

Look Again  
December 29, 2013  
Matthew 2:13-23

Last Sunday we heard an account of an angel revealing to Joseph the origin of his fiancée's pregnancy. This week our Scripture reading offers an account of Joseph receiving another visit from an angel after Jesus' birth.

Now after they had left, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, "Get up, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you; for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him."

Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother by night, and went to Egypt, and remained there until the death of Herod. This was to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet, "Out of Egypt I have called my son."

When Herod saw that he had been tricked by the wise men, he was infuriated, and he sent and killed all the children in and around Bethlehem who were two years old or under, according to the time that he had learned from the wise men.

Then was fulfilled what had been spoken through the prophet Jeremiah: "A voice was heard in Ramah, wailing and loud lamentation, Rachel weeping for her children; she refused to be consoled, because they are no more."

When Herod died, an angel of the Lord suddenly appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt and said, "Get up, take the child and his mother, and go to the land of Israel, for those who were seeking the child's life are dead."

Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother, and went to the land of Israel. But when he heard that Archelaus was ruling over Judea in place of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there. And after being warned in a dream, he went away to the district of Galilee. There he made his home in a town called Nazareth, so that what had been spoken through the prophets might be fulfilled, "He will be called a Nazorean."

May God bless the reading and hearing of these words.

Let us pray . . . Holy God, when kings use the power of their earthly kingdoms to kill and instill fear, you offer a better way. No matter what is happening all around us, Christmas must be a time when we align with Emmanuel – God with Us – and pledge ourselves anew to living in and making real the realm of God on earth. Take and use my words to empower our imaginations, awaken us to new possibilities, and embolden us in our actions. Amen.

Everyone loves Christmas, or do they? Just in time for Christmas this year the Pew Research Center released information about how we view the holiday. According to their latest survey, 92% of Americans celebrate Christmas, but there is considerable diversity when it comes to the basis of such celebrations:

just over half (51%) celebrate it as more of a religious holiday, around a third (32%) celebrate it as more of a cultural holiday, and about 1 in 10 (9%) – celebrate it as both cultural and religious or didn't comment on whether they felt it was more religious or cultural.<sup>1</sup>

Many families include people who fit within each of the three categories. Perhaps your own family reflects that type of diversity.

But what about your friends? Your neighbors?

Did you realize that our approach to Christmas differs by generation?

The older the age group, the more significant the percentage who celebrate Christmas primarily as a religious holiday. Almost twice as high a percentage of those over age 65 view Christmas as a religious holiday compared with adults under age 30 (66% to 39%).<sup>2</sup>

For those of us who think of Christmas as a holy day, our focus is on the birth of a baby like no other. While the birth narrative sounds familiar, it is entirely different than anything any of us have personally experienced. Jesus is unique.

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<sup>1</sup> Greg Smith. "Christmas: Cultural or Religious?"  
<<http://sowhatfaith.com/2013/12/25/cultural-or-religious/>>

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

Look again. Look and see the newborn.

He is God with skin on,

He is the Messiah, and

He is Emmanuel: God with us.

This is the happy baby who we see so often as the center of attention in Christmas pageants or in the middle of the crèche in our homes. We have become so used to seeing the very young Jesus at this time of year that we often don't really think about him – at least not in the way we do about most newborns.

Did Jesus favor Mary? Was he a fussy baby? Could you tell he was divine just by looking at him?

This year I found myself thinking of Jesus differently. For the first time in my life, I found myself engaged in numerous conversations about the color of Jesus' skin.

The more I think about it, the more amazed I am that a remark made by Megyn Kelly, a Fox News reporter, attracted so much attention. Many people took her quite seriously when she said:

"You know. I mean, Jesus was a white man, too. It's like we have, he's a historical figure. That's a verifiable fact."<sup>3</sup>

Some have remarked that it is important to note she later retracted her comment, and indicated that she was just joking. No matter what her perspective may really be, her words are the kind that must be addressed from pulpits and disputed by people of faith everywhere.

I am thankful I don't need to draw a portrait of Jesus in order to know who he is. I am certain that as one born in the Middle East his skin was far darker than what we envision when we hear the word "white." And, I am just as certain that if we search for the proper hue of his skin, we miss a more important truth: Jesus' identity.

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<sup>3</sup> Carol Howard Merritt. "I'm Dreaming of a White Christ(mas)."

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As we gather here on this the first Sunday of Christmas, we know that Jesus was, is, and always must be at the center of Christmas. We also recognize that in our own homes little ceramic figurines of Jesus, no matter their color, are often packed away just a few days after we celebrate his birth.

I wonder if you think about the story as you disassemble your nativity scenes.

Maybe you pause to ponder what it was like for Mary and Joseph as you wrap them up in a protective paper or place them gently into a Styrofoam container.

Perhaps you focus on the star or, more likely, on the wise ones who followed it. If you think too long or hard about them you may not put them away just yet, since they didn't arrive for quite some time after Jesus' birth.

