



Christmas Eve
December 24, 2025 – 3:30 p.m.

“God With Us”

A Reflection by Christy Wetzig, Parish Associate

Luke 2:15-20

15 When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, “Let’s go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about.” 16 So they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby, who was lying in the manger. 17 When they had seen him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child, 18 and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them. 19 But Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart. 20 The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen, which were just as they had been told.

We just read the last in a veritable traffic jam of angel to human errands that cluster around the birth of Jesus. The first angel to come meets elderly Zechariah, to tell him that his wife would give birth to John the Baptist, Jesus’ cousin. The next goes to Mary to tell her that even though she is a virgin she would have a baby, named Jesus. One goes to Joseph to say the same thing. And the final angel, as we just read, goes to the shepherds to tell them of Jesus’ birth.

Each time, sort of as a matter of course, the angel has to begin by saying, “Don’t be afraid.” The Bible is a terse book, it’s not given to flowery descriptions, and I guess we should be thankful—I tremble to think how long the Bible would be if Charles Dickens had written it. But it does feel like a pretty big oversight, to not bother to describe what the angels looked like. I mean, they weren’t earthlings. Why did no Biblical writers think anybody would be curious about what they looked like?

So we’ve made these guesses—artists have drawn human shapes but with wings, bright white robes, mostly hunky specimens of blonde, Caucasian males. Gold tinsel, obviously, we know from Christmas pageants immemorial.

But all we really know is that they have to open with: “Do not be afraid.” So whatever they looked like, you can bet they were frightening. Maybe instead of white and gold wings we should imagine green men with eyes on stalks and giant snapping pincers for hands, or wispy, luminous giants with bulbous black compound eyes and a tentacled mouth. I think then we might begin to feel the need for “Do not be afraid.”

Whatever they looked like, these were messengers coming bright from the presence of God, trailing glory, translating into human tongues words fresh from the mouth of God. Maybe that alone testifies to the need to first peel their hearers off the floor by saying, "Don't be afraid."

When Zechariah receives the news that he and his old lady wife will finally produce a son, John the Baptist, Zechariah appears to doubt the likelihood of what the angel tells him. The angel responds, and you can almost hear the angel stomp its giant foot or flair its angelic tentacles in dignified rage, "I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God and I was sent to bring you this good news." And then he smites Zechariah with dumbness for the entirety of his son's gestation.

I can't help but wonder, why didn't God send as a savior somebody more like Gabriel? Wouldn't it have been smarter for God to send this kind of savior, who frightens everybody witless, who brooks no dissension, who smites their opposition? Wouldn't people have listened more attentively to a being straight from God, someone who holds a flaming sword or waves green pincers?

The people of Israel had long been looking for a savior like this to rescue them, most recently, from the oppressive, violent rule of the Romans, the ones who in a show of power forced Mary and Joseph to leave home while she was hugely pregnant to register for unjust taxation. So why did God not send one of these fearsome angelic messengers to whip the Romans out of the region with one swat and establish a just rule? Would that have been so hard?

Instead, we're gathered today to celebrate God's weird answer to the violent Roman oppression. A baby. A baby born to displaced, oppressed poor people, lying in a bed of hay.

As this baby from unpromising beginnings grew and the man began his ministry, even the few people who had dared to put their hope in this Jesus as God's long promised savior—even they began to doubt, to wonder if God should have maybe chosen a different plan. John the Baptist, his own cousin and predecessor, thought surely their hopes for Jesus had been mistaken. From prison he asked him, "Are you really the God we were looking for? Shouldn't we be looking for another?" His brothers doubted his sanity; his closest followers edged away.

From Isaiah 53: "For he grew up before us like a tender plant, like a root out of dry ground. He had no form or majesty that we should look at him, and no beauty that we should desire him. He was despised and rejected by humans, a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief, like someone from whom people look away, he was despised and we did not esteem him. Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows."

No flawless, bright visitor flitting in with a message, he never had to peel frightened people off the floor. He wasn't even one of the popular kids, but the kid who eats alone at the lunch table; not a successful man respected by his peers but a gritty wanderer you couldn't pick out in a crowd, who went out of his way to be with poor people and disgraced people and outcasts, who went hungry, who put his hands all over contagious people, who eventually was unjustly executed and came to an ignoble end. (I guess

you'll have to come back on Easter for the surprise ending to that story.)

But this dusty traveler was God's answer to our need. We thought we knew what we needed. We thought we needed security, for our oppressors to be whipped into shape; we thought we needed safety and the freedom to pursue happiness. All of which an angel would have been sufficient to provide. But angels have no inkling of what it is to be human, besides the trip of fear in the gut. They have never born our griefs.

What we got was a God who bore the indignity of the birth canal and babyhood, in order to dwell alongside us, a God in for the long haul, acquainted with all the things that bring us grief, a God who shares our sorrows.

One of the names Jesus was given before his birth was Emmanuel, which if you look it up in the baby name book means "God with us."

I'm sorry if you're sick of hearing of this, but I've been chewing on this phrase the whole of Advent, and I'll chew on it a little more today. "God with us" is a sort of metamorphosis in reverse, a butterfly furling its wings and spinning itself a chrysalis in which to rearrange its organs and emerge a homely caterpillar. God the Infinite Creator and Eternal Sustainer of the Universe, compressed, furled, crammed, into the fragile, soft skin of a baby. God with us.

God with us. "With" as in walking alongside, abiding with, living in the midst of us. But the word "with" has another meaning: with as in for. As in, "I'm with you." God for us. God with us. Not us as in "me but not you," or "God with the people I like but not with that sort of people over there." God with us the big us, all of us, humanity. And not "God with us then during Jesus' life but not with us now"—God continuing to be with us, every day, and tomorrow too. God with us means the creator of the universe is with and for every single one of this two legged species of trouble-makers in history.

What could have possessed the Creator of the Universe to muster their infinity into the cramped skin of a human body when sending an angel would do? One thing. Crazy, helpless love. The kind that can't stand to be away, the kind that would never settle for sending a messenger, the kind of love that is a compulsion to be with the beloved, to walk alongside them, and stay with them.

And I think if there had only been one of us—you, say, or you—Jesus would have still come, crazy with love, to be with you, to share your sorrows.

That's the kind of Savior we got when Jesus was born.

So how is it that we still live in fear, so easily ignoring the angels' instructions? Why do we continue to live in darkness when such a light has dawned on us. How do we dare to pursue trivialities as if God were not walking beside us? How dare we try to go alone, when God persists in wanting to bear our sorrows with us and for us. How dare you go about your business without realizing that you were not loved enough to compel God to come and be with you. And how dare we treat others, and you know that other, the one I'm talking about, that you look down on, as if that other were not also so possessing the love of God as to compel God, out of crazy love, to be born solely to be with them.

That Jesus, he was no angel. Thanks be to God