

**FIRST PARISH CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH
UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST
East Derry, New Hampshire**

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Christmas Eve 2005

I'll admit it. I've never really caught the angel bug. Willow Tree angels are very cool, but otherwise, all those wings and harps and frills just never did much for me. Except, of course, on this night. And with this story. In this story, those fluttery little things up in the sky have got the most important lines. And carry the most important message. They don't get top billing – and they shouldn't. But they definitely deserve the award for best supporting actress. Or is it actor? Either way, the story wouldn't be the story without them. They are the ones who bring the word from God, who introduce the miracle, and who interrupt the dreams of bored shepherds with the unbelievable good news of an impossible birth.

The only one who has a name in this story is the one who's on first: Gabriel. He comes out of nowhere and appears to a nobody: an adolescent who is doing her chores and thinking about the guy she's going to spend the rest of her life with. He suddenly appears before her and starts talking about God's plans – for her life and the lives of her people Israel, for everyone she knows, for the strangers she might run into on the street and for all the future generations yet to come. The word he brings is a word of mystery and impossibility, and it reaches back generations to the lessons and promises and stories that she's overheard her father and brothers talking about when they come home from the temple. She's heard enough of their conversations to recognize some strands, a few promises, the kinds of hopes and dreams that her father has tried to keep alive in her brothers. A dream of peace. And not just a dream, but the promise of peace. And that David's family would finally reclaim their rightful place on the throne. As hard as it is to even imagine that their waiting might finally be over, it's even harder to wrap her head around the fact that she's going to play a major role. But that's the word the angel brings. That's part of the gift and the miracle that opens the story.

An angel came back 9 months later, and this one wasn't named other than as an angel of the Lord; maybe Gabriel, maybe another one. It really doesn't matter. What matters is what we hear from them: the declaration of the dawn of a grand and glorious new day, good news of a great joy – for the shepherds and for all people. Once again we're at best stunned, perhaps a bit offended by who the message is sung to, but here we are, out in the field with the dirty, tired, smelly, bottom of the barrel shepherds. The angel went to them while they were keeping watch over their flocks in the moonlight and sang the good news that for them in the city of David, a Savior has been born, the Messiah, the Lord. And then they were not only invited but instructed to go to Bethlehem to see this miracle for themselves. They didn't get invited into town everyday, and before they could rub the sleep from their eyes or begin to wonder if the message was real or they'd imagined it all, the heavens lit up with the most extravagant display of northern lights ever seen in the sky, and a symphony of angel song began pulsing around them,

bouncing off the hills and fields, as the voices declared together in unprecedented harmony: Glory to God in the highest and peace to God's people on earth.

Now, like I said, I've never been into angels. And I suspect that most of us would be hard pressed to tell of a visitation of the heavenly kind – at least probably not one from a creature with wings and halo, holding a harp, who can morph through walls and appear out of thin air. I don't know where we got the idea that that's what they looked like and how they traveled, and I also don't think that's the only way God speaks or visits or comes to bring us good news. And I do believe that God still sends messengers to bring us good news – unexpected words and the announcement of impossible happenings and the fulfillment of promises that have been on hold for so long we're absolutely convinced they were only a pie-in-the-sky sort of vision in the first place.

This night can be experienced as a fairy tale sort of fabrication, the kind that we read to our kids to put them to sleep or to keep them quiet in the midst of a manic afternoon. Or it can be remembered as a historical happening that took place over 2,000 years ago in a far away place and that doesn't have anything pertinent to say to a modern, sophisticated, complex, post 9-11 world. Or it can be embraced as the way God works and who God is and how God wants us to live. It's a story of wonder and mystery, of miracle and promise, of hope reborn and peace fulfilled. It's a story that tells us that all those lovely visions that tug at our heart strings, of a world that's safe for children to play in, where no one goes to bed hungry and everyone has a place to lay their head, where instruments of violence are transformed into the rototillers of battlefields, where new life springs up in the most frozen and barren piece of earth imaginable, where healing is known and welcome extended and forgiveness realized – all of those visions are real and true and near and dear to God's heart. God hasn't given up on them, and God hasn't given up on us. In fact, God still comes to us. And sends messengers to us. And urges us to believe and trust and assist and say yes.

The messengers who bring God's word may or may not be weird. The word and vision and task they announce may or may not defy logic. But it will be and it is a word of hope and of promise, of peace and possibility and new life and unprecedented reality. We will receive the messengers? Will we hear the announcement? Will we let God into our lives as Mary did? Or drop what we're doing in order to go to Bethlehem – or Concord or Ipswich or Oklahoma or the Sudan in order to see and celebrate and worship God? Our God still comes among us, still sends messengers, still sings peace and promise. Are we listening? Will we hear and believe and trust and respond?