December 13/14, 2014

Christmas through Angels' Eyes

Luke 2:1-14

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> **Now in those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus, that a census be taken of all the inhabited earth. This was the first census taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. And everyone was on his way to register for the census, each to his own city. Joseph also went up from Galilee, from the city of Nazareth, to Judea, to the city of David which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and family of David, in order to register along with Mary, who was engaged to him, and was with child. While they were there, the days were completed for her to give birth. And she gave birth to her firstborn son; and she wrapped Him in cloths, and laid Him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn. In the same region there were some shepherds staying out in the fields and keeping watch over their flock by night. And an angel of the Lord suddenly stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them; and they were terribly frightened. But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid; for behold, I bring you good news of great joy which will be for all the people; for today in the city of David there has been born for you a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. This will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger." And suddenly there appeared with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying, "Glory to God in the highest, And on earth peace among men with whom He is pleased."** (*NASB**,** Luke 2:1-14)

The wondrous, yet all so familiar Christmas story. I wonder sometimes if we're not so familiar with the story that it ceases to be wondrous. Perhaps for some of you this morning, you actually "checked out" while I was reading it because you know the story so well. So, how do we recapture the wonder of this story? I suppose we could view the story through the eyes of Mary and Joseph... through the eyes of the shepherds...through the eyes of the magi, or even through the eyes of Herod the wicked king. But this morning I'd like to try to recapture the wonder of this story by viewing it through the eyes of the angels.

The angels have a very unique perspective to the Christmas story. Luke tells us that every time a sinner repents and comes to Jesus, the angels throw a party in the heavenlies. Do you know that the day you decided to trust Jesus as Savior, the angels threw a party? Ephesians tells us that the angels participate with us when we, as a body, gather to worship. Paul tells us in Ephesians that part of the plan has always been that God would take sinful men and women (children destined for wrath) and, on the basis of His grace, and His grace alone, He would make them into a masterpiece, in order that they might be displayed in the heavenlies, that the angels might gasp at the wonder of what you have become in Christ.

This morning I'd like to offer a little context to help us understand why I think the angels gasp at the wonder of a sinner created into a masterpiece. In order to do that, we have to go back to the beginning of the story.

As close as I can tell, the reference to the creation of the angels is in Genesis, Chapter 2, verse 1. There is mention that God created the heavens and their hosts. I would have to think that "hosts" is a reference to God's creation of the angelic beings. Somewhere in this story, Lucifer, the greatest of all the angels, determined that he, himself, would like to be God and receive God's glory. One-third of the angels sided with Lucifer, and they were cast out of the presence of God. Two-thirds of the angels remained faithful to God. It is through the eyes of those faithful angels that we view the story this morning.

These angels would have been very aware of God's perfect creation. They would have seen the paradise that God created called Eden—this magnificent place that was both pleasurable to look at and a fruit to taste. They would have witnessed the amazing creation of Adam and Eve crowned with glory and majesty, as Psalm 8 says, that they would image God to the world. They would have been aware that God, in His goodness and grace, placed Adam and Eve in the work which He had finished—this beautiful garden paradise—as His gift to them in order that they might experience everything that God intended for them. They would have known that every evening, in the cool of the day, God would leave the heavenlies and go to the garden in order to stroll through the garden with Adam and Eve, just to enjoy the time together. They would have noticed a familiar face in the garden as Lucifer (taking on the form of a serpent) shows up in the garden in order to deceive Adam and Eve with the same lie that cost him his position in the heavenlies. I would think, initially, the temptation must have seemed laughable because Lucifer had virtually nothing to offer Adam and Eve. God had provided them virtually with everything, so they must have been stunned and confused as the conversation began to unfold, and Adam and Eve seemed to actually be listening and considering what Lucifer the serpent had to say. They must have wondered, as Adam and Eve considered the possibility that life could actually be better if they, themselves, were gods and ran their own lives for themselves.

