

If I say the word angel, what comes to mind for you? Flowing hair, white robes, and fluffy wings? Or maybe fat little cherubs, like baby angels surrounding each other in the sky? A more difficult question might be, “have you ever seen an angel?” No matter what you answer I would ask, how would you know, and are you sure?

And now the tougher question, “why is the Bible so silent on what they looked like?” There are incredible descriptions in the visions of Ezekeil and John, but when angels appeared to Abraham, or Mary, or Zechariah, or at the Easter tomb, there are only statements about white robes or the appearance of a young man. Gabriel alone is named, but is not described,

The word angel means “messenger” and that give us the important clue that their message is more important than their appearance. Renaissance artists have colored our theology while the biblical witness gives a very different message.

We have just read about Gabriel coming to Mary to tell her ahead of time of her heavenly gift. Tonight, we will hear about angels singing over a manger in Bethlehem. I raise these issues so that we focus on the message and songs of the messengers rather than argue about their dress code or appearance.

Mary's encounter seems so difficult to grasp, but only because we are often tempted to force angels to have wings rather than listen to their story. As we hear the story of Mary's encounter with angel, and remember similar visits with Abraham and others, as well as prepare for the songs of angels in the sky over Bethlehem let's focus on what they said.

For the angel's message is more important than the angel's appearance. message of the messenger rather than the appearance. It is the words and not the wings that must be our focus. And what was the incredible message to Mary? It was very short and sweet. Great news! God is with us! And you get to help!

Most interesting in Luke was that Mary didn't shriek in terror or fear at some incredible alien creature, but simply asked “How can this be that a simple young girl like me would be blessed in such a way.” Did you catch that, rather than worrying about the appearance of the messenger she listened carefully to the message. In the end, her simple faith allowed her to act and live as a servant, and in every instance of her life it is the incredible gift of peace (no matter what) that we remember.

Newspaper reporters, television commentators, and internet chat rooms would love to focus on inane and unimportant details of such an encounter. But listen again to the words Gabriel shared: “Good News, blessed one, God is with you!” With such an assurance does anything else even matter? For that birth changed the world forever, and rather than wonder if God is real or cares or whatever, he has come, in the flesh, to show us the love of God and by his example reveal how that love might look in our

living. If God is with us, what else really matters? And that is the wonderful message the angel brought to Mary, which we will hear a cloud of angels celebrate in our readings tonight! Joy to the world, indeed. Could the message be any clearer?

Now, another question, which might seem irreverent, but hopefully not. “have you ever seen an angel?” No matter what you answer I would ask, how would you know, and are you sure? How would we know whether or an angel from God is in our midst?

When I was in college one of the biggest hits Paul McCartney wrote was titled “Let it be.” It was not a Christian song and yet its background dovetails well with this conversation. At the time the Beatles were in trouble, drugs, drinking, and many problems had them about to break apart. One night he had a dream with the soothing presence of his mother, Mary who had died when he was only 14. He said it was only a dream but it felt good to be reunited with her, even for only a few moments. When he woke up he just remembered her saying, “it will be all right.” That morning he wrote: *When I find myself in times of trouble, Mother Mary comes to me. Speaking words of wisdom: Let it be.* For years, everyone thought the song was about the virgin Mary, but it was his mother’s message, in a dream, that brought him peace.

The angel who brought God’s promise to young Mary of Nazareth was named Gabriel, which means God is my strength. He must have told her his name, for she shared that with Luke for his Gospel, and his name was the message he brought. God is my strength. Good news is here! And the angels haven’t stopped singing since!

We go out of our way to say such loving things as “you are such an angel” without even considering what that might mean. But think again. If angels are messengers from God, and the message and not their appearance is the issue, would that not change how we respond? Now I would not equate what I share next with Gabriel speaking to Mary, but bear with me for a moment.

Years ago, a psychiatric social worker who had spent her whole life working seven days a week, retired, wanted to return to the church, and offered to share her gifts in any way she could. Why she picked Zion, I’ll never know. Gloria definitely didn’t look like an angel, there was nothing beautiful or soft about her appearance, and in hindsight, the timing and offer were interesting in the least. My first wife was dying. Whether Gloria knew it or not she allowed God to use her in a special way here at Zion. She struggled with us and helped me keep the pieces together. She helped Suzie to die as she supported and listened to me. She gave me courage and strength and enabled me to minister to my wife as she died. She was an angel in disguise, of that I have no doubt.

Six months after my wife died, Gloria told me that she had an inoperable tumor that had been benign for twenty years but was growing again. Over the next months I had the privilege of ministering to her, as she had to me, before she finally joined God’s faithful heavenly flock. That angel was buried but her message to me will never be forgotten.

And here is the point; our Father does have many houses, and many rooms, even here

on this earth. Gloria allowed God to work through her life and her gifts, and at least in my experience, shared freely and willingly in the same servant mode that Jesus first shared his love with her at her baptism. What did the angels sing at Bethlehem ... wasn't it Glory to God? And that was the glory that brought peace to me and has enabled me to share such a painful moment with many of you as we walk through life together as faithful children of God who are open to his message and his messengers.

At the end, she put herself totally in her hands. Her faith carried her, and that would be the only message she would ever ask me to share with others. Gloria had an incredibly difficult life, but shared her life freely, because she knew whose she was.

As we prepare to finish our Advent journey with our celebration of the miracle at Bethlehem in our songs tonight and tomorrow, take time to remember the message of the angels. Good news! God favors you! And Mary's answer was simply "I am God's servant ...let it be as it will be!

No angels today? Maybe we are too busy looking rather than listening! The songs of Bethlehem will be heard again tonight, and as we faithfully allow God to use us, live in us, live through us, as he did with Mary, the world will continue to hear the message of eh angels. Joy to the world, the Lord has come. Joy! Peace! Glory to God!

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