

“ANGELS BENDING NEAR THE EARTH”

Karen F. Bunnell
Elkton United Methodist Church
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Christmas Eve

Isaiah 9:2-7

Luke 2:1-20

One year, a brave and adventurous Sunday School teacher asked her elementary school class to put on a Christmas pageant that they would write themselves. It was entirely up to them. Well, they were very excited, and went about working on it with vigor. On the night of the pageant, the sanctuary was filled with excited parents and church members, and they sat back in their pews to see what the children had created.

There in front of them was the stable, with a manger and hay, and stuffed animals sitting all around. There were shepherds watching over the animals, and three wise men kneeling down with their gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. And there was Joseph, standing by the manger.

But there wasn't any Mary! Before the congregation could even begin to figure it out, they heard some moaning and groaning from behind the stable. Then all of a sudden, from the side, here came a doctor, dressed in a white lab coat, carrying a medical bag, and he and Joseph disappeared behind the scenery.

A couple of minutes later, they emerge from the shadows of the stable, and with Joseph standing next to him, the doctor lifts the baby he's holding in his arms, and shouts, "Congratulations! It's a God!"

Oh, out of the mouths of babes! Celebrating the moment a child is born, and, more than that, celebrating the moment Jesus was born. Indeed, it is God - God with us - Emmanuel.

Tonight we celebrate with them. And oh, my, how we need a celebration.

You know, a few weeks ago, on the first Sunday of Advent, I preached a sermon called "Christmas Carols" and we sang one of the hymns we're going to sing tonight, "It Came Upon the Midnight Clear." When we got to one of the stanzas in the middle of that hymn, I almost burst into tears. It goes like this: "And ye beneath life's crushing load whose forms are bending low, who toil along the climbing way with painful steps and slow."

I almost burst into tears, because not two days earlier, the parsonage had

been broken into, and I was shaken by that. And then, while I was thinking about that, I looked up and looked into the faces of the congregation, and saw there so many others who were suffering for many other reasons - who were, as the hymn says, "bent low, toiling with painful steps and slow."

I looked out and saw some waiting for test results, or undergoing treatment, or recovering from surgery. I saw others who I know were struggling to buy Christmas presents for their kids, let alone pay their mortgage. I saw still others who were waiting for the shoe to drop - who knew their jobs might likely be cut. And others, whose hearts are breaking because of problems with their children. And others, who are trying to adjust to life without someone precious next to them, because of death or divorce or separation. And yet others, whose minds were in some far-off place where their service-member relative is protecting our country.

That was almost a month ago, and then came Friday, December 14th, and every one of our hearts was broken over the horrible event in Newtown, Connecticut. You know how the popular song goes, "We need a little Christmas"? Well, we need a lot of Christmas this year.

And that's why we've come tonight. We've come because we know this is the only place where there is an answer to the pain of the world. This is the only place where we are reminded that there is something more powerful than evil, a light that no darkness can overcome, a love that nothing can take away. Or as one pastor put it, "Christmas is the affirmation of the deep and abiding truth that God's love is greater than all the worst the world can do." (Jon Walton, First Presbyterian Church of NYC)

God's love poured out in the baby born in the manger in Bethlehem - Emmanuel - God with us.

On the night of His birth, angels sang out the good news to all the world. And, to this day, God still sends angels to tell the good news and share His love.

So tonight, in the midst of the sadness of this world, I want to tell you about some of God's angels who point the way to Jesus our Savior, the baby born in the manger of Bethlehem, and share His love in very real ways.

I don't even know the names of these first angels, I just know what they did. It happened on a Christmas Eve night in New York City. There was a church service getting ready to start, and the sanctuary was filling up rapidly. One man came in by himself, and sat down. He was a recovering alcoholic, six months sober. In the past year, he had lost almost everything in his life, including his family. It was his first Christmas alone, and just as he was thinking that, there was a commotion as an entire family sat down excitedly in the pew in front of him. It

was too much for him to bear. He had to get out of there, and get a drink. So he got up and started to leave, when he ran into the pastor, who asked him if he was okay. "No, I'm not," the man replied, "I need to get out of here, I can't take it, I need a drink." Well, the pastor knew the man well, and knew his situation, and pleaded with him, "Please, don't. Where is your AA sponsor? Can we call him?" "No," the man replied, "he's away with his family in Wisconsin. There's nobody who can help me, I just came tonight for a word of hope, and I end up having this family sit in front of me. If I had my life together, I'd be here with my wife and kids." With tears in his eyes, he started to turn away, but the pastor took his arm and led him into a parlor, where he left him in the care of the Associate Pastor.

Meanwhile, the pastor was wracking his brain on how to help the man. He prayed silently, "O Lord, give me a word of hope for him? Help me help him."

But then, it was time for him to start the service. So he went in, and the service began with announcements, and as he started to make the announcements, suddenly it came to him, no doubt through the Holy Spirit. He said, "I have one final announcement. If anyone here tonight is a friend of Bill Wilson - and, if you are, you'll know it - could you just step out for a moment and meet me in the parlor?" (Some of you probably know that Bill Wilson founded Alcoholics Anonymous.) Well, from all over the sanctuary, people rose and made their way to the parlor to help care for that hurting man.

The pastor said this about that night, "There while I was preaching in the sanctuary about incarnation, the Word was becoming flesh in the parlor. Someone was experiencing hope." (Sermonillustrations.com)

You see, there are angels bending near the earth even now, sharing God's love and pointing the way to Jesus, and letting people know they are not alone - ever because of Him.