One can only imagine what it was like in the heavenlies when Adam and Eve actually listened to the voice of the serpent and sinned against God. What did that look like from the heavenlies as, for the first time in all of history, there was this separation between sinful men and women and a holy God, and what they had known before was suddenly over. They would have known when God left the heavenlies to go stroll with Adam and Eve in the cool of the day, but Adam and Eve were nowhere to be found. They were hiding in the trees, covered with their shame and guilt. They would have known that God made some sort of a promise that God, somehow, would bring life back out of death. But there was no way the angels could have understood, in that moment, what it would cost God.

As closely as I can tell, the very first angel assignment that we are made aware of is that the angels had the assignment to go to the Garden of Eden and escort Adam and Eve out, and to guard the entrance, that they may not return. Think about that! They had seen the fullness of what God wanted for people made in His image, and they were actually involved in walking Adam and Eve out of that, into the world now cursed with their sin. Nobody would have understood that better.

The angels show up in various ways in the Old Testament. For example, at one point they actually sit down and have supper with Abraham. Shortly after that they go to the city of Sodom and rescue Lot and his family before Sodom is destroyed by God. And then Jude tells us this very strange story where Michael, the archangel, actually contested with Satan himself for the dead body of Moses on the mountain, a contest that God won. And then imagine those four hundred silent years between the end of Malachi and the announcement of the birth of the Messiah, years for the Hebrew people that were filled with despair and disappointment and hopelessness. The angels must have wondered: *What is God up to? When will he fulfill his promise*?

Can you imagine what it must have been like that day in the heavenlies when God called Gabriel over and said, "It is time to go to earth and meet with Zacharias and tell him that his wife Elizabeth is going to have a child in her old age, and he will be the one who will announce that it is time for the Messiah to come. The conversation between Gabriel and Zacharias is classic! Gabriel meets with Zacharias and explains to him that his wife Elizabeth will have a child in her old age, and that *he* will announce the Messiah! And Zacharias says, "You know, I'm really struggling to understand this, because we're kinda old...like past childbearing years! I don't know that this is gonna work!" Gabriel's response is classic. He looks at Zacharias and says, "Do you know who I am? I am Gabriel! I stand in the presence of God! Do you think I'm just making this up? I bring to you a message from God, but because you didn't believe me, you will remain silent until the day that child is born."

A few months pass and God the Father calls Gabriel over and says, "It is time to go to earth again. This time you shall meet with a young Jewish virgin and you shall explain to her that even though she has never had relations with a man, she will have a child. It will be God in the flesh—the Savior of the world!" Can you imagine being Gabriel and having the opportunity to meet with this young Jewish virgin and to explain to her that: "*Even though you've never known a man, you will have a child! And by the way, he will be God in the flesh! He is the long-awaited Messiah, the Savior of the world!"* Gabriel has that conversation with Mary, and Mary responds beautifully. She erupts with praise for God! But the conversation gets more difficult as she tries to explain this to her betrothed husband-to-be, Joseph. "Joseph, I don't know exactly how to tell you this. I've never been with a man, but I am pregnant." Joseph, applying some common sense, assumed she had to have been unfaithful. Therefore he began a process to divorce her. Can you imagine being the angel that God calls over and says, "I need you to go to earth and have a little conversation with Joseph; he's not quite understanding this." The angel appears to Joseph and explains to Joseph. "It is true. Your wife-to-be has never known a man. She remains a virgin, but she is pregnant with a child. But this child is a gift from God, conceived by the Holy Spirit. He is actually God in the flesh. He is the long-awaited Messiah, the Savior of the world!" Can you imagine trying to process all this from the viewpoint of the angels who have seen Jesus in all his glory—as King of kings, as Lord of lords, the creator of the universe? And now, somehow, in some way, He is absent from the heavenlies and He dwells, somehow now, taking on human flesh in the womb of a young Jewish girl.

