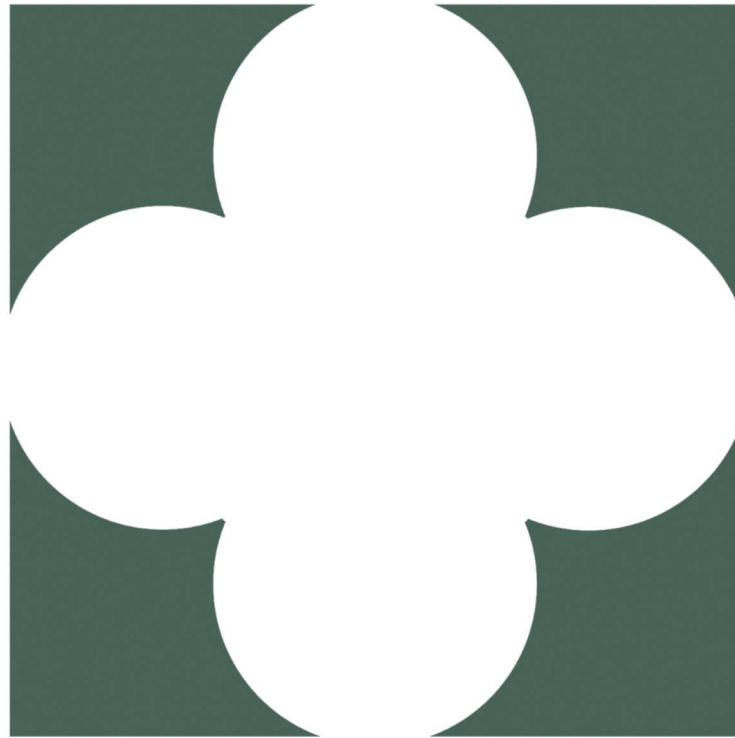


Angels in the Wilderness

Pastor Tim Phillips



seattle first baptist

November 28, 2021

Genesis 16.7-13 and Luke 1.26-38

Welcome to all of you here and at home on this First Sunday in Advent.

I especially want to welcome our friends Nick and Rex who are here with us from Michigan. They live in the next town over from where I grew up and where Nick and I went to high school. You should know, while they are here in person this morning, they are here with us most Sundays online. So, welcome to some of our online extended family!

One more thing. When Patrick and I went back to Michigan to bury my mom this summer, I was having a lot of anxiety about what kind of reception we would get from my old church members – the place where I grew up and my dad served as pastor for 40 years. But Nick and Rex welcomed us. They fed us. They centered us. They gave us a home. So, I want to say publicly, thank you.

Perhaps the Gathering this morning should be called a “Greeting” because that’s what angels do. “Greetings, favored ones,” they say.

Or maybe I should say “Happy New Year” because Advent is the beginning of a new church year. The Lectionary’s 3-year cycle of assigned readings – years A, B, and C - turns over every year in Advent.

But this year, we will be using a new Lectionary created by Hebrew Bible Scholar, Dr. Wilda C. Gafney. It’s *Year W: A Woman’s Lectionary for the Whole Church*. And I am so excited. I have preached from the same set of Advents texts every year for 25 years. Time for a change. Dr. Gafney

says: "I was (and remain) convinced it ought to be possible to tell the story of God and God's people through the most marginalized characters" of the Bible.

So, this Advent we will hear again the story of Mary but in a duet with her ancestors, Hagar and Sarah and Samson's mother and Hannah. They all have a lot in common. But each one has her own story. Just like you!

So, welcome to Year W! And this is Dr. Gafney's translation of Luke 1.26-38:

In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town of Galilee, Nazareth, to a virgin betrothed to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. And the name of the virgin was Mary. And the angel came to Mary and said, "Rejoice, favored one! The Most High God is with you." Now, she was troubled by the angel's words and pondered what sort of greeting this was. Then the angel said to her, "Fear not Mary, for you have found favor with God. And now, you will conceive in your womb and give birth to a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Sovereign God will give him the throne of his ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his sovereignty there will be no end." Then Mary said to the angel, "How can this be, since I have not known a man intimately?" The angel said to her, "The Holy Spirit, She will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the one born will be holy. He will be called the Son of God. And now, Elizabeth your kinswoman has even conceived a son in her old age, and this is the sixth month for she was called barren. For nothing is impossible with God." Then Mary said, "Here I am, the woman-slave of God; let it be with me according to your word." Then the angel left her.

