

"BY SPECIAL DELIVERY"

A Sermon By

Philip A. C. Clarke

Park Avenue United Methodist Church  
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New York, New York 10028  
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### INTRODUCTION

I read recently about a Church where on the Sunday before Christmas they did the usual Christmas pageant. The boys and girls from the Sunday School played the various roles and that Sunday morning they were all busy getting into their costumes. Mary and Joseph were in one part of the hall putting on some old bathrobes. And then over in another corner the Shepherds were gathering carrying some canes probably borrowed from some of the senior citizens of that church. And then, of course, the angels under tinsel halos and white sheets were getting lined up. One mother was trying to get an angel costume on to her squirming son, and his older sister stood by watching. "Boy" she said, "talk about miscasting!"

What are angels like? Have you ever seen one? Angels happen to be hot property right now. Not too long ago, Sophie Burnham, had a best-seller with her publication, A Book of Angels. She filled it with stories about how ordinary people ran into angels or were saved by them, or had a vision in the night from them. Since then there's been a bit of a rush to bring books about angels into print.

### DEVELOPMENT

You can even see it on television and in the movies. A hit movie of a couple of years ago was Grand Canyon. Kevin Kline plays a business man in LA who's trying to figure out what his life means and then one day something happens to him that seems to say that his life matters, that there's a purpose to his existence...that Someone out there cares about him.

He's walking down the street...worried and troubled...and he steps out from the corner without thinking. He steps right into the path of a moving city bus! He doesn't have a chance. No time to react. But someone grabs his jacket from behind and yanks him back to the curb. After he collects himself, he turns around to thank the person. He sees a woman with a baseball cap on her head walking away. He wonders...was she the one? Who is she? She slips into the crowd and is gone. Later on in describing the incident to a friend, he says,

"Was that a real person, or was that something else...you know...sent from somewhere else?"

Angels. Sophie Burnham, I understand, had so many people write to her after her book came out that she was prompted to write a sequel to it. She called the second book, Angel Letters, and it's filled with tales like that. Motorists whose cars stalled or broke down and strangers came from out of the blue to help them, only to vanish moments later. A woman loses her prized piece of jewelry, a valuable necklace and suddenly rather mysteriously it reappears. Stories like that. Angels....and then we begin to catch and to think about the mystery of angelic encounters in the Story of the first Christmas.

In Matthew's Gospel, we read about an angel coming to Joseph to tell him that the child that Mary is carrying is of the Holy Spirit. And then over in Luke's Gospel, we find a young woman, musing in the dark, and an angel suddenly stands close by and in so many words, he says:

"Ma'am! A telegram from heaven.....by special delivery!"  
That's what angels are all about...a sort of special delivery.

Back in the Middle Ages, people thought that the angels were big fellas, big enough to grab hold of the stars and the planets, and to guide them around heaven. And there they were...marching Jupiter through the sky! And playing catch with Halley's Comet! Bouncing the moon up and down every night. Some even thought that the "falling stars" were thrown by angels. And they even talked about angels who would stand guard at the Gate of Heaven and when the evil spirits got too close, the angels would chase them away. Falling stars.

WHAT DO WE REALLY KNOW ABOUT ANGELS?

What do we know about angels? When it comes right down to it, we actually know very little. We know that angels were around at the beginning of time and watched God make this big universe that's our home. It was Job who said,

"...the morning stars sang together and all the angels  
shouted for joy!" (Job 38: 7)

Can you see them? What a spectacular sight that must have been! The planets dancing and the stars singing together and all the angels shouting for joy. We know, too, that the angels praise God up there in heaven. David, in Psalm 103, said, "Praise the Lord, you His angels. You mighty ones who do His bidding."

And remember Jacob's dream at Bethel....the ladder reaching up to heaven and all the angels running up and down on it. I remember that one from my early days in Sunday School. It fascinated me. And remember John's vision in the book of Revelation? Why he saw so many angels in heaven that he couldn't even begin to count them.

ANGELS: MESSENGERS FROM GOD

But the big thing that we know about angels is that they're messengers from God.

They're the ones who took God's messages and personally delivered them to people down here on earth. An angel came to Hagar in Genesis 16 and told her how famous her son would be. Angels took Lot and his family from the city of Sodom and saved their lives. An angel commissioned Gideon to raise a little army and save the Israelites from the Midianite terrorists. And the list could go on and on. Peter and Paul over there in the New Testament. You remember the stories. Angels...messengers from God. In fact, in both languages of the Bible - Hebrew and Greek - the word, "messenger" is the same word as "angel". The terms are identical. An ANGEL is a MESSENGER. A MESSENGER is an ANGEL.

Think of our word, "evangelism". You all know what it means. It means "Good News". It means you've got something wonderful to tell someone else. It means you're so full of the love of God that it just spills out in your conversations. Look at that word again. Write it out and there - right in the middle of it, is the word ANGEL! It's supposed to be there. Evangelism comes from a Greek word. It means "Good message". In the Bible, "angel" and "messenger" mean the same thing.

But angels don't show up every day of the world. And that's why the visitations by the angel in the Christmas Story are so special and really quite dramatic. Angels only bring the big messages. They only come around when the message has been stamped by the Boss...by God, Himself:

"SPECIAL DELIVERY....."

AN OLD DUTCH SAYING

There's an old Dutch saying that goes like this, "DE DOMINE HAT VOORBIJ." Let me repeat it. It means, "The minister's just walked by!" And people would always say it when there was a big crowd and for some reason everybody suddenly stopped talking, all at the same time. There would be a moment of silence and everybody would get a little self-conscious and embarrassed and then somebody would say,

"DE DOMINE HAT VOORBIJ".