Or do you find yourself slowing your packing pace when you reach the shepherds and angels?

As difficult as it may be to imagine just what baby Jesus looked like, I think it is an even more challenging task to picture an angel. And yet, we know the Christmas story features angels on multiple occasions.

The blonde haired, blue eyed portraits of Jesus adorning many church walls do more to confuse than clarify what Jesus looked like as he grew into a man. In a similar way the many varied contemporary images of angels contribute to our inaccurate impressions.

While there have always been angels on the screen, they were especially prominent in the 1990s.

See if you can remember any thematically appropriate movies from that decade, and, if you can, try to remember how they depicted angels. Films like

Angels in the Outfield (1994),  
Michael (1996),  
The Preacher's Wife (1996),  
City of Angels (1998), and  
Dogma (1999).<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Ellen Leventry. "Top 12 TV and Movie Angels: 1990s to Today."  
<<http://www.beliefnet.com/Inspiration/Angels/2008/09/Top-12-TV-and-Movie-Angels-1990s-to-Today.aspx>>

In my estimation, all of these movies put together had less impact on how people perceived angels than did a single television show: "Touched by an Angel." Do you remember those angels, how they looked, and the ways in which they interacted with people?

That show featured a trio of angels - Monica, Tess, and Andrew - who were sent to earth to "tell depressed and troubled people that God loves them and hasn't forgotten them."<sup>5</sup>

While no two encounters were exactly alike, many times the gentle angels sounded a lot like self-help gurus when they told people, "All you have to do is reach out toward God, and then he'll come down and reach out to you."<sup>6</sup>

Just like I can't paint a historically accurate picture of baby Jesus, I also can't offer total clarity on what angels look or even sound like.

I can, however, point you back to the pages of Scripture. I can invite you to look again at those angels.

Remember Joseph's initial encounter with an angel in Matthew's Gospel when he was preparing to divorce Mary? Last week I preached about it. The first words out of the angel's mouth after calling Joseph by name were to say "do not be afraid."<sup>7</sup>

Remember Mary's initial encounter with an angel in Luke's Gospel when she was told she would soon be pregnant by the Holy Spirit? Once again the angel begins in a similar manner: calling her by name and alerting her that there is no need to be afraid.<sup>8</sup>

Personally, I haven't seen an angel - at least not yet. I hope that if I come face-to-face with an angel, I will be greeted by name and calmed with the reassuring words that I have no reason to fear.

*Fear not* are words we all need to hear at times. A few days before Christmas, a friend of mine who is a retired Presbyterian pastor wrote a poem that speaks to this very issue. Titled "Angel Talk,"<sup>9</sup> it offers helpful perspective. He writes:

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<sup>5</sup> "Touched by an Angel." <<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0108968/>>

<sup>6</sup> Michael Horton. "An Interview with Roger Olson."  
<<http://www.modernreformation.org/default.php?page=articledisplay&var2=458>>

<sup>7</sup> Matthew 1:20

<sup>8</sup> Luke 1:30

<sup>9</sup> George L. Bell. "Angel Talk." Portions of an unpublished poem written on December 23, 2013, shared by e-mail.

Fear Not!  
The angels said on Christmas Eve!  
Beginning words  
Meant to calm startled bedouins  
Protecting their flock from stalking predators.

Fear not!  
There is something good to be discovered!  
Dare to believe that tonight - today.  
Leave your chore of protection.  
Have faith and become absurd with hope!

Fear not!  
But who can believe an angel  
Who has endured a teacher's paddle,  
Or listened to the thunder of angry preachers  
Or read the account of danger in common places?

Fear not!  
But they are preparing for mass destruction,  
And the greedy have contaminated the earth.  
Systems hold some people down as others climb,  
And even a trusted partner can stab you with words!

Fear not!  
But I'm short on trust these days!  
I need to hold the hand of fear as my protection.  
I must build store houses to hold my grain.  
No one else really cares for me!

*Fear not!*  
*Here is a meal for Christmas Day!*  
*Here is a gift that will tide you through!*  
*Here is a song to sing as you drink a toast!*  
*Here is a place where you can really come home!*

Fear not!  
First words of Christmas!  
Last words at end of life's journey!  
Words that still guide wise adventurers!  
Words the winds of heaven still speak!

“Fear not” reassured Mary and Joseph many times along the path to parenthood, and again when their son faced certain death when Herod commanded the killing of all boys under age two.

As we continue to celebrate Christmas, we need not fear. Instead, we need to find our way back to the beginning.

We need to learn to look again. As we celebrate the religious aspects of Christmas, we must extend that celebration far beyond a single day.

We must never lose sight of how the world changed forever that first Christmas. John’s Gospel portrays the birth of Jesus in this way:

The Word became flesh and blood, and moved into the neighborhood.<sup>10</sup>

Look again. See now the one who dwells among us.

Amen.

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<sup>10</sup> John 1:14a, The Message.