And then came that glorious night when the Christ-child was born. But what a strange circumstance—born not in a temple...born not in a palace...not even born in a house! How could this be that there was no room in the inn? How could it be that God made flesh would actually be born in a stable and would be laid in an ordinary feeding trough? One can only imagine the angels thinking to themselves: *This seems like such a strange way to save the world!* You can also imagine the angels knowing that God had left the heavenlies and had now become a little baby born in that stable, and everybody around had virtually no idea what had just happened!

So imagine being the angel that God calls over and says, "I need you to go down there and make an announcement that the long-awaited Messiah has been born." But imagine the conversation when God says, "I need you to go to a small band of simple, poor shepherds on the side of the hill and announce it to them." You can only imagine the angels saying: "*I'm sorry...What?"* "Yes, I want you to go down to a small band of poor, simple shepherds on the side of a hill and I want you to announce it to them." So imagine that angel appearing to the shepherd to announce the news: *"For unto you is born this day in the city of David, a Savior—it is the long-awaited Christ...God in the flesh!"*

And then suddenly the sky was filled with angels, as all of the angels gathered together to celebrate this magnificent moment, saying, "G*lory to God in the highest and on earth, peace among men."* What an absolutely wondrous moment that must have been for the angels!

A little bit of time passes and an angel gets the assignment, "You need to go back to earth and meet with Mary and Joseph and tell them, 'You need to get out of town. King Herod is about to go crazy and slaughter the babies, so you need to flee to Egypt.' " After King Herod dies, an angel gets the assignment to go Egypt and tell them, "Herod has died; it's time to come home," and they settle in Nazareth.

There isn't a lot that's known over the next three decades. The angels must have watched with great anticipation, wondering when it was all going to happen. And then that glorious moment when John the Baptist—the announcer, the forerunner—baptizes Jesus to launch his public ministry. In that moment you have the Son who had become flesh; you have the Spirit who descended like a dove, and you have the voice of the Father coming out of the heavenlies with the angels announcing, "*This is my beloved Son in whom I am well pleased."* One has to wonder: *Had the angels ever viewed the triune God in that way before?*

Shortly after the baptism, almost immediately, a familiar scene begins to develop where Lucifer (Satan, himself) meets up with Jesus (God in the flesh) to go through the same lies he used thousands of years ago on Adam and Eve. But this time Jesus stood on the truth and Satan departed from Him. Then there's this amazing moment where God calls some of the angels over and says, "I want you to go down there and just spend some time with Jesus, comforting him in the wilderness, having gone through this temptation." Can you imagine being one of those angels and restoring this level of community to the One you had seen in all of His glory, now as a man on the earth? One has to ask, "What did they talk about? What did they say? What did they discuss? What was that moment like?"

Over the next three years the angels would have marveled at what it meant for God to have become flesh and walk on this earth. He did everything you'd expect: He loved the unlovables; He touched the untouchables; He made the lame to walk; He made the blind to see; He raised the dead to life; He cast out demons—everything you would expect from God made flesh. But the angels would have also been aware that there is a growing tension between the religious leaders and God, now in flesh. What a strange scene—that those who perceived themselves to be the representatives of God on earth were now at war with God on earth! The tension grows greater and greater. Certainly the angels must have understood that something was about to happen.

Maybe on Palm Sunday there was a sense that this whole thing was turning around. But then He cleanses the temple. Then the intensity level of the conflict goes through the roof and they were aware that something big was about to happen! Imagine seeing Judas depart to betray his friend. Imagine sensing that intensity in the heavenlies as Jesus left the Upper Room and made His way to the Garden of Gethsemane with the feeling that something big was about to happen. There must have been a sobering sense among the angels in heaven.

Jesus gets to the Garden of Gethsemane and now the intensity level is very high. He asks His disciples to stay with Him and to stay awake and pray with Him as He begins to agonize over what is about to happen. But His disciples are exhausted and fall asleep. So God calls over a few of the angels and says to them, "I need you to go to earth, to the Garden of Gethsemane and be with Jesus, to comfort Him while He agonizes over what is to come." Can you imagine being one of those angels, given that assignment, to be there in the Garden of Gethsemane, to comfort Him in His

agony, and how they must have wondered, "*What is going on here? What is the source of this agony? What is about to happen?"* And then imagine when Jesus says to the Father, "*If there is any way for this cup to pass from Me..."* (The angels would have been very aware that a cup is symbolic of God's wrath. "What is he talking about? How is it that God the Father is about to pour wrath out on His Son?")

