

Prophets and Angels in the Advent Story

A family service talk by Rev. Michael Gladish
Mitchellville, MD, December 14th, 2014

1st Lessons: Jeremiah 23:1-8 and Isaiah 60:1-6

The story of the Lord's birth is remarkable for many reasons, one of which is that it was predicted – or prophesied – for thousands of years before it happened. In these first lessons you heard two of the prophecies that were given during the time of the Kings of Israel, when things were not going well and the people were about to be carried away into captivity by the Babylonians.

The one from Jeremiah starts by blaming the leaders of the people, whom he called shepherds, for doing a BAD JOB and causing the people to get into trouble. Then it goes on to predict the coming of the Lord who would make things right. Notice that it says in this prophecy that “In His days Judah will be saved, and Israel will dwell safely.” We'll come back to this a little later.

The lesson from Isaiah also talks about the dark times in Israel but encourages the people by pointing out that the Lord will come to bring new LIGHT, not just for those in Israel but for all people. It even talks about KINGS bringing gold and incense to worship Him “in the brightness of His rising,” which as you know came true when the Wise Men brought their gifts to the baby Lord.

These lessons are important because they illustrate one of the ways the Lord prepared people for his coming, and that is by having special people chosen from among them speak His words to warn and encourage them. Being a prophet was no easy job! It meant standing up in front of everyone and telling them what they had done wrong, what they needed to do to improve, and how the Lord would help them when the time was right. They spoke the TRUTH that people needed to hear. Fortunately the people respected the prophets, but they didn't always *like* them, because of what they had to say. Their presence in the story of Christmas is a reminder that we also need to listen and hear the TRUTH about ourselves, and about the Lord, whether we like it or not, if we want our lives to improve. And you know, anyone from among us can be like a prophet if he or she helps us to understand the truths of Lord's Word.

While you have this thought in mind let's sing about the watchman, watching for the prophecies of the Lord's birth to come true: #963.

2nd Lesson: Matthew 1:18-25

In this lesson for the first time in the story of the Lord's birth we read about the appearance of an angel. But you know that this is only the first of MANY times angels appear, mainly in the Gospel of Luke where one appears to Zacharias, then to Mary, and then many of them all at once to the shepherds out in their fields. These angels also told the TRUTH, but they are not like the prophets: these messengers came directly from heaven, and their appearance was awesome, sudden, surprising, and usually pretty frightening – which is why the first thing they almost always said was, “Do not be afraid.”

Another feature of the angels in the Christmas story is that they never talk about the dark times or the bad things that need to be changed; they bring only GOOD NEWS – “Good tidings of great joy” which will be to all people. You see, angels always focus on the good; they don't think about the evils of this world because they're in heaven where these evils don't bother them. And they know that the Lord is always taking care of them.

Wouldn't it be great if we could all be like angels, always encouraging one another and only sharing GOOD NEWS?

While we're thinking about this, let's sing the next hymn – about the angels: #957.

3rd Lesson: TCR 86, 88

Now in this lesson we learn about the Lord coming into the world as the Truth itself in Human form – so that everything He said was TRUE and everything He did was according to the truth. But the really wonderful thing about the Lord is that in Him the truth was never separated from the goodness of His amazing love, so that everything He said or did He said or did from love and with love.

THIS is what had been missing in the world before He came. The Jewish people had the truth of His WORD, but they had forgotten how to be nice and good with it. And people of other nations were trying to be good, but they didn't know the truth about the Lord and so it was hard for them to do it. When the Lord came He reconnected the truth with the goodness of perfect love in Himself so that He could show everybody how to live “truly good,” orderly lives.

Now remember the prophets and the angels. The prophets told the Truth about the Lord, and the angels focused on the Good. And what was that Good? Right from the start, with the first angel who appeared to Joseph in a dream, it was the fulfillment of the prophecy “that we should be saved from our enemies” (Luke 1:71), meaning in fact that we should be saved from *our own sins* (Matt. 1:21).

The prophets said it *would* happen; the angels said *it was happening*. The truth says, “This is how it works; you can count on it and you can look forward to it;” good says, “Now you can enjoy it. Now you can feel it, ‘For unto you is born *this day* in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord” (Luke 2:11). As the angel said to Mary, “with God nothing shall be impossible’ (Luke 1:37).”

Remember, prophets and angels are BOTH important in the Word. We need both. One group is not better than the other. But now that He has shown us His love and wisdom – His goodness and truth – in the form of His own example, not just as a prophet, not even as an angel, but as perfect goodness and truth made visible in His own Divine Humanity... now that He has done this for us we have a wonderful new freedom to get what we need *from Him*. For He is still with us in the stories of His Word, and we can go to Him directly there now for all the wisdom and encouragement that could only come from messengers – prophets and angels – before He took on His own natural body in this world.

Today, we still read the prophecies in the Word, and we still read about what the angels said and did, but it’s different now than it was before He came because now we know what it all really means, and now, because the Lord has strengthened us by putting the heavens and the hells back into order, WE have new freedom and power to work directly with Him to improve our lives. In other words, we don’t have to wait for Him and hope for His help any longer. We don’t have to be afraid, and we don’t have to worry about our spiritual lives. We just have to DO what He has taught us to do – and NOT do what He has taught us NOT to do – and we’ll be well. In fact that’s what it means to be saved: to be healthy and well.

Again, *He is not coming, He is already here*. Now WE are the ones who have to come to HIM – and not just with our outward actions but in our hearts and minds. This is why Jeremiah said, “In His days Judah will be saved, and Israel will dwell safely.” You see, Judah in the Word represents all that part of the human spirit that consists of love and affection; Israel represents the thinking part, the knowing and understanding. So when we honor the Lord and do what He says, He gives us healthy loves and a good, strong understanding so that we can avoid temptation and “dwell safely,” at least in spirit.

Both of these are important. Both of these are necessary. Sometimes we appreciate one more than the other, but each has its place and the Lord Himself now provides both for us if we will only look and listen, and receive His Word with thankfulness.

Amen.