

Family Gospel Box for the First Sunday After Christmas

The Gospel Box is for everyone this morning...while I really would love to have everyone come up and sit around the front steps...I think you would be much more comfortable sitting together in the pews...so let's begin...

I hope you are wearing comfortable walking shoes this morning because I want to take everyone on a long grueling uphill and downhill journey. While I was on the national staff of the Presbyterian Church I was fortunate to have had the opportunity to take a study leave in the Holy Land. One of the most eventful experiences I will always remember is making the journey from Nazareth to Bethlehem, following the route that Mary and Joseph would have taken over two thousand years ago.

My comfortable journey of 158 kilometers in a modern air-conditioned bus took less than two hours. Even from our comfortable seats on the bus with my fellow pilgrims we barely caught but a glimpse as to what it must have been like for Joseph and Mary to make that grueling trip. This morning I would like to take us back two thousand years and imagine we are journeying alongside Joseph and Mary. To get an appreciation of walking 158 kilometers...imagine walking from Midland, Ontario around Lake Simcoe and south to Ajax!

It is early morning in Nazareth, just after sunrise...the air is crisp and cool as we gather up our provisions and join our fellow travellers who will make up the caravan that will eventually end in the small town of Bethlehem. The world we find ourselves in is both difficult and dangerous so the safest way to travel is with a group headed by experienced guides. The journey will take us through areas that are inhabited by lions and bears and we will need to keep a watchful eye out for robbers. Everything we will need on the trip we must carry with us...food, fresh clean water, wine in wineskins, extra clothing and blankets for the cold nights...there will be no Tim Hortens or Holiday Inns along the way!

We are told the weather will, at times be extremely uncomfortable and unpredictable...some days will be sunny and hot ...but in the evening the bone-chilling winds will keep us all close to the fire pits...the worst experience is yet to come...the wind-borne dirt will get into our clothing, our food and our water...into our eyes, our ears, our hair and ever bit of exposed skin. And we might even experience a torrential rain which will soak through our layers of clothing and into everything we are carrying.

After leaving the northern town of Nazareth we cross over the small mountains and head to the southern shores of the Sea of Galilee. We next cross over the muddy Jordan River and begin our journey south towards Jerusalem and finally to Bethlehem. We notice that the Jordan River reminds us of Duffins Creek in Ajax, muddy and shallow in most places. The guides tell us that our journey will hopefully take approximately 8 days if we are able to travel 20 kilometers every day.

We look around at our fellow travellers, all bound for Jerusalem or Bethlehem to take part in the country-wide census...they are a mixed group...a real mix of ages...and we notice the young teenage couple: Joseph, the carpenter, and his wife Mary who is 9 months pregnant...walking along hand in hand. When Mary appears tired Joseph arranges for a ride on one of the caravan carts...but much of the time Mary walks along with the rest of us.

After we pass through the mountains and past the Sea of Galilee the road is much easier for a while as we are passing through a fertile valley lush with dates, figs and grapes. Here we find places where we can refill our wineskins with fresh clean water and take time to wash off some of the dust and grime of the journey.

As the sun begins to set each evening the caravan stops at places where the guides know we will be safe for the night. Fires are lit and we all prepare our evening meal...a choice from our provisions of goat cheese, olives, honey, figs, dates and lots of pita-type bread. Our breakfasts and noon meals will not differ much from our evening meal. Exhausted from walking 20 kilometers it doesn't take us long to snuggle into our blankets and fall into a deep welcome sleep. Because of the uncertainty of weather and temperature conditions we are all well prepared...over our inner clothing we wear long linen robes belted at the waist over which we can wrap ourselves in heavy woollen cloaks to protect us from inclement colder evening weather conditions.

Most of us are wearing long tube-like socks inside our sandals...some of us have been able to afford enclosed leather shoes...which are much better protection from the pebbles on the dusty roadways. We welcome our rest for our noon lunches and evening meals...a time when we can rub our sore and weary feet!

On the afternoon of the eighth day our guides tell us we are nearing the road to Jerusalem, where some of our group will be leaving us...the rest of us now have only but a few kilometers to go to reach the outskirts of the small town of Bethlehem. As dusk nears we reach Bethlehem and learn that Mary is about to give birth and Joseph is hurrying around trying to find a room for them....well we know the rest of the story...so we leave Joseph and Mary and their new-born son and leap ahead two thousand years back to our sanctuary this morning.

As we reflect upon this grueling journey we cannot but wonder how this young couple kept going...but then we remember God was with them every step of the way.

As we think about putting Christmas 2015 behind us, packing away our decorations from the tree for another year and looking towards the coming new year...let us not forget the one gift we received that "keeps on giving"...the gift to all of us of Jesus from God. In 2016 whatever we may face keeping God's gift with us ...we will always be surrounded by his endless love. Amen

Sermon: "Earth Angels"

(A special thanks to The Rev. Richard Niell Donovan...Sermon Writer for the inspiration and ideas for this sermon)

There were shepherds camping in the hills just beyond Bethlehem. Since dusk had come they set night watches over their sheep. Suddenly, God's angel stood among them and God's glory blazed around them. They were terrified! The angel said, "Don't be afraid. I'm here to announce a great and joyful event that is meant for everybody, worldwide. A Saviour has just been born in David's town, a Saviour who is Messiah and Master. This is what you're to look for: a baby wrapped in a blanket and lying in a manger."

At once the angel was joined by a huge angelic choir singing God's praises:

*ALL GLORY BE TO GOD ON HIGH AND TO THE EARTH BE PEACE
GOOD WILL HENCEFORTH FROM HEAVEN TO EARTH
BEGIN, AND NEVER CEASE.*

As the angel choir withdrew into heaven, the shepherds, recovering from their shock as to what they had just witnessed, responded..."Let's get down to Bethlehem as quickly as we can to see for ourselves what God has just revealed to us".

