

The Story is About to Begin

Dr. Stephen D. McConnell



Luke 1:5-23

“**T**here appeared to him an angel of the Lord.”
What an interesting way to start a story.
“There appeared to him an angel of the Lord.” If someone was telling you a story and they began by saying, “Well you know it started when an angel appeared,” what would you start thinking?

Truth is angels are pretty popular these days. Angels are making a pretty big comeback. Especially at Christmastime. You have angels all over the place. Bookstores have sections devoted to angels. Flip through your cable channels and there are angels fluttering all about. Hollywood has discovered angels. We have angels in the outfield. Angels in our pocket. Angels close enough to touch us. Angels named Clarence and Michael. I saw a commercial recently advertising lingerie and they were scantily clad angels. They had wings! Angels are everywhere! Three out of every four Americans believe in angels. One half of American adults believe they have a guardian angel ... and one third of American adults claim to have actually felt the presence of an angel. Angels are doing very well these days.

So if someone began their story and said, “Now it all started when an angel appeared,” you might think given such angel popularity that that would be like saying, “Well it all started when the postman delivered the mail.” But maybe not.

Instead what we might think is that this story that is starting is not really a true story. When an angel shows up well that’s a cue that this is going to be a cute little tale along the lines of Clarence appearing to George Bailey or

the spirits appearing to Scrooge on Christmas Eve. When we hear about an angel showing up we kind of want to settle in for a sweet holiday tale.

Or if we hear someone starting their story by saying, “You know yesterday an angel appeared to me.” Well, I’m thinking that most of us might start to wonder if this story teller has gotten a little too worn out by the holidays. Or has a watched a little too much television or is on his or her way to a psychotic breakdown. Appearing angels – as much as we like to see them on the tube – or on the pages of our favorite literature – appearing angels showing up in the middle of our days, in the middle of our lives, well – that might be a little too much.

Several years ago I was up visiting my ailing father who had taken a turn for the worse over Thanksgiving. And my stepmother and I were trying to fix a little Thanksgiving dinner for the three of us in their kitchen. They had a floor plan like many Florida homes where the living room, dining room and kitchen are pretty much the same and so we were busy at the sink and stove when suddenly I looked over into the living room and there stood a being. A strange being. A man I had never seen before. I said hello. My stepmother looked and it was clear that this was a man she had never seen before. She said hello. The man said hello back. And for about five seconds the three of us stood staring at each other wondering what was going on. What to make of this visitation? Now at this point this story could go a couple of different ways. I could go on to tell you that this strange being was the angel Gabriel and he had a special message from heaven for us. And that might cause many of you to gather your things and make for the door. Or I could explain it another way – which is what really happened. That this strange man in our living room turned out to be the son-in-law of a neighbor and he had gotten the wrong number to the house he was visiting for Thanksgiving. And lo and behold he ended up in our living room. So you can stay for the rest of the sermon.

“**Sometimes the story of Jesus won’t get started in us until we’re quiet. And truth is it may be the hardest thing an advent angel can ask us to do.”**

“And there appeared to him an angel.”

Lily Tomlin once queried - Why is it that when we talk to God we are said to be praying...and when God talks to us - we are said to be psychotic.

It’s how the story of Jesus by both accounts of Matthew and Luke gets its start. An angle appears. And we who are of the Biblical sort know that when angels appear in the Bible they are a long ways away from what we see on the screen or in the pages of our stories. The angels of scripture are heavenly beings who upon their visit to mortals tend to terrify us, turn our worlds upside down, ask the impossible, bring bad news, surprise the dickens out of us, handicap us, and most of all, never leave us the same. In fact, if your life has not been inalterably changed then you probably have not been visited by an angel.

So Luke start his story about Jesus – that he is writing for a friend name Theophilus, and he starts the story by telling us about an old man named Zechariah was is married to an old woman named Elizabeth both of whom have lived very righteous lives and yet they have this empty spot in their lives ... righteousness does not guarantee your fulfillment. They have this empty spot in their lives. They have not been able to have children. The story starts with an empty spot. Most Bible stories begin with an empty spot. That’s why we find the Bible so true because we can relate to its characters. These people are real. They have empty spots just like you and I have empty spots. A lack of

something. Lack of money. Lack of health. Lack of spouse. Lack of children. Lack of success. Lack of family harmony. Lack of friends. Who doesn’t have some sort of empty spot? Zechariah and Elizabeth have an empty spot.

And what we learn is that Zechariah is a priest and the lot falls to him to perform the most sacred of all duties to enter into the holy of holies and offer prayers on behalf of all the people. And it is in the holy of holies where Zechariah receives his visit from an angel. And this very holy man, very much in tune religiously, it is this very sacred man ... who, when the angel appears, gets scared out of his mind. And it is the angel who tells him that the thing for which he has probably given up all hope, this empty spot that he imagines will never be filled, it is this very place that the angel has come to do something about. He and his wife are going to have a child. And not only are they going to have a child, but it is this child who will announce the coming of the Messiah. Now it is at this part of the encounter that Zechariah is wondering the same things we would be wondering – am I going dreaming, am I going crazy, am I in someone else’s story – so we can understand his wonderment when he asks the angel, this being he not really even sure exists, he asks, “How will I know?” How will I know that God is doing this amazing thing? And the angel says, “This is how you will know you will be quiet and out of your quiet and silence you will see and hear God doing his thing.”

