd had been put outside, he went in and took her by the hand, and the girl arose.** 26 **And the report of this went through all that district.** And the same report also went straight to heaven presumably, where her angel reported her resurrection to those assembled there *to their great joy— another victory over death and the grave (!), reported right in the truest center of everything*, in heaven itself. **Again, we know this is so because Jesus says so.** Matthew 18:10. The angels have a perpetual ministry, this communication is part of that. Joy on earth meets with a corresponding joy in heaven. Call it celestial messaging. *Where the angels are rejoicing, there there is joy indeed. They are the voice of heavenly joy.*

For the moment it might be safe to suggest that this “joy in heaven” could be accompanied with music, singing and dancing. And why not? On earth, when the lost son is restored, that activity is exactly what breaks out! The elder brother grumbles no doubt about partying. **But when “this son of yours” came, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!** (Luke 15:30) The sensitive among the Pharisees must have felt this implied rebuke—for their presumed superiority over sinners and tax collectors (as suspect as that might be!) is precisely what the elder brother projects toward his erring sibling. But what we want to note, being focused on angels and joy, is the festive mood of the moment—on earth and in heaven both. **I tell you there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance.** (v.7) ***Joy unites heaven and earth, men and angels.*** The capacity for joy is apparently a shared one. However, in heaven the joy is not mixed. (Rev. 21:3 **And I heard a loud voice from the throne** (God Himself declaring!) **saying: “Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man, and He will live with them. They will be His people, and God Himself will be with them as their God. 4 He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and there will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the former things have passed away.” 5 And the One seated on the throne said, “Behold, I make all things new.” Then He said, “Write this down, for these words are faithful and true.”)** This new cosmic order, I suggest, already prevails in heaven; it is, as it were, anticipated there and is coming about in its entirety on earth with Christ’s return, with the coming of the new Jerusalem.

Angels are neither male nor female, unmarried, individual creations of God who have no kinship with humanity. They are ministers and messengers of God; they are mysterious and as real as the material world—although they appear to be composed of different stuff. They are not terrestrial beings, they are immortal beings. They are limited in their knowledge (entirely dependent on revelation!) and are powerful, but not infinitely powerful. As for their character, they are “holy.” They are absolutely pure and they live a sanctified and separate existence in various ranks and orders—there is an implied hierarchy in heaven, a chain of command, duties and directives: notices, work orders and reports. As to their ministry, it is a perpetual one—they are always coming or going (like shoppers in the grand mall a mall on escalators!). In addition to communication, they also touch, help and renew man in the process of his probationary existence on earth, in this life. *There is entrusted to them the guardianship of children, all children (!)* who have by right, access to the immediate presence of God through their angels. These angels have a place of clear and unobstructed vision; they see God with unclouded eyes. They investigate, wait, listen and learn; they know what is revealed to them! **See that you do not despise the children,** warns our Lord. (Matthew 18:10) This angelic advocacy is a fact of life, one that

pertains beyond the veil. Angels exist who have a sacred and significant ward: the children are their trust.

Angels are also the guides assigned to the dying. When a man dies, he enters another order of life. It is alien to them, the recently deceased start off as strangers there.

What is dying anyway? Is it not the leaving behind of the chance of dying, all fears of mortality? Is it not the dropping off of the flesh, *which alone can die*, and heading out with a new body into that new order of eternal life?! Think of it, the presence of a new reality, full of mystery and promise, a man conscious of loneliness (dying is done personally, one at a time) and perplexed, knowing nothing about what lies ahead, or what to do with it. That is the necessity of what follows, an angel appears to accost him, to carry him into the bosom of Abraham which is nothing less than the heart of heaven reserved for the redeemed. Perhaps, it is a chariot full of angels "coming after me . . . coming for to carry me home."

How wonderful! How like the man afflicted with palsy carried by his friends on a litter by the shoulders and hands of those who loved him enough to bring him to Jesus for healing. **So they were all amazed and glorified God, saying, "We never saw anything like this before!"** (Mark 2:12) And we had better believe that they, the forgiven man and his friends and family, rejoiced, partied and celebrated that day! Wonderful, above wonderful.