If Mary was having any trouble staying awake, this news would certainly wake her up. And that's what the angels of Advent are supposed to do. Wake us up to a different kind of waiting. And that's our Advent Canticle for this year: Awake, Awake! And greet this new morn. It is inserted in your bulletin and, at home, you can follow the link to the online Order of Worship and see the words and music there.

LESSON

When an exhausted and despairing Hagar wakes up at the well, her story continues. Genesis 16.7-13:

Now the messenger [angel] of the ALL-SEEING God found Hagar by a spring of water in the wilderness, the spring on the way to Shur. And the messenger said, "Hagar, slave-girl of Sarai, from where have you come and where are you going?" And she said, "From my mistress Sarai am I fleeing." The messenger of the INSCRUTABLE God said to her, "Return to your mistress, and subject yourself to her." The messenger said to Hagar, "Greatly will I multiply your seed, so they cannot be counted for multitude ... Look! You are pregnant and shall give birth to a son, and you shall call him Ishmael (meaning God hears), for the FAITHFUL ONE has heard of your abuse ... So Hagar named the LIVING GOD who spoke to her: "You are El-ro'i" for she said, "Have I really seen God and remained alive after seeing God?"

The word of God for the people of God.
Thanks be to God.

This is the season for angels. And not just the ones that meet Hagar and Mary. Angels are part of our cultural imagination this time of year.

I grew up with a 45 recording of Ethel Barratt reading “The Littlest Angel.” I loved that story about a young awkward most un-angelic member of the heavenly host who was always getting into trouble and getting things wrong. And yet, he gave the perfect gift that became the Star of Bethlehem. Perhaps I identified with him.

Some of you will watch the classic *It’s A Wonderful Life* ... again. And you will meet the angel Clarence who saves the day by showing George Bailey the meaning of his life and the power of community. I cry at the end every time.

Or one of my favorites, *The Preacher’s Wife*, the updated remake of *The Bishop’s Wife*, where we meet Denzell Washington as the angel Dudley and we get to hear Whitney Houston sing: “I Love the Lord.” Dudley brings a stressed preacher’s family a message of love and economic justice in an urban wilderness. I think I have met Dudley along the way.

And this isn’t just about the angels of the Christmas season. Wednesday is World AIDS Day. It is *still* World AIDS Day. And even though there have been amazing advances in treatment, more than half a million people around the world died of complications related to AIDS in 2020.

At the beginning of the crisis, when Tony Kushner wanted to give us a window into the suffering and loss of people living and dying with AIDS, he brought us *Angels in America*.

I'm reading a book I just discovered in my "read-when-you-get-a-chance" pile by Father Jerry Anderson, an Episcopal priest who created an AIDS care program and was on the forefront of openly gay clergy in the Episcopal Church. Guess what he calls his memoir? *Ordained by Angels* because, he says:

They were angels who helped me discern the next phase of my work in the church and made it possible for me to offer pastoral care and healing to people with AIDS. These angels in human form served as earthly heralds of God's mercy and love. Many of those who suffered and died from AIDS also bore me on angels' wings as they shared their sense of God's presence and made me a better priest.

So, this *is* a season for angels.

They show up in the wilderness of our doubts about our own value and the sense of inadequacy about our own gifts; in the questions we have about the meaning of our lives and the messiness of community; in the hardness and stress in working for love and justice in an urban wilderness; in the wilderness of a pandemic's suffering and pain and death.

The thing about angels is that they tend to show up in the wilderness.

So, no surprise that a young woman – in a cultural wilderness where she already had little control over her own life - is told by an angelic messenger that she is going to be pregnant through the Holy Spirit.

