

There Are Angels All Around Christmas Eve, 2008

There is a lovely old carol I've been thinking of lately. It's a song about angels -- the angels of Christmas. And it simply says, "There are angels hovering round." Which is what Luke said in his gospel. There were angels all around when Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea. First the angel came to Zechariah the Priest to tell him that he and Elizabeth would have a son -- in their old age, mind you -- their first child after all these years. That was the message of the angel who came.

And then the angel appeared to a young woman. Barely more than a child. A young woman in her teens. And the message was oddly the same. "You will have a son," said the angel. And yet, the young woman, named Mary, had never been married. She was engaged, of course, to a carpenter from Nazareth. But the wedding was still in the works. She wasn't married yet. She'd never been with a man -- with *any* man. And yet the angel said to her, "God has called you. God has chosen you to give birth to his son." Ordinary, everyday, common young woman.

And in Matthew's gospel an angel comes to Joseph in a dream to deliver a message -- a message from God that the child Mary carries within her is God's own. And God has chosen *him, a humble carpenter*, to teach him and love him and care for him as his own.

Oh, there are angels hovering round.... But it doesn't end there....

There were shepherds in the hills tending their flocks as shepherds had done for generations before them. But that night there were angels -- messengers -- hovering round, watching over God's flock that night, tending God's sheep. And one of the angel's came to the shepherds to deliver a message -- **"good tidings of great joy which shall be to all people,"** they said. Do you remember the words? **"For unto you is born this day in the city of David, a Savior, which is Christ the Lord. And this shall be a sign unto you; Ye shall find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger. ✕ And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God, and saying, Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men.**

Oh, there were angels -- there were angels all around. And each of them with a message to share -- with glad tidings to deliver -- with good news to tell. Which is what angels do, you know. They have something to tell. The word angel means messenger. They are the messengers of God.

And that means that here and now, nearly two-thousand years later, in this very place at the corner of Glendale and here, there are angels all around. Messengers of God. Maybe you've seen one of them, or heard their voice, or felt their touch.

I heard about someone who did. Tony Campolo ... said that a friend of his, who is an associate pastor at a large Presbyterian church in Bel Air California, told him once how she loves to go to Nordstrom's dept store there in Bel Air during the Christmas season. She can't afford to buy anything there, mind you. But she loves to go there at Christmas time and just take in all the wonderful Christmas decorations in that place and... there's live music on every floor.

And on one of her visits, this young pastor was on the top floor of the store looking at some of the finest dresses in the world, when the elevator doors opened and out stepped

a bag lady. Her clothes were dirty and her stockings were rolled down to her ankles. And she just stood there holding an old gym bag in her right hand. And it was obvious that she was out of place and not about to buy anything. Because the dresses there were in the thousand dollar range. And this bag lady didn't seem like the kind of person who would have anything close to that much money.

And Tony said his friend, the young woman - the pastor - expected the security guard to come very quickly and usher the bag lady out of the store. But instead of a security guard, a very stately looking saleswoman came over to her and said, "May, I help you, madam?"

The Bag lady said, "Yeah... I wanna buy a dress."

"What kind of dress?"

"A party dress!" said the bag lady.

"Well, you've come to the right place," said the saleswoman. "Follow me. I think we have some of the finest party dresses in the world."

And the saleswoman, she said, spent more than fifteen minutes matching dresses with the woman's skin color, trying to help her decide which dress would go best with

her skin tone and the color of her eyes. And after picking out three dresses the saleswoman thought she would look most attractive in, she asked the bag lady to follow her to the dressing room. And the young pastor said she followed along (at a distance), went into the next dressing room, and put her ear to the wall. Because she wanted to hear all of this. It was just so incredible, she thought!

And the bag lady tried on the dresses with the saleswoman's help. But then, after ten minutes, or so, the bag lady said, "I've changed my mind. I'm not going to buy a dress today!"

And the saleswoman said, "That's okay. But here's my card. Should you ever come back to Nordstrom's, I do hope that you will ask for me. I would consider it such a privilege to wait on you again."

And when the young woman, the pastor, emerged from the dressing room, she noticed a little pin on the saleswoman's blouse. It said WWJD - what would Jesus' do.

I tell you that woman was something like an angel -- a messenger of the Lord. And the message? Oh, the message to the woman who came to see the party dresses was, "Somebody sees. Somebody hears. Somebody knows who

you are. You aren't just a bag lady. You're a child of the King. You're one of God's children. You are somebody -- who is valued and honored, respected and loved. Because that's who you are. You are the reason for the season. The Bethlehem babe was born because God loves YOU."

