

Hark the Herald Angels Sing (Advent Angels 4)

Luke 2:1-20

December 18, 2022

First Presbyterian, Luling

Up till now in this Angels of Christmas series, we've been considering individual people encountering individual angels. This is comparatively comfortable for us, because we as Americans tend to think individually, rather than collectively. We definitely understand why Zechariah and Mary and Joseph all had to be told "Don't be afraid," when the angel showed up to have a one-on-one conversation, or dream conversation, with each of them. But we naturally think of things in independent, individual terms.

I've been listening to a book called "How You Say It: Why You Talk the Way You Do and What it Says About You" (by Katherine Kinzler), and I'm only partway into it. But she references a study where they asked bilingual people about themselves and their memories. Specifically, people who were bilingual in American English and Chinese. The author says it's well established research that Americans think of themselves as individuals first, and Chinese people think of themselves first as part of a community or collection of people. They were doing this study to see how that was reflected in the language of fully bilingual, bicultural people. When asked in English to describe themselves, these bilingual people were more likely to share their careers, hobbies, or interests. When asked in Chinese to describe themselves, these very same people were more likely to describe themselves in terms of their families—as children or siblings, for instance. The same thing happened when they were asked about their memories. In English, they tended to remember individual activities and achievements, and in Chinese they tended to describe memories of things their whole family or school class did together.

Humans are humans, of course, and have memories and identities that are both individual and communal. We could all share something about ourselves as separate individuals and as part of our families or towns or clubs or organizations. This study was just looking at our tendencies and inclinations, and it confirmed that our language and culture are all tied up together, not surprisingly. Our culture, generally speaking, is more individual focused. And Chinese culture, generally speaking, is more communally focused.

Ancient cultures were more communally focused than our own. If we look at the Old Testament from this vantage point, we can see that God called an

individual—Abraham—but blessed him so that all the families of the earth could, in turn, be blessed. The stories we have often focus on individuals—Joseph, Moses, Isaiah—but most always include how that individual fits into the community, and how the interaction between God and the individual affects not just the one person but the whole group. Moses’s encounters with God changed not just him, but the Law that God gave him affected the whole community of the Israelites.

Our English translations obscure this focus, since for us you singular is the same as you plural. It would make things a lot clearer if the powers that be would accept “y’all” as formal English for you plural.

Take today’s appearance of angels, as an example. *“But the angel said to them, ‘Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing y’all good news of great joy for all the people: ¹¹to y’all is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, who is the Messiah, the Lord. ¹²This will be a sign for y’all: y’all will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.’”*

Unique among the passages we’ve looked at this Advent, this angelic encounter is initially a single angel appearing to a whole bunch of shepherds, and then it quickly escalates into a whole bunch of angels—the heavenly host—and a whole bunch of shepherds. It’s a communal encounter, not an individual one. It’s not that this encounter doesn’t mean anything at all to us, but it takes us a little more effort to take it in and understand how it’s different than the encounters that Zechariah and Mary and Joseph each had with their individual angels.

Every singular “you” that the angel speaks to the shepherds is a “y’all”—the angel is speaking to all of them, and beyond the shepherds themselves, the angel is addressing the whole world. It’s news of great joy for all people.

What the shepherds had that Mary and Joseph and Zechariah were missing, is that they shared this experience. “Did you see that?” “Did you hear that?” They could confirm among themselves, that this amazing thing had really happened. No signs necessary to verify that there really had been a heavenly host shining in the sky over their flocks that night.

The shepherds’ decision to go to Bethlehem and see the baby lying in a manger was a decision that they made together. And then they all went together. It was a group experience, a group decision, and a group pilgrimage.

Once they had seen the baby, they return, glorifying God for all they had heard and seen. They’d heard the angel’s words, and seen the glory of the heavenly host. They’d seen the baby wrapped in swaddling clothes lying in a manger, just as the angel had said. It had been an eventful night for the

shepherds.

We often hear Jesus's call to us as individuals. Go and make disciples of all nations. Feed the hungry, give water to the thirsty, clothe the naked, visit the imprisoned. Come and follow me. Go and tell. We do have individual callings and individual responsibilities to fulfill those commands and callings.

But we also have a communal calling and responsibility to fulfill those commands and answer those callings. We aren't in this discipleship thing as a bunch of individuals, each trying to take on the whole thing all by ourselves. We're in it together. And the shepherds show us what the very first seekers of Jesus and the very first to tell the story of Jesus's birth—they show us how to live faith as a community.

We light the candle of love this Sunday, and this baby wrapped in swaddling clothes lying in a manger is love, love for all a y'all.