You see, years ago in Holland, if a fishing boat went down in the North Sea or if an accident occurred, taking somebody's life...they would always go and tell the minister first. And then he would be the messenger. He would walk the streets and go to the homes and break the news to the families. "DE DOMINE HAT VOORBIJ". "The Minister's just walked by"...and everybody's heart would stop and they would listen for the footsteps. Whose house is he going to? Who is going to receive some bad news? When everything happened in normal ways, word spread through the markets and the shops and up and down the streets and canals. But when it was a big message, a special message, then it was the minister who carried it.

AND THAT'S THE WAY FOR ANGELS

And that's the way it is for the angels. Normally, God shows His splendor in the heavens. Normally, God speaks His power in the winds and waves. Normally, God talks to His people through prophets and preachers and the Bible, but sometimes the Message is just too big. Sometimes it's too important to trust to just anyone. Sometimes God needs to take special care so that it comes out right....and so that it's heard by the right people in the right way. Sometimes no one can carry the message except the angels lone.

And that's why an angel came to Joseph. This was a big message. And that was why Gabriel showed up at Mary's house that day. He's a messenger of God. Why, his very name, Gabriel, describes his character. Gabriel - "mighty man of God". And when he burst into Mary's room, she knew right away it was more than just a piece of junk mail that he was delivering. God had a special message. And only the angels could carry it.

It was the message of Jesus. It was the message of salvation, for all! It was the message of hope in troubled times, and of peace in a chaotic world, of joy in a depressed world. It was about love. It was a really big message. A miraculous message and it came, BY SPECIAL DELIVERY!

THE STORY GETS INTERESTING

And here's where the story takes on some added meaning. Here's where it really gets interesting. Because, the first thing that happens to Joseph and Mary, after the angel leaves them, is that they now turn into angels themselves. Joseph and Mary now become angels. Sometimes we miss that. Joseph becomes an angel to his young bride-to-be. Through his love and his tenderness and his understanding, through his patience, he took to her the message of God's love. And Mary? When Mary heard the message of what God was about to do, she became a messenger, too. She took the message of Gabriel and became an angel for her cousin, Elizabeth. She went to tell Elizabeth the "Good News" - the Gospel, the "Message".

In the best sense of the word, Mary and Joseph themselves became angels. And that's what this Holy Season of the year is really all about.

And that's what this Church is all about! It's to hear the message of God's "Good News" of love and of joy and of peace and of hope...all sent to us by special delivery from heaven by way of the angels, and then turning those who hear it into angels of "Good News" to others.

The angel came to Joseph and then to Mary. He brought a special delivery message to them. It was the message of Jesus. It was the message of God's Kingdom, the message of love.

"Of peace on earth and of good will to men."

God couldn't trust just anyone to deliver it. And so He sent down His messenger. Upon receiving it, Mary and Joseph sensed it was highly important. Unusual. The message of a lifetime. But once they heard it and received it and understood what God was saying...yes, once they were clear on what it all meant, they turned into angels, too. They became messengers of God's "Good News"...taking it to others. Look at that miracle. See what God is doing. And yes, tremble in amazement. Jesus is on His Way.

CLOSING LINES

Have you ever wanted to see an angel? Take the time to look around you...here this morning. This place is filled with angels. They're here...quietly bearing witness to God's love...giving and sharing. Someone tells the story of the little boy who heard that verse from Hebrews 13. How does it go?

"Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for thereby some have entertained angels unawares...."

(Hebrews 13: 2)

He told his friend that angels don't have wings. Sometimes, he said, they're strangers in ordinary underclothes, under garments. Ah, who can say? But this I know: as I look through this sanctuary today, there are plenty of angels here. Like Joseph. Like Mary. You, too, know the message of the Gospel. You, too, have come to see in this beautiful Christmas story what God is doing. You gaze at the heart of love that comes from heaven....bringing a world that is waiting to be born. As we do our bit...our share in bringing it to pass, we are angels as well.

PRAYER

Help us to celebrate with joy and love the birth of Jesus, that we may share in the song of the angels, the gladness of the shepherds, and the worship of the Wise Men.

Close the door of hate and open the door of love all over the world. Let kindness come with every gift and good desires with every greeting. Teach us to be merry with clear hearts and may Christmas morning make us happy to be Your children and the Christmas evening bring us to our beds with grateful thoughts, forgiving and forgiven. In the name of the Christ Child, we pray. Amen.

PASTORAL PRAYER: December 24, 1995

WE THANK THEE, O GOD, for the light that came into our world in  
the life of Jesus.

HELP US as we try to catch that light in our own lives;  
Let it shine through us to pierce the darkness  
of some life or some home this Christmas.

By the way of Bethlehem, lead us, O God, to newness of  
life.

By the innocence of the Christ Child, renew our simple  
trust.

By the tenderness of Mary, deliver us from hardness of  
heart, from cruelty, from  
violence.

By the patience of Joseph, save us from rash judgements of  
others, and thus enable us to  
persevere through life's more  
difficult moments.

By the Wise Men's long journey, keep our searching spirits  
from fainting.

By the shining of a star, guide our feet in the path of  
peace and in the way of brotherhood.

AS WE REJOICE in the joy of these days - without forgetting the sadness and  
sorrow, the poverty and the prejudice that are abroad in  
our world - we would remember that light that the  
darkness cannot put out -

Cheer us with the song of the angels.

May the spirit of love be born anew in our hearts.

In the name and spirit of the Christ Child, we pray.

(Choral Amen)