Sunday, December 24, 1995
LISTENING TO ANGELS
Matthew 1:18-25

Angels are very popular today. More books have been written and published on the subject of angels in the last few years than at any other time since the invention of the printing press. Little figurines representing angels are also big sellers, even though there are no descriptions of angels given in the Bible. Some of the figurines and pictures of angels that I've seen are pink-faced cherubs with mouths agape or Hallmark choristers singing "Noel." I've even seen one figurine of a fat porcelain angel wearing a dashiki. And we've all heard people talk about having a "guardian angel."

For some reason or another, Christian and Jewish angels are usually depicted with wings. But that's nothing new. The ancient Greeks had their winged messengers too. In fact, almost every religion has some form of intermediary commuting between the human and the divine, which is surely why angels are shown with wings: to facilitate their transit from heaven to earth. However, this is more a commentary on our own lack of imagination than on the true nature of angels or their needs.

Angels are frequently mentioned in Bible stories. Both in Hebrew and in Greek, "angel" means messenger, a messenger of God. The word is indicative of duty, not of nature. In the Bible and in our religious tradition, angels intervene in moments of crisis, give strength when needed, and bring special messages.

The stories surrounding Christmas are filled with angels. An angel appeared to Mary to tell her that she would be the mother of the Savior. Before that, an angel appeared to Zechariah to tell him that he and his wife Elizabeth would be the parents of a baby who would grow up to be the "preparer of the way."

When Joseph discovered that his fiancée Mary was pregnant and he wanted to quietly break the engagement to save embarrassment for everyone, he was told by an angel in a dream not to be afraid to take Mary as his wife. At the time of the birth of the baby in Bethlehem, an angel appeared to the shepherds in the fields to announce it, and then a whole choir of angels joined in as they sang, "Glory to God in the highest." Later, in another dream, Joseph was told by an angel to take Mary and the baby to Egypt to save the baby's life.

As an adult, when Jesus began his ministry and was tempted, we are told that following the temptations, "angels came and ministered to him." Later in his ministry, when he knew that he would be killed by his enemies and as he prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane to know and follow God's will, we are told that an angel appeared to strengthen him.

At other times in Bible stories, angels appear in disguise. In one Old Testament story, Abraham is seated by the entrance of his tent when three men pass by. He went to greet them and welcomed them into his home. Abraham didn't know that he was entertaining angels in disguise. He had invited them in because they needed a place to stay, and he was one who practiced hospitality.

Later in the New Testament, in the book of Hebrews, this incident is recalled as the writer reminds us, "Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for thereby some have

entertained angels unawares." It's a way of saying that the way we treat people is the way we treat God and that angels are not always who we expect them to be.

I don't know about you, but when I look back on my life, most of the angels that I have encountered have been in disguise, and they have frequently brought messages I did not want to hear.

Incidentally, most angels today, which are represented in popular art and figurines, are feminine, whereas in the Bible, it is implied that they are masculine. Some of the Biblical names for them are Gabriel, Michael, and Raphael.

Did anyone ever tell you that you had the voice of an angel? That's an expression often used, "She had the voice of an angel." I'm not sure if that description applies to the sound of the voice or the message which the voice gives. Incidentally, in many of the Bible stories of angels, their main message seems to be "hurry up, get going."

When an angel spoke to the Apostle Peter while he was in jail, the angel said to Peter, "Rise quickly." An angel said to Elijah, "Arise and eat." An angel said to Gideon, "Arise and go in this your might." And when the angel appeared to Joseph in a dream, the message was, "Go quickly." The message of the angel to Philip in the book of Acts was, "Arise and go." In other words, "Hurry up." In that sense, my mother was an angel. Her message to me and my brothers and sisters frequently was, "Hurry up, it's time to get going."

Throughout all the Bible stories about angels, their main purpose is to guide and correct. We can assume that Joseph, who was engaged to Mary, would not have heard from the angel if he had arrived at the right answer the first time regarding Mary's being pregnant. But that was not the case.

In the time of Mary and Joseph, marriage normally had three steps. First came the engagement in which the marriage partner was selected. This was often done by the families. The second stage was the betrothal, which lasted about a year and required total faithfulness to one another. In order to break off the betrothal, one had to secure a writ of divorce. The third stage was that of marriage, actually living with one another.

It was during that second stage that we find Mary and Joseph with their difficult decision. It was during the betrothal period, in which no intimate sexual relations were permitted, that Mary became pregnant, and both Mary and Joseph knew he wasn't the father. What were they to do?

According to Matthew's story, Joseph decided the best thing was to get a writ of divorce, to break the betrothal. We don't know how long it took Joseph to come to this decision or who, if anyone else, he consulted. And then came the angel.

The angel's message was, "Joseph, don't be afraid to do what you truly want to do. Don't be afraid to risk your reputation. Don't be afraid to take Mary as your wife because God has a part in what is going on here." The angel was saying, "Joseph, I know about the decision you made to divorce Mary. I know it must've felt like the right decision at the time, but give it some more thought. Find the courage to change your mind and do that which God is leading you to do."

