

**Sermon: "Listen Up!"**

**Scripture: Luke 1:5-25**

**Preacher: Rev. Will Burhans**

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Another symbol of Christmas is the angel. Do you realize how prominent a role angels play throughout the Bible? They are all over the place from the very beginning in Genesis when Adam and Eve make a mess of things and are exiled out of the garden, East of Eden, and an angel stands there with flaming sword in hand to keep them out of the garden. They are there in the very end, the Book of Revelation, the angelic hosts of angels around God's throne, multi-headed, multi-winged singing praises to Lamb of God on the throne, holy, holy, holy! And they are everywhere in between – Moses is given along with the 10 commandments a guardian angel to go before him, Hagar and Ishmael are preserved by an angel in their exile in the wilderness, Jacob wrestles with an angel in the wilderness, to name but a few in the Hebrew scriptures and then they show up in force in the birth narratives, the Angel Gabriel first coming to Zechariah to announce the birth of John the Baptist and then coming to Mary to announce the birth of Jesus and then the angel choruses appearing to the shepherds, the cherubim and seraphim, and the angel coming to warn Joseph to get up and take his wife and child to Egypt to escape murderous Herod. The angels tend Jesus in the wilderness at the beginning of his public ministry and they return in the garden of Gethsemane to comfort him as he struggles with his death to come and in certain accounts of the resurrection they are there too in the tomb telling the disciples that he is resurrected. They're quite literally everywhere. And in a few weeks we'll have angels all over the place in this sanctuary as our kids perform our

traditional Christmas Pageant. Is there anything as cute as the angels in the Christmas Pageant?!

But as far as scripture goes, the people who experience angels did not think they were cute, far from it! When Zechariah saw the angel beside the altar the scripture says “he was terrified and fear overwhelmed him!” So not, “oh what a cute little angel.” But apparently Zechariah’s response wasn’t favorable in Gabriel’s fiery eyes! Gabriel had been preparing for this speech and the one he’d give to Mary for much of eternity and so he revealed – “your elderly wife will give birth and this child will lead the people to Lord your God and he will make many ready and prepare the way of the Lord, the Messiah!” And Gabriel is feeling the weight of it all, this turning point in human history has finally arrived and his angelic light-filled voice almost brings the angel himself to tears and Zechariah responds – “Uh, how can I know for certain that all of this will take place, I mean my wife and I are really old, so it seems unlikely.”

This was apparently not what Gabriel was expecting to hear or wanted to hear cause his angelic eyes grow narrow, as I imagine it, and probably his angelic countenance grows dimmer and he says “I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God. And I have been sent to bring you this good news. And for that question I am rendering you mute, unable to speak, until it has been fulfilled.” And Zechariah says... well, he doesn’t say anything from then on and for about 9 months!

Sometimes, Zechariah, sometimes, church, when we have an experience of God or a suspicion that God is at work in our lives, sometimes the best thing to do is to shut up, even if just for a little while, maybe to just wait and to try not to

speak into it, but instead to listen up and take note and pay attention. “Be alert!” as the bumper sticker says, because the world needs more “lerts”.

This week I came across a sermon that I had written for the first Sunday of Advent 17 years ago in the church in VT where I was serving - 2005. I had just returned from my grandfather’s funeral, the grandfather who was a minister and as one of his last acts of a 70-year tenure in ministry had given the final blessing over me at my ordination. And in that sermon I gave 17 years ago, the first Sunday of Advent, I was sharing with the congregation how I had given the benediction at my grandad’s funeral service the week before and I spoke of this moment when I stood at the pulpit and looked out over my granddad’s casket and noticed within my whole extended family sitting there my sister Emily who was radiant because she was pregnant and due to give birth “any day now!” I told the congregation. And I preached about how we have a God who always accompanies death with the promise of new life, never leaving us bereft and alone but with the promises of the future emerging. And that the season of Advent is a season of waiting and watching for how that birthing of God in our lives will come. I shared that sermon with my sister this week.

It turns out that 6 days later from that funeral - 17 years ago – my sister Emily gave birth to little Jonathan Scofield Knight, Scofield being our grandfather’s middle name. And the angels brought Jonathan into the world with the blessing of an extra chromosome. We all held our breath and wondered as this little boy with Down Syndrome entered into all of our lives. It was not what any of us expected or knew much of anything about. There might have been many opinions and ideas and discussions that would have happened, many imaginings both questioning and concerned if not dire had the family known ahead of time that

this child would have Down Syndrome. But it was for the best that we remained mute in our ignorance, while God's angel all along was basically saying "be quite and just see what happens." That's often what is most needed in the face of the unknown or even in the face of what we experience as a tragedy or great loss or in our pain and struggle, even if just for a little while the invitation is to watch and wait for what this might really mean in our lives and in the unknown of that watching and waiting to trust God in it.

And what did it mean for my sister and her family of 4 boys and for the rest of us? It meant a person entered their lives, all our lives, bearing such gifts. Just a little example - Our family up here for Thanksgiving facetimes my sister who was hosting a meal down in Richmond and who should answer but Jonathan and he's like WILLLL!! TRACY, AUGUSTA CLAIRE, NAOMI, HALIANA, it's SO good to see you, I love you guys, oh my gosh!! And that's the way that Jonathan greets you whenever he greets you like he's been awaiting his whole life for you, kind of shakes his head and just laughs and smiles and make you feel like you are the best, cause to him you are. That's one of the gifts he bears. And we've talked about how by his very presence he requires others to be more present to the moment than anyone else, and he requires at times those around him let go of their agenda of what should and shouldn't happen and go with what Jonathan has decided should be. And boy, is he one who brings laughter and music and dancing like you wouldn't believe. And at all our family gatherings with me an ordained minister and my father and sister all ordained ministers, guess who prays and makes us feel so grateful to bow our heads before God in thanks? Of course, it's Jonathan.

And none of his family, none of us, his extended family, would have ever known, such gifts would have been brought to us by the angel bearing a child with an extra chromosome. We just had to wait and watch and listen and realize that we couldn't possibly know what it all would mean. Just like old Elizabeth and Zechariah, they couldn't possibly have fathomed in a million years with a million minds what it would mean that this baby boy John was to be born to them and the gift he would be to the world.

God is working in your life, you know? Maybe you don't know or don't have any idea, but God is working and active in your life. Angels maybe beyond our usual spectra of light and a shimmering of energy too subtle for us to notice, are involved with us. They stand with flaming swords barring us from where we should not be and bring invitations in unimaginable directions we must go where certain unfathomable gifts abound.

So could the season of Advent and the coming of Christmas with all its rich tapestry of symbols and stories and visions invite us above all else to be quiet and still for a little while – even in this season, quiet and still, maybe especially in this season, we are invited to watch for it, to wait for it, to pay attention anew for what is coming... in God's time, with God's blessing. We really have no idea what's arriving, just around the corner, what's being nurtured in the womb of our lives, what's about to be brought to birth in and through our lives, so let's relinquish our fear and our control and gripping hold for a little bit and just see what God has in store... Amen.