And no surprise that the first to get this kind of visitation was a “slave-girl” named, Hagar who finds herself in a wilderness of rejection and despair. In fact, the message to Hagar is almost exactly the same as the one to Mary: “Look! You are pregnant and shall give birth to a son, and you call him Ishmael (meaning God hears).” That message echoes through history all the way to Mary: “You will conceive in your womb and give birth to a son, and you will name him Jesus.”

So, the first thing to say about what happens when angels show up in the wilderness, is that they have a *message*. And that message comes to people who have very little control over their lives.

Dr. Gafney has translated the message of the angel to Hagar as addressed to a “slave-girl.” And Mary responds to the angel’s message describing herself as the “woman-slave” of God.

Does that make you uncomfortable? Couldn’t Dr. Gafney have cleaned up her translation a little bit?

What she says is that by using “slave” we are brought face to face with the whole history of slavery. She doesn’t want us to whitewash the fact that both of these woman were living in a situation where they were not in control of their own identities or their own destinies. In Hagar’s case, she did what her mistress, Sarai, asked and slept with Sarai’s husband, Abram – who by the way, seems to be uncharacteristically absent from most of the story even though Hagar is pregnant with his own son and Sarai is

abusing her, taking out her own frustration and resentment on Hagar. Sarai, wasn't this *your* idea?

We will hear more about Sarai – by then her name is Sarah – next week. But for now, let's just say that the Bible's way of talking about our Matriarchs and Patriarchs is not that they are heroes. What they are is deeply *human*. And Hagar's suffering at the hand of Sarai and dismissal by Abram is very similar to the way my privilege as a white guy works in the world for those who are at the mercy of my own way of life.

Dr. Renita Weems says that this story is “hauntingly reminiscent” of the stories of black slave women raped by their masters and then punished by their white mistresses out of resentment and the threat those children posed to their own privilege. That history stalks us today. And:

Quite frankly, she says, the kinds of atrocities some mothers have committed against other mothers and their children continue to stun me. I am often amazed at the extent to which otherwise intelligent, otherwise moral women (and men) will renounce intelligence and morality to protect some perceived rights they feel their children have in relation to other mothers' children.

Dr. Weems reminds us of those images of mothers yelling insults at children infected with AIDS who just wanted to go to school. And “white mothers from Little Rock, Chicago, and Boston snarling and hurling obscenities at innocent black children” on their way to schools ordered by the courts to be desegregated. Have you seen those images of school board meetings with

red-faced belligerent parents yelling profanities at children and their parents for wearing a mask?

We are not all that far from Hagar's story. And Dr. Gafney doesn't want us to forget it. In all the nonsense about "critical race theory" let us not forget that slavery is real and it was never pretty and it cannot be whitewashed – literally *whitewashed* – because it makes white folks feel uncomfortable.

Hagar was a "slave-girl" who ran away to the wilderness to escape the masters that controlled her life and could jeopardize her son.

And that's when the angel shows up with a message.

The message is, first, God hears. God has been touched by the sound of your oppression. That's what you are to name your son, "Ishmael," God hears. And it is the same message at the beginning of Exodus: "The Israelites groaned under their slavery, and cried out. Out of that slavery their cry for help rose up to God and God heard their groaning." [Exodus 2.23-24]

God hears the cries of those who are in chains, those who are exploited and have lost control of their own identity and destiny. "God hears," the angel says, and that's great news for Hagar and for all those who come after her. But is that good news for us? What is God hearing about us in the prayers of those who are stuck in poverty and feel helpless in the economic system we helped to create and maintain?

And don't think God doesn't see. Hagar names God in her encounter with the angel: "El-ro'i" which means the God who sees me. This is incredible. People don't get to name God. God names people and Hagar is told what to name her son. But Rachel Held Evans says: "... just one person in all your sacred Scripture dared to name God, and it wasn't a priest, prophet, warrior, or king. It was I, Hagar – foreigner, woman, slave. [And] don't you dare forget it."

For someone whose cries have gone unnoticed or whose suffering has been dismissed as petty or self-inflicted, imagine what it means to say: God hears.

For someone who has spent her life being invisible – or trying to be – imagine what it means to say: God sees me.

