

Sermon preached by The Rev. Charles Rowins at St. Christopher-by-the-Sea, Gibson Island, Maryland, 2nd Sunday of Advent, December 9, 2018.

During this Season of Advent, we are considering the five candles which our Advent Wreath supports. Last week we looked at the Prophecy Candle and the message of hope that the prophets proclaimed prior to the birth of Christ. But we also looked at the role of prophets following the resurrection. The work of prophets post-resurrection – including you and me - is to certify that the Messiah, the Savior, really did arrive, that this Jesus is indeed who he said he was. Not prediction, but confirmation. Not just a promise, but fulfillment of that promise.

Today we address our second candle, the Angels candle, and the Peace that this candle signifies.

What exactly was the role of the Angels in the Christmas drama? Well, their role was to announce the arrival of the Good News, and, in doing so, comfort those who had been waiting for the Good News. Announcer and Comforter.

We wouldn't honor the Angels if they didn't announce Comfort. Had the Angel said to the shepherds, "I bring you bad news of no joy at all," we wouldn't be here today. But that's not what the Angel said. The announcement rather was "I bring you good news of great joy."

It's one thing to hear an announcement. It's another to be comforted by that announcement." It's the latter that we celebrate today.

This sequence of good news and comfort isn't as simple as it sounds. Sometimes what appears good and an agent of comfort turns out to be really hard work and a source of great anxiety.

Remember that the promise of a Messiah had existed for many centuries, and many wannabe Messiahs had come and gone, without lasting comfort. "Fool me once, shame on you. Fool me twice, shame on me." That's how some felt after a series of failures or False Messiahs.

Would this new angelic announcement be any different? Would this infant be the One? Would hope for the True Messiah finally be realized? Do we dare put our

faith on the line again, or do we wait for another? Baruch (**Baruch 5:1-9**), a companion of the Prophet Jeremiah, frames the question differently: “Will God remember?”

Interestingly, this is the same question that you and I face more than twenty centuries later. We’re here because we have answered this question in the affirmative. We are hopeful. We have listened to the Angel, and concluded that the Angel’s message is indeed good news and is indeed comforting news.

This is not an easy conclusion to draw. There are all sorts of forces that suggest otherwise. But we are a stubborn people, with deep Faith. We buy the Christmas Story. This infant is the Savior of the World. This is Good News. And it is Comforting News. We own this Story. Our confidence is that of St. Paul (**Philippians 1:3-11**): “For God is my witness.”

In short, we are at Peace with our decision to greet the Christ Child and worship the Christ Child and share the Christ Child. This is the Peace of the Lord that we share with one another during the Communion Service. It is heartfelt when we receive that Peace and when we extend that Peace.

This extension, the phrase “And also with you,” is one of the most meaningful responses that we can offer we can offer one another. In part, because what we are extending is the capital Peace of the Lord, not the more modest peace of one another, though our peace is important and welcome. Yet, while we wish one another well, we don’t pretend that our good wishes are the best that we can offer. The very best that we can offer is the capital Peace of the Lord.

And what is comforting about this exchange is that the more we can share the Lord’s Peace, the stronger our peace becomes. “What’s gotten into him or her?” might be the reaction of some. But that’s okay. Maybe, just maybe, that which has transformed us in the view of others is our transformation after opening ourselves to the Peace of the Lord.

And part of opening ourselves to this Peace is faithful listening. The announcement of an Angel isn’t heard by everyone. We have to be open to the possibility that God communicates through all sorts of beings and that the reason for such communication is comfort.

Frankly, this openness is not one of our strengths. We accept words of comfort from all sorts of people, but from angels? Not so fast. We can't see angels. We can't vet angels. We're not sure if angels even exist. And, even if they did exist, would we trust them? Who are they anyway? What do we really mean when we say to someone, "Be an angel, won't you, and do this for me"?

Let's ask the question in a different way. If we believe in a God of promise and comfort, should we restrict this God in terms of communication? If God can create Existence from Nothing, is communicating through angels such a big deal? And if entering human existence as the son of Mary and Joseph is believable, why shouldn't announcing this event through an angel be believable? Such communication might be beyond our imagination, but is it beyond God's creative ability? I don't think so.

Maybe we need to worry less about the possibility of angels even sending a message of good news and comfort, and concern ourselves more with sharing such a message. We tend to tie ourselves in intellectual knots rather than freeing ourselves to share the Peace that we receive from the Christmas Story and which we gladly share with our children and grandchildren.

Certainly one of the reasons we might be reluctant to talk about angels is a fear that listeners will think we have lost it. Well, so be it. If we are observing Christmas and Easter and the other festivals, these folks already think we have lost it. So, what more can they say? Better to move ahead with our convictions than hide them or apologize for them. Who knows what our witness to Christ might mean for one who still has an open mind or even a closed mind. We learned Christ from others. Maybe others can learn Christ from us.

And the quality which will be most impressive, even to those most cynical, is the Peace of the Lord that our thoughts and actions reveal. If we take in the Good News and the Comforting News, people will notice. And just as we were curious, and still are, they will be curious, and might well ask, as a first step, if they can join us for church or Bible study or Christmas caroling. You and I had a start. So can others, and that start might involve us. And not just us, but the Spirit that dwells in us. In his letter to the Philippians, St. Paul describes our task as "the harvest of righteousness."

It's all exciting, this Christmas business. Good and comforting news. What's not to like? It's news that is not ours to hoard, however, but to share. "Prepare the way of the Lord" is the language of Isaiah that St. Luke cites (**Luke 3:1-6**). This preparation is challenging work, for which we will need nourishment. As we noted last week, we need a training table. Well, we have one. It's called the Season of Advent. Grab a tray. Amen.