When our loved ones, who are faithful believers, pass beyond our voice's reach, our eyes' cheer, our fingers' caresses, the splash of our tears, the sound of voices singing them home to heaven (hymns of anticipatory grace), they pass from our love to the hands of captivating angels who bear them hence to the habitations of the blessed and into the presence of divine love. Together, the soul and these angels, they embark on the first voyage, the first leg of the everlasting pilgrimage into the great, wonderful and blessed life that lies beyond the dying and the grave.

As for their aspect, it might be all force and flaming glory. (This was the perfect camouflage for the angel who appeared in the fiery furnace of Nebuchanezzar alongside the persecuted Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego!) It might be the fierce aspect of the guard placed with a flaming sword at the entry to Eden to forbid our return. Or of the awe-inspiring demeanor of the commander of the Lord's army in Joshua 5:14. Or of the ministering angel who appeared in the garden of our redemption (Gethsemane) to minister to Jesus. Or even the two "angels"/men in flaming white who sat beside the burial table in Jesus' empty tomb when the women came seeking Jesus' body. **Why do you seek the living among the dead?** They asked.

Sometimes angels are pressed into military style duty. We should recall 2 Kings 6:16-19 where Elisha held back on the nuclear option and defeated the Syrians with angelic help:

**16 He said, "Do not be afraid, for those who are with us are more than those who are with them." 17 Then Elisha prayed and said, "O Lord, please open his eyes that he may see." So the Lord opened the eyes of the young man, and he saw, and behold, the mountain was full of horses and chariots of fire**

all around Elisha. 18 And when the Syrians came down against him, Elisha prayed to the Lord and said, “Please strike this people with blindness.” So he struck them with blindness in accordance with the prayer of Elisha. 19 And Elisha said to them, “This is not the way, and this is not the city. Follow me, and I will bring you to the man whom you seek.” And he led them to Samaria.

We cannot know if this passage is what Jesus had in mind at the time of his arrest, when he declares: **Do you not think that I could ask the Father and He would send me twelve legions of angels?!—**six thousand warring spirits, plus calvary. Yes, *he had back-up and he had alternatives!* (Twelve legions when one angel would do!) Yes, twelve as in twelve tribes, apostles, legions of angels and the twelve days of the Feast of Christmas. Peter drew his sword at the wrong place, at the wrong time! We have to wonder what the servant of the high priest thought as he pursued the arrest and trial of Jesus with his severed ear restored!

Angels are also end-time reapers. They, not we, separate the tare from the wheat at the final harvest. And the tares they consign to the fire—not us. They serve God as agents and instruments of divine judgment—at the time of this final, great sorting out. Would Jesus ask for imaginary, illusory, mythological or fantastical help? I very much doubt it. Jesus believed in real angels, and so do I. He embraced this belief in the face of Sadducean hostility (liberal derision, intellectual mockery) remember, the high priest was a Sadducee in Jesus’ day. No resurrection, no angels and no judgment day in their “rational” creed. He and all his unbelieving cohorts were swept away in the holocaust of 70 AD—brought on by their stubborn refusal to acknowledge the day of their visitation by the King of kings. Angels were and are the armies of heaven still. They can war and they can bring glad tidings of great joy! With “The First Noel,” “Angels from the Realms of Glory,” “Joy to the World” and “Angels We Have Heard on High,” we have *angelic proclamation!*, signals from a populated universe which was well-connected long before the Internet—and through a celestial system energized by a power far greater than batteries, screens screens and chargers could ever service. When we leave the church today to re-enter the everyday world may it be less ordinary and more wonderful; God’s *angels are out there* offering us ministries other than the essentially spiritually and typical ones (i.e. beyond our fellowship with the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Angels already help us in ways that exceed the capacity of our dreams to encompass, or of our hard drives to technologies to store!

Apparently, we inhabit a world order inhabited by other creatures who connect use and touch our lives and speak in whispers a language we have not as yet fully mastered—it is so good that they have mastered ours! It is wonderful that we face no dangers unknown, unsought, uncared-for; that God has through His angels cause us to rejoice and He invites us into that joy. Have an even more blessed Christmas!

**Amen**