And there are other angels, bending near the earth, who point the way to Jesus and show His sacrificial love and grace to those who need to feel it in their lives. One of them was a boy named Rob, whose story was told by the wonderful writer Pearl Buck.

Rob was a farmer's son, and if you've ever known a child who grew up on a farm, you know that they know what hard work is - and Rob sure knew it. Every morning at 4 a.m. his father would creep into his room and wake him up, and Rob and his father would go out in the dark to the barn to milk the cows. Every single morning of the year. Rob really hated it - he hated that he had to get up like that - none of his friends did.

Well, one year, one particularly tough year - a year when there would be no

presents under the Christmas tree, a year when they were just trying to make ends meet, Rob overheard his parents talking one day. He heard his father say to his mother, "Mary, I really hate to wake Rob in the mornings. He's growing so fast and he needs his sleep. If you could see how hard he's sleeping when I go in to wake him up! I wish I could manage alone."

When Rob heard those words, he knew just how much his father loved him - he realized it more than he ever had before, and suddenly he felt bad for how resentful he had been about helping. Well, as I said, it was getting to be Christmas, and oh, how Rob wished he could give his father a great present, but of course, he had no money.

Suddenly, he had a brilliant idea. He would get up way earlier than 4 a.m. and go and milk all of the cows before his father even got up. Then when he did get up and go out to the barn, he would get the best surprise of his life - that his work was all done for him, and he could rest.

So, sure enough, that Christmas morning, at 3 a.m. Rob crept out of bed, and out of the house, and took care of all the cows - and it wasn't as bad as it had been before. He actually enjoyed it. Then when he was done, he crept back into the house, and waited (but he was so excited he could hardly stand it!)

Well, 4 a.m. came, and there was his dad, at his bedside, touching his shoulder, waking him up to go and help with the milking. "C'mon Rob. We have to get up, even if it is Christmas." Rob mumbled something like, "Okay, okay." His father left to go to the barn, and Rob laid there, laughing to himself. He knew that in just a few minutes, his dad would discover the surprise in the barn.

And soon enough, he heard footsteps in the hallway, and then his dad was standing there laughing, but almost crying. "Thought you'd fool me, did you?"

"Merry Christmas, Dad!" Rob replied, and he jumped up and gave his dad a great big bear hug. His dad's voice filled with emotion replied, "Son, thank you. Nobody ever did a nicer thing for me . . ."

They went downstairs and soon the whole family came down, and Rob was so happy as his dad told the rest of the family what he had done and how much it meant to him. "It was the best Christmas gift I ever had," he said, "and I'll remember it every year, on Christmas morning, as long as I live."

Years later, long after his father had passed away, it suddenly occurred to Rob that the love that he had shared that morning was born in him when he knew that his father loved him. It was love that awakened love.

(Pearl Buck, *Christmas Day in the Morning*, 1955)

Friends, it is love that awakens love - God's love for us that compels us to love one another. When we know we are loved, we love freely. There are angels all around us, even this day, pointing the way to Jesus, by loving others as He has first loved them.

And finally, there are angels bending near the earth, pointing the way to Jesus by saving others - and we know well, the names of at least two of them this week - Victoria Soto and Dawn Hochsprung - of Sandy Hook Elementary School. We've heard their stories over and over again. Victoria, the 27 year old teacher who when she heard the gunman approaching told her students to get into closets, and did her best to save all of them, at the cost of her own life. And Dawn, the principal, who did all she could to stop the rampage, sacrificing her life to save the lives of the precious children of her school.

They were angels bending near the earth. They, with what they did on Friday, December 14th, showed us in a very real way the love of Jesus Christ - how love sometimes means giving everything you have, even your life, for someone else.

My dear friends, no matter what you are going through in your life, the Good News of Christmas is that you do not go through it alone. In the baby born in a manger in Bethlehem, God has said to us, "I love you. I am with you always. You are never alone, and nothing can ultimately harm you."

So I want to finish with one final story. It's about a little girl and her parents, who were riding through a neighborhood looking at all the Christmas lights in all the yards. It was quite a sight. It was like one of those house decorating contests they used to have on "Home Improvement" with Tim (the Tool Man) Taylor trying to outshine everyone else.

Anyway, it was a warm night, and the car windows were down, and the little girl was excitedly checking out all the displays. They got by one house, and Santa was on the roof in his sleigh, with the eight tiny reindeer, and there was a snowman in the yard, and all sorts of elves, and it was all lit up, and wonderful. As it happened, when they drove by, the owner of the house was in the yard, and the little girl saw him, and excitedly yelled out the window to him - "Love those decorations!" The man smiled and waved at her.

Well, they kept on going, and saw house after house after house, then finally they came to the last house on the block - and this house's decoration was a great huge nativity scene. There was a stable, and a life-sized Mary and Joseph, some animals, and wise men and shepherds, and in the manger was a plastic Jesus doll with a light bulb inside him illuminating him for all the world to see.

It was such a wonderful surprise to the little girl after seeing all the Santas and elves and reindeer and snowmen, that she leaned way out of the car and yelled at the top of her lungs so everyone would be sure to hear, “Hey Jesus, glad to see you! Great of you to come!”

(Jon Walton, First Presbyterian Church of NYC)

My friends, in these troubled times, when many are bent low and walking painful steps and slow for so many reasons, we join our voices with that little girl’s saying for all the world to hear this night, “Hey Jesus, we are so, so glad to see you!” Because of you, Lord, all is calm and all is bright, and all will yet be well. Thanks be to God!

Amen.