

Fourth Sunday of Advent  
December 18, 2005

*The Most Convincing Angel*

**Narrator:** The readings on this Fourth Sunday of Advent are an interesting compliment to each other. The Hebrew text is from 2 Samuel 7 where we find the prophet Nathan acting as an angelic messenger to King David. In the Gospel lesson from Luke 1: 26 – 38, we find Mary's elderly relative and kinswoman, Elizabeth, providing wisdom and support that is angel-like to the young, unmarried Mary who has been told astonishing news by the angel Gabriel. In both lessons, it seems as if God uses humans to be God's messengers, God's angels when there is astonishing, life-changing news to be heard and accepted.

In the lesson from 2 Samuel, we find King David eager to build a temple for the God of Israel. He confides his intentions to Nathan, an influential member of David's court in Jerusalem who has access to the king. It is this same Nathan who later confronts David over his sin with Bathsheba and plays a role in the accession of Solomon. But in this morning's reading, he is simply David's confidant. His first response to David's desire to build a temple for God is one of approval. But Nathan spoke too quickly. God speaks to Nathan in the night and Nathan relays the message to David. God does not desire nor need a house, a permanent, fixed dwelling. God does not want to be confined but wants to continue to move about among all the people of Israel. Listen to this story as recorded in 2 Samuel 7: 1 – 11, 16.

Now when the King David was settled in his house, and God had given him rest from all his enemies around him, King David said to the prophet Nathan, "See now, I am living in a house of cedar, but the ark of God stays in a tent."<sup>3</sup>Nathan said to the king, "Go, do all that you have in mind; for the LORD is with you."

<sup>4</sup> But that same night the word of God came to Nathan: <sup>5</sup>Go and tell my servant David: Thus says your God: Are you the one to build me a house to live in? <sup>6</sup>I have not lived in a house since the day I brought up the people of Israel from Egypt to this day, but I have been moving about in a tent and a tabernacle. <sup>7</sup>Wherever I have moved about among all the people of Israel, did I ever speak a word with any of the tribal leaders of Israel, whom I commanded to shepherd my people Israel, saying, "Why have you not built me a house of cedar?" <sup>8</sup>Now therefore thus you shall say to my servant David: Thus says your God: I took you from the pasture, from following the sheep to be prince over my people Israel; <sup>9</sup>and I have been with you wherever you went, and have cut off all your enemies from before you; and I will make for you a great name, like the name of the great ones of the earth. <sup>10</sup>And I will appoint a place for my people Israel and will plant them, so that they may live in their own place, and be disturbed no more; and evildoers shall afflict them no more, as formerly, <sup>11</sup>from the time that I appointed judges over my people Israel; and I will give you rest from all your enemies. Moreover God declares to you that God will make you a house.

Your house and your kingdom shall be made sure forever before me; your throne shall be established forever.

Could it be that God had other plans for future days? While God refuses the plush temple that David plans to build, years later, God chooses another place to dwell. That place is within the womb of the lowly peasant girl, Mary.

It is the angel Gabriel that brings the news of God's plan to young Mary. Listen to the annunciation story and notice how the angel relays the message that Mary's relative Elizabeth is also with child, even in her old age. This is recorded in Luke 1: 26 – 38.

<sup>26</sup> In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, <sup>27</sup>to a young woman named Mary who was engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. <sup>28</sup>Upon arriving the angel said to her and said, 'Greetings, favored one! God is with you. Blessed are you among women' <sup>29</sup>Mary was deeply troubled by these words and wondered what the angel's greeting meant. <sup>30</sup>The angel said to her, 'Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. <sup>31</sup>And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will

name him Jesus. <sup>32</sup>His dignity will be great, and he will be called the Only Begotten of God. God will give Jesus the throne of his ancestor David. <sup>33</sup>He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his reign will never end.'

<sup>34</sup>Mary said to the angel, 'How can this be, since I have never been with a man?' <sup>35</sup>The angel said to her, 'The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be called the Holy One of God. <sup>36</sup>And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a child; and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren. <sup>37</sup>For nothing will be impossible with God.' <sup>38</sup>Then Mary said, 'Here am I, the servant of the God; let it be done to me as you say.' Then the angel departed from her.

One would think that it would be enough for the angel Gabriel to announce God's plan for Mary, but instead, the angel tells Mary about the pregnancy of her elderly relative, Elizabeth. We know that Mary went to visit her kinswoman, and from that we can deduce that they had a trusting, affectionate relationship. Perhaps Mary's willingness to bear the Christ Child proceeds in part from the courage and hope that this wise, older woman offered to her during her pregnancy. Think about what Gabriel added to the announcement of the work of the Holy Spirit: the example of a wise older woman whom Mary trust.

Do you begin to see how Nathan's relationship with David and Elizabeth's relationship with Mary have marvelous parallels? They are the angels who help interpret and commend God's news to others. What would it be like to eavesdrop on a conversation between Nathan and Elizabeth?

**Nathan:** Elizabeth, I finally get to meet you. I have wanted to talk to you for centuries.

**Elizabeth:** Nathan, I can't believe that I am finally meeting you. You were quite famous when I was alive. We always thought of you as a great and courageous man.

**Nathan:** Well, you know what they say, don't believe everything that you hear. I have admired you for some time. The way that you cared for Mary as she was about to give birth and your encouragement of her was remarkable.

**Elizabeth:** What was remarkable was the way that you stood up to King David and showed him when he was wrong. Where did you get that courage?

**Nathan:** It wasn't me, Elizabeth. It was the spirit of God acting within me. I was just a poor shepherd, like David, when God came to me in that dream.

