

Thursday, December 24, 2015 – Christmas Eve
Pastor Erin Bouman, Irving Park Lutheran Church
Luke 2:1-20

Hear the Angels

Can you hear me? Can you hear me from this mic, here in the pulpit? We've been having a problem with our sound system here lately. Or it could be several problems. I was telling someone about it, I said, "Well, some people have trouble hearing from this mic, but then other times it seems to be that mic over there, sometimes strange sounds coming out of it, it has been known to pick up radio stations... And sometimes it's the mics that we worship leaders wear, but sometimes that's because we forget to turn those mics on, they've got this toggle switch. Sometimes it has to do with where hearers are sitting, or it has to do with different sound pitches. But then to some people it doesn't seem like there is a problem, where they are, or how their ears are. The problem is the problem is different, depending on the day and who you talk to. The person listening said, "That's not just the problem with the church's sound system."

If you have been part of a church—any church, not just this one, this phenomenon is not something exclusive to us, and it's not just about sound systems... If you have been part of an institution, you probably recognize this parable of how complicated our problems are: all the ways, and the whys, of how we can't hear. We experience this in the institution that is the church, we experience this in the institution that is the government. Citizens of Chicago, residents of Illinois, we know about complicated civic problems; we know how diffuse and difficult the problems of our politic are.

If you are part of an institution that is the family, you know about complicated problems, too. You may know it particularly well, this very instant, because of who you are sitting next to. Or you may know it, because of who you are not sitting next to. Why isn't that person here tonight, sitting next to you, sitting with you? Why aren't you more with those whom you are sitting next to? Despite commercials that try to convince us that Christmas is a perfect celebration of perfect families, this season, this night, often heightens family tensions, highlights our losses, lays bare our relational inadequacies: all the ways we do not know what people want, and are unable to give it to them anyway.

Christmas is not about how perfect we are, but how imperfect. If you are part of the institution that is humanity, if you are a person, you know about this problem we have. Call it the problem with our sound system; call it sin.

A couple of weeks ago in a Bible study here, we read an article, a reflection on the Christmas season and characters in it, Mary and Joseph—we hear about them tonight, about their journey to Bethlehem. The article reflected on what happened before that, what happened before the birth of peace and joy and redemption for all, before this good news of great joy for all people: to you is born a Savior, Christ the Lord. Before we hear that angelic announcement, so that we can hear it, we must also acknowledge the problem, the religious, and political, and familial, and individual problems in our world—they were in the world into which Jesus was born, too. Mary and Joseph, as you'll recall, knew about complicated problems: an unexpected pregnancy, an almost called off engagement, a political decree at the worst possible time, religious turmoil in a multi-faith environment. These were complicated problems, and these were less than perfect people, Mary and Joseph. They considered opting out, they wrestled with uncertainty; they wondered how this could be; they felt afraid.

But despite all of that, somehow, Mary and Joseph were open to surprises; they had hope in a solution. The article said, “That is why they could hear the angel.” I was struck by that line: “that is why they could hear the angel.” I was struck by it, because I hadn’t thought an angel was something you could miss. I hadn’t thought an angel was something you wouldn’t hear. Angels are loud. Who wouldn’t be able to hear them? Who wouldn’t be able to hear a heavenly host, filling the sky with sound? That’s how it sounds in the story we hear tonight, when the angels appear on the hillside—hardly something you could not hear, or so you would think.

But think of the other announcements by angels, in the stories before tonight, in the announcements that happened before tonight. There’s the angel that appears to Mary, and tells her this truly surprising news. There’s the angel that appears to Joseph, in a dream. I’ve always thought those announcements were loud, and maybe they were, but still, it would have been possible to not hear them. Joseph could have shrugged it off as a fitful night of sleep. Mary could have stood firm in the factual impossibility. But that’s not what happened, that’s not what they did. They could hear the angel. And so they nurtured an expanding belly, and they stayed together, and they set out for Bethlehem, and Christ was born.

And then, even out on the hillsides of Bethlehem, where shepherds were keeping watch over their flocks by night, even there, even then, did you notice this about the angelic announcement? At first, it was just one angel. The shepherds could have written it off as a particularly shocking flash of lightning. But instead, even in their fear, they could hear that one angel, and then, they heard all kinds of angels. The angels and their song just filled the sky, a celestial choir.

Mary and Joseph, and the shepherds, they were people, just like you and me, they were imperfect people, but they could hear angels. They could hear, because God knows how to fix sound systems. Even our sound system. Not just the one in our church, but in our lives, in ourselves. God was born to do just that. God was born to help us hear angels.

We are already hearing them, we just don’t know what they are. I’m not talking about the radio stations that get picked up out from that microphone. I’m talking, for example, about the angels we hear when a baby gets born. When you make the journey of pregnancy and your newborn is placed in your arms, face wrinkling at a new world of light, tiny voice crying with surprise... beneath it, can’t you hear the angels’ humming? Or when you gather at the bedside of a loved one, who is slipping away from life, as you stroke their shoulder, can’t you hear the rustle of wings? At those times especially, at a birth and at a death, we can hear angels.

So also it is in the Bible, with Jesus, at his birth, and at his death. At Jesus’ birth there were angels, and after Jesus died, at the tomb, there were angels. The followers of Jesus who came to the tomb were afraid, but they could hear those angels. We can, too, for Christ has come. Christ comes so that we can hear them. Faith comes from hearing. Gloria in excelsis, amen!