Christmas Eve 2002
TOUCHED BY AN ANGEL

The stories surrounding Christmas are filled with angels. An angel surprised Zechariah while he was working as a priest in the Temple and told him that his wife, Elizabeth, would have a son who was to become John the Baptist and that he would be the "preparer of the way." Mary is visited by an angel who tells her that she will become pregnant, and her son will be the Savior. When Joseph discovered that his fiancée, Mary, was pregnant and wanted to quietly break the engagement to save embarrassment for everyone, he was visited by an angel who told him 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 field 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, an angel told Joseph to take Mary and the baby to Egypt to save the baby's life. When it was safe to return to Nazareth, the hometown of Joseph and Mary, an angel gave Joseph the news.

Consider how many of our beloved Christmas carols have angels in them. Here are a few: "The First Nowell the angel did say, was to certain poor shepherds in fields as they lay." There's "Hark! The Herald Angels Sing," "Angels We Have Heard on High," "Angels from the Realms of Glory," and "It Came Upon a Midnight Clear." Add to that the number of composers who have set the angels' "Gloria" to music.

The basic message of the angels that surround the Christmas story is simple: "Do what God wants you to do" and "Do not be afraid." The women visitors to the empty tomb on Easter needed to hear the same words from the angel before they could hear anything else.

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

In other Bible stories, angels are not always easy to recognize. They often 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 invited them in because they needed a place to stay, and he 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 reminding us 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 I have encountered have been in disguise, and they have frequently brought messages I did not want to hear.

A very popular television show called Touched by an Angel presents storylines involving various kinds of interventions by angels who help troubled individuals solve their problems, achieve their goals, or deal with life's ups and downs.

Oddly enough, current popular notions about angels illustrate how far we've come since we first learned about angels in the Bible. In the Bible, angels are always masculine and sometimes terrifying. However, in our culture, we usually describe little girls or beautiful young women as "angels," by which we mean kind and sweet. Remember that television program called Charlie's Angels? Little boys are not often thought of as angels. You don't hear young men or old men described as angels.

You might be surprised to learn that the idea of angels having wings is not a biblical image. None of the angels in the Bible are said to have wings. That came later when medieval artists tried to illustrate what an angel did, which was to move between heaven and earth and deliver messages to people. Both the Hebrew and Greek words for "angel" mean "messenger."

What's the connection between angels and religious faith? The whole history of religious thought is the effort to explain the in-breaking activity of the Holy One, the Sacred. How, when, and through what means does the Divine enter the human realm? When that happens — when something or someone suddenly seems possessed of an other-worldly essence, either because of the truth they dare tell us or the love they possess and give without expecting anything in return — we don't know how to explain it except to say we have experienced a kind of visitation. You have been touched by an angel.

But here's the crucial point. What the Bible stories tell us is that angels are anything but harmless. They are not to be trifled with. They are not, as they are often portrayed today, personal psychics, loving cosmic companions, or personal guardians. Some people talk about angels as if that's what they are, and that bothers me. Not because I don't think God sends messages and messengers, but because the things people tell me their personal angels are doing seem out of character. Every time I hear about a so-called guardian angel saving a child from death in a plane crash or in some other accident where scores of others die, I wonder why God didn't go ahead and dispatch an angel for everyone.

Angels in the Bible usually give orders, and most of the time, they tell you to do things you don't necessarily want to do. 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 go in this your might." When the angel appeared to Joseph in a dream, the message was, "Go quickly." The angel told Joseph, "Do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife." Joseph was going to break the engagement, but God had another plan for him.

When Mary finds out she is going to be pregnant but is not yet married to the man to whom she is engaged, it is an angel that visits her and whispers the impossible message to her. And the message is, roughly translated, "Go with it." The angel doesn't say he will watch over her or be her personal cosmic companion. The angel delivers a message and then leaves. She ponders all this in her heart, and there is nothing warm and fuzzy about it.

I believe most of us have been touched by an angel at crucial points in our lives, although you might not have thought of it in those terms. Think of those times in your 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 touched by an angel?

This is especially true in those cases where angels were urging you to do something you didn't want to do. Being touched by an angel usually does not mean taking the easy way out. If you were left to decide yourself, you might take the path of least resistance. If the message is from God, the angel is probably pointing you in the other direction.

The Christmas story is telling you that there are always angels in your midst, and most of the time, you don't recognize them. It's another way of saying that God is present. The important thing, according to the Bible, is to continue to love each other and always remember to welcome strangers, for by doing this, some people have entertained angels unawares. It sounds very much like what Jesus said about the mystery of the incarnation: "You ask me when I was hungry, or naked, or sick, or in prison, and you failed to visit me... I tell you that when you did not do it to one of the least of these my sisters and brothers, you did not do it unto me."

The message of Christmas is not to play games with the idea of angels or go in search of one to be your spiritual bodyguard. The point is to try to be one as often as you can.

The ultimate question is not whether or not you've been touched by an angel, but whether you have loved someone so completely and unconditionally that when they look at you, they see an angel and know they have been touched by one. Amen.