Out of your quiet and your silence you will see and hear God doing his thing. In the story of Jesus the first message from heaven is, “Be quiet.” Now it is this point in the story where we know something maybe cosmic is happening. Because this angel is not Clarence the “feel-good” angel. This angel is bringing gravity to the story. This angel is one of those Bible angels that asks the impossible, turns worlds upside down and terrifies us. Luke says, when Zechariah saw him he was terrified. And he tells a terrifying thing to Zechariah – you will be quiet! Now if there is anything that you and I don’t like to be told it is to be quiet. When we were young and our parents told us to be quiet we didn’t like it. When we were older and our teachers told us to be quiet we didn’t like it. And as adults when someone tells us to be quiet we not only don’t like it but sometimes we are embarrassed by it and sometimes we are angered by it. “How dare anyone tell me to be quiet!”

So God says, “Be quiet.”

If the story of Jesus is going to get started you are going to have to be quiet. It’s like the movie theater when they come on and say, “Before this movie is going to start you need to be quiet. You need to silence your cell phones, unwrap your lozenge, conclude your conversation because the story is about to begin. And doesn’t the story of Jesus begin in you and me when we stop talking?

I suspect the holiest moments of our lives came when our mouths were shut. We weren’t speaking ... we were listening. And we heard God speak. Somehow, some way we heard God speak. Somehow, some way we saw God do his thing.

In John’s great “revelation” that we find at the end of the Bible in the book called Revelation there is that dramatic moment when the Lamb opens the seven seals of this word God has for the world and as the seven seals are opened great and dramatic things are revealed including the four horsemen of the Apocalypse and the saints of

heaven and the cosmos collapsing and then comes the seventh seal, the climatic seal, the final revelation and the Lamb opens the seventh seal and there is silence. Complete silence. And John says that out of the silence he saw.

When we are silent God has us to see and hear.

As I stood and witnessed the birth of my child twenty eight years ago what a shame if I had been on my cell phone, or talking about the football game or practicing my sermon. No, this demanded silence. Thank God I was silent. Because God spoke to me.

When I step into a hospice room and join the circle of family hovered about the one they love. This is not a time to talk about the weather or to debate who we are going to vote for. Blah, blah, blah. This is a time to be quiet.

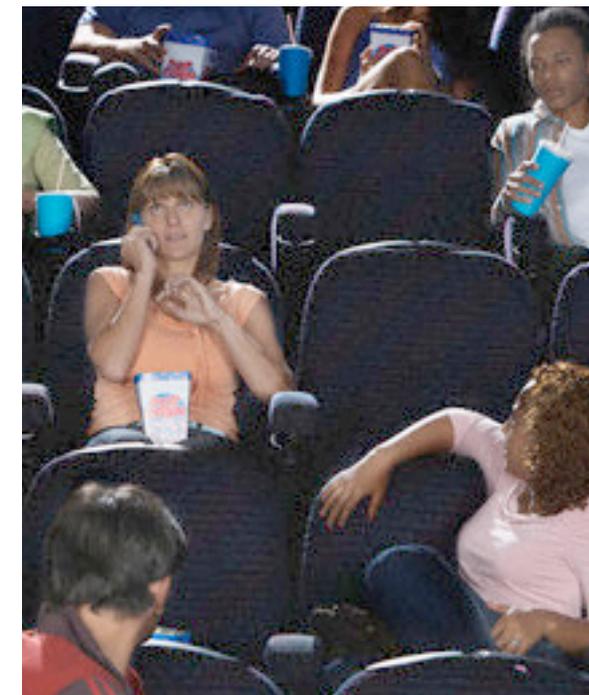
On Christmas Eve at 10AM I will find my way to a radio and to the live broadcast of the Service of Nine Lessons and Carols from the chapel at Kings College in Cambridge, England and I will wait with hushed expectation for that boy soprano to start the service with singing the first verse of *Once in Royal David’s City* and for that to mean anything at all there must be silence. Let all mortal flesh keep silence.

Sometimes the story of Jesus won’t get started in us until we’re quiet. And truth is it may be the hardest thing an advent angel can ask us to do. Be quiet. IT was one of the great risks that God took when he decided to create a part of creation that would be in his image – it was to mean that we would be a conversation partner with God. No other part of creation is a conversation partner with God. And the great risk that God took when he created us is that we might be tempted to hog the conversation. Have you ever talked with someone who hogged the conversation? Who wouldn’t let you get a word in edgewise? And hasn’t it been your temptation to say, “Sssshhhh. Be quiet.” And so it makes all the sense in the world for the story of our

redemption, our salvation, our reconciliation to begin with the angel of the Lord stepping into the room and saying, “Sssshhhh. Let all mortal flesh keep silence. Sssshh. Let’s let the Lord get a word in edgewise. Sssshhhh. I think God has some good news for us.”

There’s still time, right? There’s still four days to go. And that’s just until Christmas. There’s still years and decades left in the rest of each of our lives. There’s still time to be quiet. There’s still time to hit the off button on your remote. There’s still time to put down the newspaper. There’s still time to silence your cell phone. There’s still time to just plain hush.

And if the thought of that terrifies you? Be not afraid. It is the advent angel - and we may have found ourselves in the Zechariah story and the silence means that the Jesus story is about to begin.



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December 20, 2015

Church of the Palms

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