And then imagine the moment when the mob begins to come up the path to the Garden of Gethsemane in order to take Jesus away. Whatever else angels are, angels are probably first and foremost, *warriors*. One can only imagine the Angel Army snapping to attention, ready at the nod of the Father to immediately rescue Jesus. But the nod never comes. Can you imagine being a warrior and being asked to just simply stand and watch as this scene unfolds? They would have watched as Jesus was hauled down into Jerusalem. They would have watched as Jesus was mocked, as He was beaten, as He was spit upon. They would have watched the phony trials and the sentence that Jesus was to die. They would have watched the scourging as the flesh was torn from His body. They would have watched as He walked the road to Golgotha, and they would have watched as He was nailed to a cross and dropped in a hole—a death meant for the worst of the worst in the Roman Empire.

Can you imagine the scene in the heavenlies when, from twelve o'clock noon until three o'clock in the afternoon, all creation went dark. One would have to imagine that that included the heavenlies, as all creation mourned this moment as somehow, someway, the very wrath of God was being poured out on His Son. The angels must have wondered at what exactly was going on in this moment. At the end of that, the Son actually cries out to the Father, "*My God! My God! Why hast thou forsaken me?"*

Can you imagine, from the angels' perspective, trying to process for the first time in all eternity that somehow, someway, there was this mysterious separation between the Father and the Son. What was that like to see it in the presence of the Father? And then, something so mysterious, so unexplainable happened to the One who was the eternal creator of the universe, who had become man and somehow, someway, there He died...He died! Imagine processing that from the heavenlies and trying to make some sense of: *How does God die?* There's a lot of mystery in terms of where exactly Jesus was in those three days as His body was in the tomb. But there's no mystery as to what happened on the third day, as Jesus rose from the dead. Can you imagine being the angels called over and assigned to go to earth and announce to the broken, grieving followers of Jesus the message, "*Why do you seek the living among the dead? He is not here! He is risen!"* Can you imagine the angels in heaven exploding into applause at that moment as they realize that Jesus, once and for all, has conquered sin and death?

So then, does it start to make sense? Having seen this story from beginning to end and all that God was willing to do to take children of wrath and make them into this magnificent trophy of His grace? Does it then make sense why the angels throw a party *every* time a sinner repents and receives the Savior? Doesn't it begin to make sense why they want to join us when we gather as children of God to worship? And doesn't it make sense that when God holds *you* up *in Christ* in the heavenlies, to put you on display (having been a child of God's wrath, destined for God's wrath, helpless and desperate in every way), yet on the basis of God's grace, He has made *you* into something spectacular? When God holds you up in the heavenlies, having seen the story from beginning to end, the angels *gasp* at the wonder of what God has done!

I have no doubt that this December, people (many of them Christians) in the midst of the stress, in the midst of the materialism, in the midst of the confusion, in the midst of the distractions of what

has become Christmas, will probably fail to wonder at the story of the birth of the Christ child. But I am absolutely sure that the angels in heaven won't fail to wonder. I would even imagine that many of them gather together and they reminisce and remember that glorious night when they announced to a sinful, despairing world, *"For unto you is born this day, in the city of David, a Savior. It is Christ the Lord!"*

*Our Father, we celebrate today with the angels, "Glory to God in the highest! The Savior has come!" God, help us not to lose the wonder of the story—that God the Son would become flesh, to die on a cross, to be the Savior of the world—*that we might not just experience a ticket to heaven, but that we would be made a magnificent masterpiece of your grace, Lord, so much so that the angels gasp at the wonder of what we've become. Lord, help us to celebrate that anew and fresh this Christmas Season. In Jesus' name. Amen.*

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