And can you imagine -- Can you just imagine what a difference that message would make in her life? [I know what a difference it makes in mine.

Behold I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David, a Savior, which is Christ the Lord.

One more story... A young woman woke up one morning in 1960, she said, with six hungry babies and 75 cents. Their father was gone. The youngest of the boys was only three months old, the oldest was seven, and their sister was two.

Their Dad had never been much more than just somebody they were afraid of. As soon as they heard his tires crunch down on the gravel in the driveway, they would scramble to hide under their beds. He did manage to leave them \$15 a week to buy groceries. But even in then, it wasn't enough. Now that he had decided to leave, there

would be no more beatings ... but there would be no food either.

And the mother said that if there was any kind of help for people in need in southern Indiana at the time, she certainly didn't know about it. So she scrubbed the kids until they looked brand new and she put on her best homemade dress, loaded them into a rusty old '51 Chevy and drove off to find a job.

All seven of them went to every factory, and every store and every restaurant in town. But no luck. None at all.

After that, the kids would stay crammed inside the car trying their best to be quiet while she tried to convince who ever would listen that she was willing to learn or do anything she had to do because, "I have to have a job," she said. But still no luck.

"The last place we went to," she said, "was just a few miles out of town. There was an old Root Beer Barrel drive-in there that had been converted to a truck-stop called the Big Wheel.

"An old lady named Granny owned the place," she said. And she would peek out of the window from time to time at all those kids. And she told the young mother that she needed someone on the graveyard shift, eleven at night until seven in the morning. She paid 65 cents an hour, she said, and she could start that night.

So the young woman said she raced home and called the teenager down the street that baby-sat for people. And she bargained with her to come and sleep on her sofa for a dollar a night. And she said, "That night when the little ones and I knelt to say our prayers, we all thanked God for finding Mommy a job." And so she started at the Big Wheel.

In the mornings, when she got home, she would wake the baby-sitter and send her home with a dollar of my tip money-- which was about half of what she averaged each night. But as the weeks went by, the heating bills put a strain on her meager income. And the tires on her old Chevy were as thin as balloons and started to leak. She had to fill them with air on the way to work and fill them again every morning before she could go home.

And then one bleak morning, she dragged herself to the car to go home and there in the back seat of her car were

four brand new tires! There was no note, no anything, just four brand new tires. And she wondered, she said, if there angels taken up residence in Southern Indiana!

Well, by that time, she was working six nights a week and it still wasn't enough. And Christmas was just around the corner and she knew there wouldn't be money for toys and presents for the kids. But she found a can of red paint, she said, and she started fixing up and painting some old toys. And she hid them in the basement for Christmas morning. And clothes were a worry for her, as well. She was sewing patches on top of patches.

On Christmas Eve the usual customers were drinking coffee at The Big Wheel. The truckers were there, and a state trooper, she said. And there were a few musicians hanging around after playing for a Christmas ball somewhere. And all the regulars just sat around talking till the early hours of the morning and then left to go home.

And when it was time for her to go home at 7 o'clock Christmas morning, she went out to the parking lot and she couldn't believe what she saw. For, her old battered Chevy was filled to the top with boxes of every shape and size.

And she opened the door, crawled inside, lifted the lid off the top box. And inside was a whole case of blue jeans, sizes 2 through ten! And she looked inside another box and there were shirts to go with the jeans. And she peeked in some of the other boxes, and there was candy and nuts and bananas and bags of groceries. There was an enormous ham, and cans of vegetables and pie filling and flour and sugar. And a whole bag full of laundry supplies. And there were five toy trucks and one beautiful little doll.

And she said, "As I drove back through empty streets as the sun slowly rose on the most amazing Christmas Day of my life, I was sobbing with gratitude. And I will never forget the joy on the faces of my little ones that precious morning.

And she ended her story this way. She said, "I tell you, there were angels in Indiana. There were angels all around us. And they all hung out at the Big Wheel truck stop....

There are angels here, too, you know -- messengers of God, holy and beloved. And God sends them with good tidings of great joy for all people. And that message is, "You're a child of the King. You're one of God's children. You are somebody -- who is valued and honored, respected and loved. Because that's who you are. You are the reason for

the season. The Bethlehem babe was born because God loves YOU." That's the message God has called and chosen the messengers to deliver. And the messengers God has called and chosen to tell the great good news are here. Do you see them? The messengers are you.

This is the word which is given for you. Amen

Soli Deo Gloria

Benen, ObISB

