

Isaiah 9:2, 6-7, Micah 5:2-5a, Luke 2:1-20
Christmas Eve 2024 – Saginaw First U.M.C.
“Ambassadors of Light” – Rev. Amy Terhune

One of my favorite stories is the one about young Marc, who decided to build his own nativity scene in the playroom one Sunday afternoon after doing his part in the church Christmas Pageant. For a stable, he had opened an old Dukes of Hazard lunch box and set it up on its side, building half walls out of Legos to complete the scene. A ballerina Barbie sat in the center of the scene as Mary, holding a toy Bart Simpson in her arms while GI Joe, in full battle gear, lounged casually nearby in the role of Joseph. A variety of figurines, stuffed animals, and happy meal toys surrounded the scene in the role of shepherds, wisemen, and barnyard animals, and perched in glory atop the Dukes of Hazard thermos from the lunchbox, like a castle turret on the scene, stood a Darth Vader figured with red sword and black cape, cast as the angel Gabriel. Why Darth Vader? Because the angels are always telling everyone not to be afraid, so Angels must be scary, right? I get it. [idea here adapted significantly from “The Gift of Preparation by Billy D. Strayhorn, www.Sermons.com.]

Yet, for those of you who know anything about the Star Wars franchise, you know that there’s a dark side of the force, and a light side of the force, and Darth Vader belongs to the dark side for vast duration of the series. Yet, his is a redemptions story – one who finds the light through the love of the son. Which, I suppose, is why religious people love to draw parallels, even if George Lucas never intended that.

In the original Christmas narrative as told in the gospel of Luke, the angels are scary, not because they intimidate with violence or threats, but because they come as ambassadors of light into a dark world. This Christmas season, our Bishop David Bard offered a recorded sermon to use for those who needed a sermon while on vacation over the Christmas Holiday. I listened to the Bishop’s sermon because even preachers need to hear a good sermon sometimes. He introduced me to a term making the rounds in socio-political studies in the past 30 years or so. The term is VUCA – an acronym introduced by the US Army War College in the late 80s to describe a post-cold-war-world. It stands for Volatile, Uncertain, Complex, and Ambiguous. That’s our world. Volatile, Uncertain, Complex, and Ambiguous. [check out the Bishop’s Sermon at <https://vimeo.com/1028504983>.]

I don’t dispute that we live in VUCA world. But Jesus was born into one, too – a volatile world where the supposed great Roman peace was built on violent domination and oppression of others. A world equally uncertain and filled with complexities and ambiguities. A dark world. Not altogether unlike our own. And yet, God always comes to the world in the dark. A baby in a backwards town in a conquered land to a despairing people. A risen savior emerging from a tomb before the sun has risen on the third day.

Tonight, we grapple with the reality that God chose vulnerability. God chose to enter our world as an infant, 7 pounds, totally dependent on those around him, not even able to hold his own head up. That’s how God comes. And the older I get, the more a conviction lives within me that God’s way in the world is vulnerability. It’s not coercion or brutality or hate or domination. Those never last. Real power takes the risk to be vulnerable in the practice of love, compassion, forgiveness, grace. Those angelic ambassadors of light bring us good news: A savior is born. I appreciate what Parker Palmer writes about that: “...the Christmas story has a pointed word for us, a word from those angels: be not afraid. Those words don’t say ‘have no fear’. Instead, they say that we don’t need to BE our fear. The inner landscapes of our lives offer many places to stand – alongside fear there are places with names like compassion, trust, faith, devotion, and truth. By choosing to stand in one of those places, it’s

possible to be something better than our fear.” [from <https://facebook.com/share/p/1AtjXfxNzP/?mibextid=wwXlfr>.]
It is possible to be ambassadors of light – an angel in another’s darkness.

Light has come into the world. Not as a nuclear blast, but as a life. A life that is the light for all people.

Earlier this season, I added a few new songs to my Christmas Playlist – I do that every year – and one of the ones I picked up this year was “I Heard the Bells on Christmas Day” performed by Jars of Clay. If you don’t know the story, that song was written during the civil war by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow. It moves from joy to despair over the state of the war, and then to hope in the last verse, which, in the Jars of Clay version, quiets from a full ensemble to a single acoustic guitar and a single voice:

Then pealed the bells more loud and deep:
"God is not dead, nor doth He sleep;
The Wrong shall fail, the Right prevail,
With peace on earth, good-will to men.

And as their band music swells in again towards the end of the song, they build it chord by chord by chord up one octave – 8 notes - and then into a second octave. Up 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7 – and that’s where they stop, fading into silence. One note before the completion of that octave. If you’re not a musician, my apologies. But you know it when you hear it, intuitively, I think. You know there’s supposed to be one more note – that you’re not quite there – that there’s no resolution. [Hear *Jars of Clay*’s version at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=odGJR33xElw>.]

And yet, if I had to describe our world in this moment, waiting with baited breath on the cusp of whatever God is going to do next, watching for the fulfillment of the Kingdom of God in our midst, hoping for peace on earth and goodwill amongst humankind, I can’t think of a better way to do it than to stop on the 7th of an octave.

Tonight, if we listen deeply, with the innermost part of our soul, we’ll hear that last note for which we all wait. We’ll see the light on the horizon. We’ll hold the enormity of God in our heart, if only for a fleeting moment. If we just let ourselves be in that vulnerable space of receptivity and longing, we meet God there, and it gets us through the darkest night. Let me close with a story.

George was the custodian of a small church in rural Louisiana. He was married to Alice and together they had six children. One afternoon, Alice, aged 34, was hanging wash in the backyard and dropped of a heart attack. Gone in the span of a heartbeat. One of the church elders who was a friend, upon hearing of the death, went to be with George. When he arrived, George was stretched out on the bed staring at the ceiling, numb. His friend said nothing, but instead pulled up a rocker, sat down by the bed, lit up a cigar and began to rock. George drifted into soul-soothing sleep as night fell. Later George recounted how on the day Alice died he awoke in the dark and instinctively reached out for Alice, but she was not there. When he touched the empty side of the bed, he was stabbed awake by the agony of his lostness and loneliness. Just as the pain of isolation became unbearable, George said he caught in the corner of his eye an arcing red glow, the movement of his friend’s lit cigar as he rocked quietly. “I got through the night because my friend was *there*.” [from Don Wardlaw, *Lectionary Homiletics*, January 1992, p. 9, adapted; as used in “God With Skin On” by Susan R. Andrews. www.Sermons.com.]

We get through the night because God is here. And sometimes, others get through the night because God is in us, empowering us in a VUCA world to be ambassadors of light. Merry Christmas. Amen.