**Elizabeth:** I understand completely. Zechariah and I had lived a quiet life for so many years. We never expected anything out of the ordinary would happen to us, but there it was. I got pregnant in my old age and gave birth to John, who became John the Baptist. And at the same time my cousin Mary was pregnant with Jesus. Nathan, tell me more about your encounter with God and your challenge to David.

**Nathan:** God chose David from among the family of Jesse. David was just a boy and a shepherd at that, but God had wonderful plans for him. Through David, God delivered our people from the hands of the Philistines. Through David our kingdom grew in size and power. Through David, we had become a great people. It was then that David reached too far.

**Elizabeth:** What do you mean, "Reached too far"?

**Nathan:** It sounded innocent enough. David said that he wanted to build a temple for God's Word, the Ark of the Covenant. In fact, I thought that it was an appropriate way to honor God too. That night, however, when I was sleeping God came to me.

**Elizabeth:** What was that like?

**Nathan:** This may sound strange, but it was wonderful. At first, I was frightened, but then a calm came over me as I listened to what God was saying to me.

**Elizabeth:** I know exactly what you mean. You may remember, Zechariah had encountered God in the temple and God told him that we would have a son. Zechariah didn't know what to make of it and indeed he even lost his voice. When he came home, I could see that something marvelous was about to occur and when I got pregnant with John, I was never so sure of anything in my life as I was that this was the hand of God at work.

**Nathan:** Yes! Yes! You understand. Well, God revealed to me the true heart of David. David's desire to build the new temple was less about honoring God than it was about honoring himself. What God could see, was that David wanted to build a magnificent temple to show everyone David's wealth and power. David had lost sight of who he was. He had forgotten that God was the source of all of his blessings. He had begun to believe that he had done all of these wonderful things by his own hand. God saw David's pride and arrogance. And besides, God did not want to be contained nor confined by a temple. God wanted to continue to move among the peoples of Israel. There would be a right time and a right place for God to make a house for God's self. When I was visited that night by the angel of God all of this became clear to me.

**Elizabeth:** What did you do then?

**Nathan:** Of course I wondered why that angel came to me and not directly to David, but I had no choice but to speak the words that I had been given. I had to confront David with the truth about what he was trying to do.

**Elizabeth:** You had to bring him down a peg or two.

**Nathan:** Exactly, because if the King had gone on with his plan it would have violated God's ultimate plan. We would have lost the most precious gift that we have, the knowledge that it is God who is at work in our lives and not just ourselves. It is God who ultimately is ruler and not the King.

**Elizabeth:** So you were clearing the way so that God could continue to be revealed.

**Nathan:** Yes, yes.

**Elizabeth:** What a strange irony I see.

**Nathan:** Strange? What is strange?

**Elizabeth:** You know something of my story. I have received the gift of life from God when I conceived our son John.

**Nathan:** Yes, but I don't see the irony there.

**Elizabeth:** No the irony is not there, but it is in my relationship to Mary. Mary had been visited by an angel too. She was told that she would be the one who would hold the incarnation of God in her womb and to birth the Christ.

**Nathan:** I still don't follow you.

**Elizabeth:** Well, you see, Mary was just the opposite of King David. He thought that he was worthy to build the place to hold God. He thought that he was the one to control God's coming and going. When you were visited by the angel, you saw that it was God who would choose where and when to appear and where and when to be contained. When Mary was visited by Gabriel, her first thought was that she was unworthy, that she was so lowly and unimportant that God would never choose her to be the one to birth the Christ.

**Nathan:** How do you come into the picture?

**Elizabeth:** Mary was so young. She had so few experiences in the world. I was a good deal older and my faith had been tested through so many years of pain and failure. I knew, however, that God could work miracles through even the least of us. I was carrying the proof in my womb. I had to convince Mary that God would use a poor young girl like herself. I had to convince her that with God all things are possible. My proudest moment came when Mary was able to speak from her heart and articulate what God was doing through her:

My soul magnifies the Lord, she said.  
And my spirit rejoices in God  
My Savior,  
For God has looked with favor on my lowliness.  
Surely, the Mighty One has done great  
things for me,  
And holy is God's name

God has scattered the proud in the  
thoughts of their hearts.  
God has brought down the powerful  
from their thrones,  
and lifted up the lowly;  
filled the hungry with good things and sent the rich away empty.

**Nathan:** You certainly got through to her. She knew exactly what God wanted and how God would use her.

**Elizabeth:** God finally decided to be housed in the womb of a poor, young peasant woman so that God's Love would become flesh and live among us forever.

**Nathan:** You were reinforcing the angels message to Mary so that she would believe and I was reinforcing the angels message to me so that King David would believe.

**Elizabeth:** You see the irony, your task from the angel was to bring David down to earth so that God could use him, and my task from the angel was to bring Mary up to where she belonged, so that God could use her.

**Nathan:** Elizabeth, you know who angels are, they are messengers from God who open our eyes to what God can do.

**Elizabeth:** Isn't that what we were? As unlikely as we may have appeared, we were God's most convincing angels opening the eyes of two remarkable people to see God's intentions for their lives.

**Narrator:** King David's most convincing angel was young Nathan, who trusted God's messages and was ever faithful to God's plan. Mary's most convincing angel was Elizabeth, a beloved and trusted confidant, a wise older woman.

Angels are messengers of God. Winged words. Hovering visitations. Angels are the way through which God touches our lives. But we must be alert for their arrival, open to hear their words.

Who around you – partner, children, parents, friends, colleagues, members of this congregation, strangers – who are the angels through which God is touching your life?

What most convincing angel in your life is opening your heart this Advent to believe in God's promises?

What most convincing angel in your life this Advent is opening your heart to prepare for the birth of Christ?

May you watch and wait and be alert so that you will hear the singing of the angels.  
So be it. Amen and Amen.

