

Sermon by John Timmer: "Flutter of Angels" from Luke 1 and 2

The Advent world is a world of angels. It's a world alive with the flutter of angels. Our world, in contrast, is inhospitable to angels. It seems totally void of angels. This discrepancy between the Advent world and our world is the thought behind H. G. Well's story, "*The Wonderful Visit*."

One day, so this story goes, the Rev. K. Hillyer is out on a moor with his gun. Suddenly a great light flashes across the sky. It's a bird of enormous proportions. The Rev. Hillyer takes aim, fires and shoots down this bird. But then, as he walks up to the wounded animal, he discovers that what he has shot down is no ordinary bird. In fact, it is no bird at all, but an angel. Deeply disturbed by this discovery, he binds up the angel's wound as best as he can, and then takes the heavenly visitor home, there to decide what to do about a situation absolutely unique in his ministerial experience.

One of the first things he does is summon a medical doctor: Dr. Crump. As Dr. Crump examines the creature, he is amazed at its anatomical structure. But he is too educated to consider the creature to be an angel. No sir! There is no fooling him. When the Rev. Hillyer tries to persuade him that the wounded creature IS an angel by asking, "But what about the wings, doctor? How do you explain the wings?", then Dr. Crump replies: "Oh, quite natural, if a little abnormal." "Are you sure they are natural?" the Rev. Hillyer asks. "My dear fellow," Dr. Crump says, "everything that is, is natural. There is nothing unnatural in the world." "And yet," the Rev. Hillyer says, "I can almost swear it's an angel, a messenger from the realm of glory." "Think it over," Dr. Crump replies, "it was a hot afternoon! And the brilliant sunshine was boiling down on your head. "No angel invades Dr. Crump's world. It's hermetically closed to angels.

And so, in many respects, is our world. It has no room for angels, not really. Modern theology doesn't either. Which is something you find out when you prepare to preach a sermon on angels. With an occasional exception, modern theologians preserve absolute silence on the subject. They have a lot to say about demons. But not about angels. In sharp contrast to the Bible. Here you break your neck over angels. They're all over the place.

But who of US has ever seen or met an angel? And if, perchance, we did meet one, chances are we explained it away. Like Ebenezer Scrooge did the ghost of Marley. He explained it away. Ebenezer Scrooge was very distrustful of his eyesight, very distrustful of the supernatural. He simply refused to believe in the ghost of Marley, even though it appeared before his very eyes. Marley's ghost asked why Scrooge doubted his senses. "Because," Scrooge answered, "because even a little thing affects my senses. A slight disorder of the stomach turns my eyes into cheats. You, ghost, may be an undigested bit of beef, a blot of mustard, a crumb of cheese, a fragment of an underdone potato."

The problem with angels is the discrepancy between what we see and what we believe. What we see does not confirm what we believe. We allow angels to function in one area of our life but not in another. We allow angels to function in the area of worship, and we sing of angels from the realms of glory as though they were our next-door neighbors. But these same angels do not function in the area of every day living. For if someone were to press us, "Really now, do you

honestly believe that angels exist out there?" We would probably shrug our shoulders and say, "It would be nice if they did, but I'm not sure they do."

When it comes to angels, many of us resemble the New Testament Sadducees. These Sadducees didn't believe in angels either. In Acts 23 we read that they denied the resurrection and the existence of angels and spirits. Were they living today we would call them secularists. They believed that this life is all there is and there ain't no more.

There's much of the Sadducee in us. We may sing of angels from the realm of glory on Sunday, but who of us thinks about angels on weekdays? The Sadducees did not believe in angels because they always sided with whoever was in power. When Greece was the world power, the Sadducees sided with the Greeks. When Rome was the world power, the Sadducees sided with the Romans. Always they made political compromises. Always they traded with people who were in power. "Beware," Jesus warned, "of the leaven of the Sadducees." Watch out for these people, for they are power hungry.

Which is the main reason they didn't believe in angels. For angels are creatures of behind-the-scene power. Angels maintain the balance of power. When armed soldiers came to arrest Jesus, when Judas kissed Jesus and said, "Hail, Master!", when Peter drew his sword and cut off Malchus' ear, Jesus said: "Put your sword back into its place; for all who take the sword will perish by the sword. Do you think that I cannot appeal to my Father, and he will at once send me more than twelve legions of angels?" When Jesus spoke about twelve legions of angels, Peter knew exactly what he meant, for Peter, like all Jewish people, knew the story of Elisha--the story to which Jesus was alluding.

