

Dec. 24, 2006
Christmas Eve (7:00pm)
First Parish UCC
Luke 2:8-20
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The Angel Angle

One of my favorite Christmas stories is *Elijah's Angel*, by Michael Rosen. It is a real life experience, telling of Michael's friendship with Elijah Pierce, a renowned wood carver who lived in Columbus, Ohio.

Elijah and Michael are friends. There are many things about them that are different. Elijah is 80 years old; Michael is nine. Elijah's skin is very dark; Michael's skin is lighter. Elijah is Christian; Michael is Jewish. Elijah spends his days cutting hair and making woodcarvings. Michael goes to school. He met Elijah on a school field trip to Elijah's barbershop. But Elijah and Michael have something very important in common – they have good hearts.

The year that Michael was nine, Christmas Eve and the first night of Hanukkah fell on the same day. That day, Elijah gave Michael one of his new, special, foot-tall, glittery, polka-dotted wooden angels that he had made. "Merry Christmas, Michael. I want you to have this special angel. You know, I send prayers to all the wood I've ever carved; now you'll always be in my prayers."

On the one hand, Michael was thrilled. On the other, he was afraid his father would be upset if he brought a Christmas angel into their Jewish home. He had heard his father talk about graven images, and he was afraid this was one of them. At first Michael sneaked it into the house. Yet, when he

couldn't stand it anymore, he showed it to his parents. It turned out they also had good hearts. They said it was all right for Michael to have the angel because it was an angel of friendship.

The next morning, Michael took the menorah he had made out of painted spools and sequins at Hebrew school and wrapped it up in Hanukkah paper to give to Elijah. He wrote a note, which he read to his parents, "Merry Christmas, Elijah. Your friend, Michael. P.S. Thank you for making me an angel." His parents chuckled, and his mother said, "We thought you already were an angel."

Michael kept the angel by his bed. Elijah put the menorah in the window of his barbershop and lit a new candle each night of Hanukkah.

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Sometimes I transpose letters when I'm writing or typing. I often do that with the word "angel." I realize that instead of angel I've written angle. Maybe it's because I was a math teacher a long time ago. In those days, I spent a lot of time talking about angles and now I talk about angels. But it seems to me that there is something there when you put the two together. There is an angle to angels in our tradition.

Throughout scripture the angle on angels is that they are messengers for God. That is what the word angel literally means. The word angel is used to depict both celestial beings and earthly beings that serve as messengers for God.

The image of angels refers to that mysterious, yet convicting, sense of knowing – a transfer of knowledge that doesn't come through the US mail or even Email. It is that knowing that comes more intangibly, more mysteriously. We call it by many names – a intuition, a dream, a still small voice, the prodding of the Spirit, the sudden illumination in another person's face, or some people just call it an angel, whether visible or not.

The writer of Luke uses the image of angels to describe how the shepherds receive knowledge about something extraordinary that is happening. Yet, notice how once the celestial angels have made known the “good news of great joy” to the shepherds, the shepherds then become the messengers, the “angels” if you will, to make known what has been told to them concerning this child.

The angel with angels is that the “good news” is passed along. The one who receives the “good news” is called then to pass it on to others.

* * *

Sometimes in the midst of the familiar Christmas story the “good news” captures us anew. I have heard of more than one instance where a young church thespian became an angel right in the midst of a church pageant.

(Thomas Long in his book, *Shepherds and Bathrobes*, tells of one such happening.)

Imagine it is Christmas Eve in a small church. The children are in the costumes all ready for the annual Christmas pageant.

They have practiced their lines and the rehearsals have gone well.

The boy playing the innkeeper didn't really want to be part of the pageant. He is a rather socially awkward and physically awkward young man. His coordination hasn't caught up with the growth of his body. But there are only so many children and everyone is needed to play a part.

Since this boy is physically large the adults decided he'd make a good innkeeper. When they told him he only had to remember one line, he reluctantly agreed to play the part.

At the appropriate time in the pageant, the innkeeper takes his place. Joseph and Mary arrive at the door, asking for lodging. The innkeeper crosses his arms across his chest and sternly replies, “There is no room in the inn.”

As Mary and Joseph turn dejectedly away, something happens. The sight of their plight moves the young man. Much to his surprise and the surprise of the whole congregation, he calls out, “Wait. Don't go. You can have my room.”

It was unintentional, and certainly unexpected, but right in the midst of the Christmas pageant, the innkeeper became an angel, a messenger, bringing good news to those who were in need.