What is so amazing about this part of the Christmas story is the fact that these shepherds had just quieted down their flocks of sheep and were likely getting ready to prepare their evening meal...when out of nowhere God's angel suddenly appeared and began speaking to them. Now sheep are known to be nervous creatures and anything that might suddenly startle them...well you are likely to have sheep running everywhere. But that did not happen...the sheep remained calm...only the shepherds were startled.

God's angel was speaking only to the shepherds...so the sheep were completely unaware what was taking place between the angel and the shepherds. The word angel comes from the Latin word angelus which means messenger. So God's angel came with a message directly to the shepherds and no one else in and around Bethlehem. Throughout the Bible we can find 273 occasions when angels have brought messages to specific people.

Angels have fascinated we humans for centuries...we place an angel at the top of our Christmas trees, we collect miniature angel ornaments, we place angel statues over grave sites in cemeteries, we write songs and books about angels; produce movies and TV programs starring angels...still in reruns is the ever popular TV series "Touched by an Angel". We even bake angel food cakes!

Many people believe we each have a guardian angel who sits on our shoulder and watches over us. That would be great if we each had an angel sitting on our shoulder ready to raise an alarm when we are in danger or would speak up at critical moments in our life and say...

"Be sure to turn off the stove under the pot before you smoke up the whole house".

OR "The brakes on your car are about to fail...get to a mechanic now".

OR "Your blood pressure is over 200...get to see your doctor immediately and do exactly what the doctor tells you".

Wouldn't it be nice to have an angel at our disposal to tell us how to avoid trouble...how to handle problems before they get out of hand...how to minimize pain and disappointment and maximize enjoyment! Wouldn't that be wonderful!

Joseph had an angel like that. The angel appeared to Joseph three times, in each instance telling him what to do. In the first instance, Joseph was about to divorce Mary, who was pregnant...but not by Joseph. His angel told Joseph not to be afraid to marry her, and explained the importance of the baby. Then the Gospel of Matthew reports what Joseph did..."he acted as the angel of the Lord commanded and he took Mary as his wife..."

Then the angel appeared a second time, warning Joseph that he needed to flee to avoid Herod's murderous wrath...then Matthew reports what Joseph did...he again acted exactly as the angel instructed. Then sometime later, the angel appeared to Joseph telling him to take Mary and the child Jesus and return home to the land of Israel because those who were seeking to harm the child were all now dead. Once again, Joseph obeyed the angel, who was delivering a message from God...and as a result...the whole world has been a better place for his obedience.

Wouldn't it be nice if we really had an angel to tell us what to do! Wouldn't it be nice if we had someone to help us make the best of our lives. I believe that we do have an angels like that! Angels, after all, were only messengers of God, delivering God's messages to us...messages designed to keep us out of difficulties and to help us live happy, productive lives...and these angels I like to call our EARTH ANGELS.

Who are these earth angels?.....think about that for a moment....can you think of anyone or anything that God might be using to get a message to you...a message that you really need to hear...a message that will help you to avoid trouble and to live a happy, productive life?

For husbands here this morning...I think we can honestly say one of our angels would be our wives. While we don't always agree with what they have to say and we don't always want to hear it...we have finally learned how to listen carefully! We know that they are on our side, and we know that they won't try to mislead us. We also know that wives are wise in some ways that we are not. We might not always agree with them and we are likely not always do what they suggest, but we always (or almost always listen), because we know that God sometimes delivers his messages through them. They are truly one of our earth angels.

Sometimes children are earth angels...sometimes our children deliver a message from God that we really need to hear. I heard about a mother who overheard her children arguing loudly and throwing things around...she went to their room and asked why they were quarrelling. One of the children replied...."we're not quarrelling...we're just playing mommy and daddy". Could it be that there was a message from God in that child's words...a message that those parents needed to hear!

There are earth angels to help you right here at St. Timothy's...I think for the past 13 years we can say that Dennis Cook was one of these...as we so often heard a message from this pulpit that we all needed to hear. But Dennis was only but one of many earth angels here within our church family...the friends you share over coffee hour each month...they could easily have a word from God that you need to hear. Those who attend Bible study groups...you are sure to find a message from God that you need to hear. Those who serve on Session, boards and committees or sing in the choir...these people with whom you rub elbows with week in and week out might be earth angels who have a bit of wisdom from God to guide you...or a bit of support and comfort from God to console you...or a bit of encouragement or a time of laughter to keep you going.

Our church family here at St. Timothy's has always been full of earth angels...you just have to open your heart to receive the blessings that they have come to give you.

And then the Bible is an angel...it is just full of God's messages that you need to hear...full of wisdom that has the potential to change your life for the better. The Bible is just full of God's angels...God's messages to you and to me...God's messages to help us untangle the unruly knots of our lives...to help each of us to live the life that God created us to be.

Let me be your angel for a moment right now...I have a message from God to you...the message is simply this...God has surrounded each of us with angels...angels to bless our lives...to help us live full and rich lives. God's earth angels are all around us...just waiting to bless us. We simply need to just open our eyes...open our hearts...hear and obey...and receive the blessings that God wants to give each and every one of us.

Claus Westermann, in his book "God's Angels Need No Wings" reminds us that...

"Today angels cannot appear as they once appeared... they will come in other ways...in the Bible, angels are not at all religious...they almost never confront us in the specially religious contexts of worship or religious language...angels encounter people where, to our way of thinking, we would never expect to find messengers of God." AMEN