Elisha, too, had been looked for once by armed soldiers, the way Jesus was in the Garden of Gethsemane. And Elisha's disciple too had been very upset, the way Jesus' disciples were in Gethsemane. "Oh, my lord! What shall we do?" Elisha's disciple had asked. And Elisha had answered: "Fear not, for those who are with us are more than those who are with them." And then Elisha had prayed, "O Lord, please open his eyes that he may see."

For to those who, like Ebenezer Scrooge, make their eyes the ultimate criterion whereby to judge whether something is true or not, angels do not exist. To them, what you don't see doesn't exist. "O Lord, please open his eyes that he may see." And the Lord HAD opened his eyes so that he saw that the hills round about the city were alive with the flutter of angels.

We've all watched movies of people exploring underground caves and tunnels by the light of their torches. The walls are dripping with moisture. An occasional bat flutters overhead. Then, as they turn the next bend of the tunnel they are following, they see a faint light. They move on, and suddenly the ceiling goes up and up, and in the top there is a crack. Through it, a long thin ray of light falls and dimly lights up the dripping walls. Up at the top there are even a few ferns growing. Daylight! The explorers are suddenly reminded of the open-air world above. They think: If a mere trickle of sunlight can make the underground cave visible, what must be the power of the sun up there where it has free scope and nothing stands in its way? That, you might say, is a parable. The cave is our world--the world of darkness. We are the explorers, trying to find our way through this life by the light of our own torches. But then, every once in a while, we

come upon a thin ray of light that is clearly from above, from the world above our cave world. The world we live in is a strange mixture of mostly darkness and a little bit of light, of darkness that does not tolerate the light, and of light that seeks to drive out the darkness.

As the evangelist John writes in the opening chapter of his gospel: "The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it," but WOULD have overcome it if it had had its way. Here, in our world, the light shines dimly into the darkness. But above our cave, all is light. Above our cave, the brightness of God overflows like water from a fountain, and meets no resistance anywhere. Above our cave God's light fills creatures in whom is no darkness at all--creatures whom the Bible calls angels.

As New Testament Christians, we believe that the rays of light shining into our cave world come from a world where all is light. We only see what's in the cave: drippings walls and bats. We don't see the world of light above the cave. We don't see the angels-creatures that already now are fully illumined by God's light. But we believe they exist.

We believe that there are whole legions of them. Elisha's disciple saw the legions of angels, standing by to rescue his master. And they did rescue him. Jesus' disciples did not see the legions of angels, for their master refused to summon them. Jesus chose not be rescued by angels. He chose to go to his death.

Yet by that very death Jesus opened the eyes of his disciples to see the angels for whom, in his greatest need, he had refused to pray. On Easter morning the women went to the tomb and there saw the angels, one at the head and one at the feet of the place where Jesus had lain. It was by dying that Jesus brought heaven down to earth. His tomb on Easter morning was a piece of heaven, a place of angels. Where Jesus lay dead for us, and where he rose for us, heaven was opened, a broad shaft of light shone into the darkness of our cave, and the angels of God were just as real as were the stone and the grave clothes. The act of love which made Jesus die for us brought down the angels, brought down these pure spirits of light who have been serving God ever since they were created.

The Bible shows no interest in angels as such. It offers no description of what angels look like. All it tells us is what angels do. Angels are like my words. The words I am now speaking are my messengers. They do not exist as such. They exist only in so far as they carry my thoughts to you. They are my messengers and exist only as such. I cannot grab my words out of the air and examine them under a microscope. Words are like messengers. They cannot be turned into microscope cultures. Angels are like words. Because they are, the Bible shows no interest in the anatomy of angels. It shows interest only in the messages angels carry, messages like: "Greetings, Mary, the Lord is with you. You will be with child and give birth to a son!" Messages like: "I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. Today a savior has been born to you!" The presence of angels tells us that God has a message for us. And whenever we gather to listen to that message, we can be sure that it is accompanied by the flutter of angels.