

- Saint John's Pulpit (Nov. 28, First Sunday of Advent)

- "Advent Mission: Becoming an Angel" Luke 1:18-19, 26-33

¹⁸ Zechariah said to the angel, "How will I know that this is so? For I am an old man, and my wife is getting on in years." ¹⁹ The angel replied, "I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to bring you this good news. Luke 1:18-19 NRSV

²⁶ In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, ²⁷ to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. ²⁸ And he came to her and said, "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you." ²⁹ But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. ³⁰ The angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. ³¹ And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. ³² He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. ³³ He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end." Luke 1:26-33 NRSV

Would Santa be busy this Christmas?

Many things around the world and our country say that Santa Clause might not be too much busy this Christmas. Because of a supply chain issue, financial challenge, low stock for toys section, parents and grandparents are confused to choose Christmas gifts for (grand)children. Maybe Santa and his eco-friendly limousine Rudolph may not enjoy milk and cookies when they visit houses because of food price is so high at this time. Yes, we all do not want to be negative, but we know that this winter would be challenging for some of our neighbors.

In that sense, I would like to say thank you all for your very generous gifts for kids through the Salvation Army Stockings. This past Monday, Maryann Lacheman who coordinates the Salvation Army Stockings came to the church to pick them up. She told me that lots of people joined and helped this

mission project very generously! In the pandemic, you all become Santa Clause for kids! Again, thank you all for your support, and let's continue prayers for our neighbors.

Advent makes Gabriel so busy

As we are beginning this Advent season, I would like to speak about angels today. Do you know this? While Christmas makes Santa busy, Advent made the angel Gabriel so busy mostly with delivering the good news.

Gabriel is one of few angels known by his own name. Only two books in the Bible present his story- one is the book of Daniel from the Old Testament, and the other is the Gospel of Luke in the New Testament. In the book of Daniel, Gabriel helped Daniel understand some eschatological signs to come, which means Gabriel deals with secrets in God's kingdom (presumably he had to pass lots of screenings and personal background checks for this!). In Daniel 8 and 9 you can meet the angel, Gabriel.

15 When I, Daniel, had seen the vision, I tried to understand it. Then someone appeared standing before me, having the appearance of a man, 16 and I heard a human voice by the Ulai, calling, "Gabriel, help this man understand the vision." Daniel 8:15-16 NRSV

21 while I was speaking in prayer, the man Gabriel, whom I had seen before in a vision, came to me in swift flight at the time of the evening sacrifice. 22 He came and said to me, "Daniel, I have now come out to give you wisdom and understanding. Daniel 9:21-22 NRSV

In Luke, Gabriel's role seems to be more important in delivering messages of two consecutive births. One is telling Zachariah about the birth of John the Baptist and the other is telling Mary about the birth of Jesus Christ. As we noted before, Gabriel deals with special messages from God in terms of eschatology, so delivering messages of John the Baptist's birth and Jesus' birth can be regarded as a climax to complete a great promise of salvation from God.

Among Christians, angels have been one of the entities full of mystery and curiosity. Do they have a halo? Do they fly with wings? Do they have a mysterious power to defeat enemies? Do they wear always white robes?

Despite all these questions, there is no clear idea who they are. The only thing we know about angels is that they are messengers from God.

All evidence about Gabriel in both Daniel and Luke give us some good answers to our inquiries. One clear idea is that they do not look threatening! When Mary met Gabriel and heard that she will be a mother of Jesus Christ, what she was perplexed was not so much by Gabriel's appearance as by what she heard from Gabriel! When Mary saw Gabriel, she had no fear!

28 And he came to her and said, "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you." 29 But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. Luke 1:28-29 NRSV

In a similar vein, when Zachariah first met Gabriel, the Bible says he was terrified, but what caused him terrified actually was his expectation to see no one as he was serving the incense offering in the sanctuary authorized for priests only.

Overall, Gabriel had a good conversation with Zachariah and Mary. Rather Zachariah and Mary got good news from Gabriel here to fulfill the greatest promise from God to the world. However, to both Zachariah and Mary, Gabriel's message might discourage them seriously. To Zachariah, giving birth to John the Baptist did not make sense because Elizabeth, his wife was too old. Likewise, to Mary, giving birth to Jesus not only required 'science' to understand, but also her sacrifice to overcome prejudice, criticism, and threats putting her in death according to the Jewish tradition.

To those who were full of fear, worries, and skepticism, Gabriel gave them comfort and peace and encouraged them to do this great mission. To Zachariah,

19 The angel replied, "I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to bring you this good news. Luke 1:19 NRSV

To Mary,

30 The angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. Luke 1:30 NRSV

Could we be an angel to someone?

As we enter a season of Advent this year, how can we make this Advent more meaningful? What do you think is the best way to wait for the birth of Jesus Christ? If so, what about becoming an angel to someone? Yes, we all can be like Gabriel to our neighbors, friends, and family. I believe that this pandemic needs more angels, don't you? There are lots of people who are in fear, worry, and hopeless future. They are thirsty for God's grace and good news. They need someone who can tell them "Don't be afraid!"

Although we are not able to receive God's message directly, we can speak the language of hope, support, and encouragement to others. I believe this is the way of becoming an angel wonderfully. To become an angel, we don't have to have wings to fly, but we can give a call or text so fast to check in on people who need help and courage. Your white robe cannot make you an angel, but your pure spirit can do it! Don't be disappointed because you do not have a 'halo'! But you can say "hello" to all by smiling!

The point is this. We need someone who can say warm words, at the same time we need to become that person! John Wesley wrote this meaningful note in his journal on June 4(Thursday), 1747, which looks like he is teaching Methodists how to become an angel to neighbors:

"If you cannot relieve, do not grieve, the poor. Give them soft words, if nothing else; abstain from either sour looks or harsh words. Let them be glad to come, even though they should go empty away. Put yourself in the place of every poor man, and deal with him as you would God should deal with you." John Wesley, June 4, 1747

What about extending 'the poor' from this quotation to emotional, relational, physical, and spiritual areas? Not only financially, but also there are many people who are poor emotionally, physically, relationally, and spiritually. We cannot give them a perfect solution, but we give them soft words. When we try to become an angel, this Advent will be full of Hope, Peace, Love, and Joy!