

I love angels, both the CONCEPT of angels as well as the actual existence of angels. You might guess this about me because during the Eucharistic prayer each week I emphasize the angels. Have you noticed? “Therefore,” I get to say on our behalf, “we praise you, joining our voices with ANGELS and ARCHANGELS and with all the company of heaven, who forever sing this hymn to proclaim the glory of your name.” Listen for the “angels and archangels” in the Eucharistic Prayer tonight; you may hear what I mean. I LOVE angels.



William Bouguereau. *Songs of the Angels*, 1881. public domain

Apparently I am not alone in loving angels. I’ve mentioned this before, but—strangely—77% of the adults in our country also believe in angels. I say “strangely” because MORE of us believe in angels than believe in heaven or in hell. I don’t know where we think the angels come from or go to between their appearances to us. But that’s not our concern tonight.

Neither are angels our concern tonight, exactly. I just felt compelled to BEGIN with angels because there are

so many of them hovering around our late Advent and Christmas gospel lessons:

- An angel visited Joe the Carpenter and told him to marry his fiancée, Mary, even though she was carrying someone else’s child. “Fear not,” the angel told Joe, “God will be with you. Keep your eyes on the baby.”
- An angel visited the shepherds, and told them the Good News that all of humanity has celebrated, then and to this day. The Good News is this: God is born into our world. The long-awaited Messiah has come! This child will change everything and reality will never be the same again. “Let us go to Bethlehem,” the shepherds said, and SEE this baby who is born.

I think that if a heavenly being appearing to us, right here, tonight, right here in this church, we too would be terrified. The angel famously told the shepherds, “Do not be afraid, it’s GOOD NEWS I’m bringing. The Holy One you’ve longed for, awaited, yearned to come and set things right, that Holy One of God is here, right now. And here’s how you will know this Holy One: He’s a newborn baby, in an improbable bed, a stranger in town, with no clothes of his own, hungry to be fed.”

Well, that’s the story—a true story, the truest story of all time—that I’ve just told. But “fear not” is not our concern tonight, either.

“So,” you may be wondering, “Why beat around the bush so long? Get to the point that you have to share.”

I have a sense tonight, a deep sense, that we Christians have lost our focus. Angels are great. And we love to hear “fear not: because this life and what’s beyond terrify us. But we need to keep our eyes on the baby, on Baby Jesus.

Maybe THAT’S what truly terrifies us, God come among us, because we have this life figured out, sort of, and we know that this baby will require major changes.

- Maybe what truly terrifies us is that we fear that the baby will grow up and want us to do his things, to live our lives his way, for his purposes.
- Maybe what truly terrifies us is that, unlike the angel, the baby wants a permanent relationship with us.
- Maybe what truly terrifies us is that this baby will be our ultimate judge. Christ Jesus will decide whether we live or die, and where we will spend eternity.

Chances are, though, you came tonight to sing with the angels—I did. I came tonight to sing for joy. And I do sing for joy. But there’s fear right around the edges of my perception, every time I take my eyes off the baby.

Maybe Mary and Joe had an inkling of their baby’s fate. They certainly had enough hints by angels. Know what I think? I think THEY were TERRIFIED. More than any parents of their first newborn. I think they were terrified because the first thing they did was to mummify their child—a foreboding that this child would die young. Did you notice that Mary and Joseph put Jesus in a feeding place? Maybe THEY didn’t know this baby would become food for the whole world, but Luke, the author of tonight’s gospel, surely news.

So yes, Mary and Joseph wrapped baby Jesus in strips of cloth. I wonder if they stopped at his neck. Maybe they kept going and wrapped his mouth with



the cloth to keep him silent or to keep him safe. Maybe they kept ON going and wrapped his eyes and ears with the cloth to keep him from observing them fall short, as they were bound to do.

No, that is US. WE are terrified at what a close encounter with this infant will mean. We know what's coming when the baby grows up, know what he wants us to do. "Feed my sheep," and "Clothe my beloved naked people," and "Don't forget to love them, ALL of them, because I love them." We're the ones who shush the baby and rock him to sleep.

Maybe you aren't terrified, but you should be. This child is going to change the very way we worship God. This child is going to send us out into the world, away from our home, to do what he would have us do. This child is going to change the way we conceive of time, much less what we DO with our time. This child is going to change what it means to be church. Forget changing the baby; this baby is changing US!

The truly Good News, though, is this: This baby born tonight has already conquered death itself, and now invites us to spend forever with him and with angels, where we and all the company of heaven will glorify God and the child and where we will be filled with pure joy, the very Spirit of God. Yes, keep your eyes on THIS BABY. We plan to spend forever with him in that place where the angels live.

As for tonight:

FEAR NOT, for behold I bring you Good News of great joy for all people:

Unto us a child is born,

O come, let us adore him.