

WHEN AN ANGEL WON'T DO  
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First Presbyterian Church  
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Isaiah 63:6-8  
Matthew 2:13-25

When I traveled in Egypt a couple of years ago, one of the things that I discovered is that this passage from Matthew is one of the most treasured texts among Christians in Egypt. You can understand why. The little family—Mary, Joseph, and the baby—flee from the danger of King Herod, and go to Egypt. Imagine if the angel had come to Joseph in a dream and had said: “Take the baby and its mother and flee to the land of Tennessee.” We’d pay attention to them, too.

Just about anywhere I visited in Egypt claimed to have had Jesus stay there—this cathedral, that monastery. Places where the Holy Family passed through seem to be as numerous as Cracker Barrels. And it occurred to me: Of course this is a big deal. Jesus, the Lord of life, was here, literally in the flesh. Of course they would treasure the scriptures that speak of Jesus, for it affirms what the scripture says: “The Word became flesh and dwelt among us.” Or, as we read today in Isaiah: “It was no messenger or angel, but [God’s] own presence that saved [us.]” Sometimes an angel just won’t do. Sometimes, if salvation is going to happen, it requires the very presence of God.

We can tell it as a story, but a true story. And it starts, well, at the beginning. In the beginning God created a wonderful world, teeming with life—blue whales and great blue herons, eagles and egrets, sparrows and sharks; and plants: oak tree and gingerroot, stalks of corn growing as tall as an elephant’s eye, and flowers: rose and daffodil and pansy and violet, too many to name. And it was great, in fact, better than great. It was good.

The centerpiece of God’s creation was a garden, which came to be called Eden. A paradisiacal spot, with all the best of God’s creation there. Into the garden God placed a

man and a woman, to take care of the garden, to sunbathe in it, to eat its fruit, and to enjoy it.

There was just one rule which God gave the man and woman in the garden: You may not eat of that tree which is in the midst of the garden. For awhile the man and the woman followed that rule. But you know how it goes: That tree was always there, and the man would catch sight of it when he went fishing in the pond, and the woman would notice it when she came back from picking blueberries.

And so the day came when, at the suggestion of a sly snake, the man and the woman disobeyed God. They ate the fruit of the forbidden tree. It doesn't seem like such a big deal to eat a little fruit. But they disobeyed God; they thought they knew better than God. And that is a big deal. And finally, after God discovered what they had done, and after the blaming and the counter-blaming, the man and the woman were banished from the garden. All that has happened by the time we get through the third chapter of Genesis.

There is a sense in which the entire remainder of the Bible is the story of God's trying to reach out to the man and the woman and their descendents and bring them back, back to the garden, back to the full and perfect and paradisiacal life with God and with each other.

God sends representatives to earth to try to call the people back. At first, God sends angels. He sends an angel to Abraham, who is about to sacrifice his own son on top of the mountain. "Abraham, Abraham," calls the angel. And Abraham stops, and the son's life is spared. (Genesis 22:11)

God sends an angel to a burning bush where a man named Moses notices it. "Go tell pharaoh to let my people go." (Exodus 3:2)

God sends an angel to Gideon, who's not sure whether he should be the one to lead the army into battle. The angel comes to reassure him. (Judges 6:11f.)

God sends not only angels, but God sends messengers, human representatives, to call the people to repentance and to the full life of God.

God sends a messenger named Nathan to King David, after David has had his sordid affair with Bathsheba. Nathan delivers God's accusation: "You are the man!" And David sees his sin. (II Samuel 12:1f.)

God sends a messenger named Elijah to King Ahab to denounce his ways of ruling and grabbing, and Ahab trembles. (I Kings 18:1f.)

God sends prophets—Isaiah and Amos and Micah and others—to call, to plead, to judge, to invite the people back to the life that God wants with the people, back to Eden. Sometimes the words of a messenger or the presence of an angel will work, and things get better for awhile. But then the wheels come off again and it's back to the beginning.

So we can imagine God pondering what to do. Angels have not had the desired effect of calling the people back. Neither have messengers of one sort or another. God decides, finally, that nothing would do but for God to send the Son, to cause the word to become flesh. Make no mistake: This is not a casual decision. God would surely have rather done anything else than send the Son, if some other alternative were available. But the God who loved the Son also loved the world. And so, in the end, God decides that it must be the Son who must come to earth. No longer is it an angel or a messenger or some other representative. It is God, come to earth.

God knew that if the Son came to earth, he could not be a super human with super powers. God had tried that with Samson, and it hadn't worked. No, when the Son came to earth, he would have to come as one of us. He would have to be born as a baby. He would have to live a normal life in a normal family, no special treatment, no special favors.

God also knew that when the Son came to earth, there would be great opposition to him. Into this world of war, the Son would preach peace. Into this world of hate, the Son would proclaim life. Into this world of revenge, the Son would announce forgiveness. People wouldn't like that, God knew. Some would disagree with him. Some would shout at him, and curse him, and hit him. Why, they might even kill him. That was the sort of dangerous world into which the Son of God would come.

And so, in the fullness of time, God sent his Son into the world. Jesus was not an angel of God, or a messenger. Sometimes an angel or a messenger just won't do. Jesus was God's Son, come to earth as one of us.

In the darkest time of the year, in an out-of-the-way stable in an out-of-the-way town in the province of Judea, God's Son came to earth. The Word became flesh and dwelt

among us. He really was here, in the same world in which we live. Go to Egypt, and they'll show you some of the places where he was.

Once he was born there was no going back, no changing the divine mind. Jesus would see this thing through to completion, no matter how it turned out. Jesus would save the world, even if it cost him his life.

Sometimes an angel is just what we need. We speak of guardian angels that guide and protect us. But there are times when an angel just won't do. What we need, finally and utterly, is nothing less than the very presence of God. That is the one who comes among us in the baby who is born in the manger at Bethlehem.

We tell it as a story, but it is really true. Jesus lived on this earth, in our world, our lives, to save us, to redeem us, to call us back to the full life in God. That is what we celebrate in this Christmas season. He's among us now, and nothing can ever be the same again. It's not an angel, not a messenger, but God's very presence among us, now and for all time. Glory to God in the highest! Glory to God! ✠