And there is more to this message. The angel on behalf of God says, "I will multiply your seed, so they cannot be counted for multitude." If that sounds familiar it's probably because it's the same promise Abram receives just three chapters earlier in Genesis. She too will be the mother of nations! She too will have ancestors like the stars in the sky.

So, when the angel tells Hagar to return to Sarai, she cannot go the same way she came because she is carrying Ishmael, "God hears." And she has her own name for God, "God sees me." And she holds in her heart the promise that she, too, will be the mother of nations.

Yes. She returns to the household of slavery – and we should know enough *never* to recommend or even

suggest this to anyone. It's on us to never let a return to slavery of any kind be the better option. But, in that time, what else could Hagar do? *Not* to return would mean death in this wilderness for herself and her baby. There were no shelters for abused women. There were no programs for unwed mothers. There were no support systems for women in Hagar's position.

But don't think Hagar went meekly. She might be returning to the house of Sarai but don't think she went back to being intimidated again. Don't think she snuck back into the tent hoping no one would notice. She had spent time in the wilderness where angels show up. And she is returning with the voice of heaven ringing in her ears: God hears; God sees me; God promises *me* the same honor you folks with all that privilege want to claim for yourself.

And I hope, somewhere along the way, Hagar and Sarai found a way to share their stories and to hope together in the possibilities for each of them. I hope they found a way toward some kind of reconciliation, because, as Dr. Weems says:

At some time in all our lives, whether we are black or white, we are all Hagar's daughters [and I'll add sons]. When our backs are against the wall; when we feel abandoned, abused, betrayed, and banished; when we find ourselves in need of another woman's help (a friend, neighbor, colleague, relative, stranger, another man's wife); we, like Hagar, are in need of a woman who will "sister" us, not exploit us ... We need a sister whose genuine mercy – not pity which is episodic, random, and moody – is steadfast, consistent, and free.

I hope Hagar and Sarai found that sisterhood in each other. I hope we find that kinship in each other because this is a wilderness. It is, as I said a couple weeks ago with R.E.M., “the end of the world as we know it.” Things are changing. The world is confusing. And our own lives feel like they are out of control.

But as any good angel will tell you, Fear not! God hears. God sees. And God has a promise for you that can set you free.

And that brings me, finally, to the second thing angels do. They show up in the wilderness with a message. But you might also remember from Mark 1, that when Jesus was in his own wilderness, the angels showed up and “*ministered* to him” [Mark 1.13]

Angels show up in the wilderness with a message *and* a ministry.

When I was heading into my own wilderness of loss and anxiety, there were angels waiting for me. It wasn’t Clarence or Dudley or Gabriel. It was Nick and Rex. And they ministered to me.

And I think Father Anderson is right about being “ordained by angels.” Angels not only minister to us, they ordain ministry through us.

In her wilderness of confusion and wonder, when Mary said yes to the Holy Spirit, she was ordained by the angel to be a minister of new life and renewed hope in the world.

In her wilderness, Hagar was ordained by the angel to be a minister of the God who hears and sees and makes a promise that could set your heart free.

In the wilderness of AIDS, Father Anderson says: “These angels in human form served as earthly *heralds* of God’s mercy and love.”

And do you hear that? Hark! Those herald angels sing! And, today, if you hear their voice, do not harden your hearts.

NOTES

The translation for the texts used this morning are from Wilda C. Gafney’s *Year W: A Women’s Lectionary for the Whole Church* (Church Publishing Incorporated, 2021), see pp.1-3 and her note about the use of “slave” on xxii. Father Jerry Anderson, *Ordained By Angels: A Memoir of an AIDS Chaplain* (Jerry Anderson, 2018), p.96. Renita Weems, *Just a Sister Away*, as excerpted by Jan L. Richardson in *Sacred Journeys: A Woman’s Book of Daily Prayer* (Upper Room Books, 1995), pp.337-341. Rachel Held Evans in *Inspired: Slaying Giants, Walking on Water, and Loving the Bible Again* (Nelson Books, 2018), see her telling of the Hagar story, pp. 29-33.