

TEACH US TO PRAY: ANGELS

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Luke 2:8-20

This time of year, there is no shortage of wonderful stories to read that focus on Christmas. Each year, I usually re-read *A Christmas Carol* by Charles Dickens. There is the poem *The Night Before Christmas*. There is the O. Henry short story *The Gift of the Magi*. There is *The Nutcracker*—no, not the ballet which my wife and daughter watch every year, but the original story by the German writer Ernst Hoffmann. The story is a dark, delirious nightmare about a little girl who finds her toy soldiers at war with an army of mice. These are all great books, but my favorite has to be a story published in 1957 by Theodor Geisel, a.k.a. Dr. Seuss, *How the Grinch Stole Christmas*.

Dr. Seuss' story tells of the Grinch who lives in a cave on a mountain just north of Whoville. The Grinch detests Christmas. The residents of Whoville—the Whos—they revel in their celebration of Christmas. The Whos mark the occasion with gifts and food and lavish decorations. Also, they sing. Up in his mountain cave, the Grinch can hear the Whos singing their Christmas songs and he loathes it.

One year, the Grinch hatches a plan to derail the Whos' Christmas. On Christmas Eve, he dresses up as a Santa and rides his sleigh into town, and as the Whos sleep, he takes their gifts, their food, their decorations, and even the logs from their fireplaces. He figures that without these items, the Whos will be unable to celebrate Christmas. The Grinch loads his sleigh with everything he has stolen and drives it up the mountain to dump into an abyss. As he is about to dump everything he hears the faint but growing sound of the Whos singing. The Grinch can't believe it. As Dr. Seuss puts it:

And the Grinch, with his grinch-feet ice-cold in the snow,
Stood puzzling and puzzling: "How could it be so?"
"It came without ribbons! It came without tags!"
"It came without packages, boxes or bags!"
And he puzzled three hours, till his puzzler was sore.
Then the Grinch thought of something he hadn't before!
"Maybe Christmas," he thought, "doesn't come from a store."
"Maybe Christmas...perhaps...means a little bit more!"

The Whos' caroling brought a change to the Grinch. He turned his sleigh around, drove it back to Whoville, and returned all that he had taken. The Grinch then joined the Whos in their Christmas celebration.

Now, the story of the Grinch is not really a Christmas story. Like most modern Christmas tales, it is a story of redemption and change. The Grinch is really just a

retelling of Ebenezer Scrooge. The real Christmas story is the one I read earlier—the account of the birth of a child who is the sign of the Messiah.

This story begins earlier—much earlier—with the Genesis story of creation and humanity's subsequent fall. It continues with the covenant established between God and Abraham in which God promises to watch over his people and care for them. This covenant then culminates in God coming to us as one of us. This is what we see in the Christmas story—the story of the birth of Jesus.

As we read in Luke's gospel, Joseph and Mary are a couple engaged to be married. They are forced to travel to Bethlehem to be counted in the Roman census despite the fact that Mary is expecting a child. They journey from Nazareth but because of the many people present in Bethlehem, the best accommodation they can locate is a feed shed. It is here that Mary's child is born.

The story then shifts to the countryside beyond the village where shepherds are watching their flocks. It is night-time when an angel of God appears before the shepherds. Luke tells us that the glory of the Lord shone all around the shepherds and they were terrified. The angel says to them, *Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.*

And this is where we come to the prayer for today. This sermon concludes a Fall Sermon Series entitled Teach Us To Pray. Each week, we have examined a different prayer that we find in scripture and ask what we can learn from this prayer about the act of praying. The prayer for today is the prayer proclaimed by the heavenly host. After that first angel speaks, a multitude of angels appears. They are praising God and saying:

*Glory to God in the highest heaven,
and on earth peace among those whom he favors!*

That is what they say. It is a prayer because they are speaking to God.

Most of the prayers we have looked at in this series are requests to God—they ask for something. One prayer asks for a child, two ask for wisdom, one asks that his life be spared while two ask that God would take their lives (which God doesn't do). It is quite okay to approach God in prayer and bring a request. As we saw in the prayer of King David last week, we have the courage to come before God in prayer with our request because we have a relationship with God. We know that God loves us.

But this prayer of the angels in the Christmas story does not ask for anything at all. This brief prayer is simply an exclamation of praise. The first angel told the shepherds of the good news. This good news is a matter of joy for all people, even

shepherds in a field at night. The good news is that in the city of King David, a Messiah is born. How will they know? There will be a sign. And the sign will be a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a feed shed.

When the angel is finished describing this good news, an angelic army appears in the night praising God and saying:

*Glory to God in the highest heaven,
and on earth peace among those whom he favors!*

When this battalion of angels had departed, the shepherds decide to head into Bethlehem and find what the angel had described. They discover Mary and Joseph and the child. The shepherds tell them what they had experienced. Everyone was amazed. The shepherds then returned to the sheep they had left unattended.

So, what can we learn from this prayer of the angels? We learn that a prayer can simply be praise. Just proclaiming the glory of God is sufficient. Maybe that is what we should do in all our prayers—just confess how magnificent is our God.

But something else that we learn from the prayer of the angels is that when we praise God, others become witnesses to our praise and follow suit. We can praise with our words; we can praise with our actions. When you do or say something that glorifies God, others see it and will be drawn to do the same. Praying words of praise to God is contagious. The angels praise God and the shepherds do the same. Luke tells us, *The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.* Praising God is infectious. Praising God has the power to change lives.

We see this even in the story told by Dr. Suess. The Grinch was ready to destroy the Whos' Christmas belongings when he hears the voices of the Whos singing. Their singing is a form of praise and their voices change the Grinch. "They say his heart grew three sizes that day."

When we praise God, we have the power to change lives. The angels changed the lives of the shepherds and the shepherds have changed our lives with their praise.

When you pray, praise God. When you act, praise God. In fact, the purpose of everything we do should be to praise God.

As the Psalmist writes:

*Praise the Lord! Praise the Lord from the heavens; praise him in the heights!
Praise him, all his angels; praise him, all his host!
Kings of the earth and all peoples, princes and all rulers of the earth!*

Young men and women alike, old and young together!

Let them praise the name of the Lord, for his name alone is exalted; his glory is above earth and heaven.

Throughout this season of Advent, we've been waiting and preparing so that when we do find God in our lives, we know how to give praise.

Praise the Lord!