I think most of us have listened to angels at crucial points in our lives, although we may not have thought of it in those terms. Think of those times in your own life when you have

corrected your course or changed your plans because you responded to some unexplained urging. Can it not be said that you were listening to angels?

Too often in our discussion of angels, we limit the focus and only think of an angel as keeping us from harm or difficulty, or shielding us from hard choices or responsible living, whereas the opposite may be true. Joseph's plans were to break the engagement with Mary quietly and to exit without becoming further involved. The point is, in Joseph's case and in our own situations, listening to an angel does not mean taking the easy way out. If we were left to decide ourselves, it is likely most of us would choose the path of least resistance. If the message is from God, the angel is probably pointing in the other direction.

Who knows who these angels are? As I mentioned earlier, we often talk about guardian angels, but the guardian angels people tell me about are usually not those who are pushing someone to do something difficult, unpopular, or risky. The guardian angels I hear described are more like calming voices that protect people from those sorts of things. In the Bible stories, angels certainly do some of that, but are more often found leading people away from themselves into the fray.

What are some of the other consequences of listening to angels?

Listening to angels can help us not to take ourselves so seriously. As G.K. Chesterton said, "Angels can fly because they take themselves lightly." In contrast, someone else said, "The devil — aspiring to perfection — fell on account of his gravity." Not only is perfectionism dangerous, it is also joyless.

Angels have a sense of humor and joy. It is said that some of the most serious theologians used to debate how many angels can dance on the head of a pin. That gives the wrong impression of angels. When angels dance on the head of a pin, they don't concern themselves with how many can fit, as if they were crowding into a phone booth. Their full attention is devoted to the joy of the dance.

In his book, A Rumor of Angels, Peter Berger writes about "the comic relief of redemption; it makes it possible for us to laugh and to play with a new fullness." He goes on to say, "This in no way implies a remoteness from the moral challenges of the moment."

So if you want to listen to angels, you will probably not hear them if you take yourself too seriously.

Remember too that angels are not dull. They don't wear halos and strum harps, singing the same old song over and over again forever. In fact, as someone said, every song an angel sings is a new song, every note a new note, just as every moment of our lives is a new moment and another opportunity for awakening, for the giving and receiving of grace.

Another consequence of listening to angels is that it can give you a new appreciation of the present. Remember too, if you are going to listen to angels, you have to recognize them in their many disguises.

A few years ago, my wife and I were on a cruise ship headed for Alaska. Each day, I would get up early and go out on deck. One morning, the salt air was strong, and the sky was filled with clouds. One other passenger was standing by the rail. "Lousy day," he said. "Not great," I answered.

And then a deckhand carrying a bucket and a mop, an old man with a bright red face and a Cockney accent, came down the stairway singing at the top of his lungs. It was a slightly off-color ballad, and my fellow passenger took great offense. What offended him was not the song so much as the singer. “Hasn’t the bloke got eyes?” he muttered, and then confronting him directly, said, “What do you sing on a good day, a dirge?”

“A good day? Why, this is a good day,” the deckhand answered.

“You’ve got to be kidding,” said my fellow passenger. “I paid a lot of money for this cruise, and what do I get? I might as well have stayed home.”

“Guv’ner,” said the old man, a twinkle in his eye, “there’s many a blind man who would give his eyeteeth to look out on this day.” I heard the message from this angel. I only hope my fellow passenger did.

Listening to angels can change the direction of your life, as it did for Joseph; it can cause you to not take yourself so seriously; and listening to angels can give you a new appreciation of the present.

There is yet one more consequence of listening to angels, especially at this time of year: it can cause us to see life as a gift always filled with new possibilities and thereby lift us out of our ruts and routines.

Few of us would consciously choose indifference over love, boredom over enchantment, or superficial knowledge over wisdom. Yet the patterns of our lives can drive us in precisely this direction.

Every routine can become a rut. As long as our wheels run in the same groove year in and year out, we begin to think we know what life is all about.

I like the story which Cleveland Amory tells in The Proper Bostonians. For more than fifty years, John Lowell had oatmeal for breakfast every day. One morning, to her shock, his cook burned the cereal and discovered that there was no more in the pantry. “John,” she said, “There isn’t going to be any oatmeal this morning.” “Oh,” that’s all right, my dear,” he replied. “I never did care for it.”

As one observer of life said, “Over time, we construct prisons for ourselves, places to hide where our illusions will be safe.”

Listening to angels can help us break out of some of those cherished routines. We all have a lot of them. Some are necessary, and others are not. Listening to the angels in our midst can help us distinguish one from the other.

Christmas is a time especially to be listening to angels. They are all around us, waiting to be heard. And remember, most of them are in disguise. A final word. One person had this to say about Christmas: “Christmas is real. It’s the rest of the year that’s a myth.” Amen.