

Sermon

Second Sunday of Advent

6th December 2020



Worship led by Rev Dr André Groenewald
Music from Martin Petty



“If we were angels, we would understand... death, is not a tragedy, but instead the gateway to eternal life, the life for which we were originally created.”

(Sheila Cassidy)

Gathering of God's people

Welcome and Announcements

Good morning, welcome to our service.

Please stay updated with everything that is happening. We would like to say a big thank you to all our members who have responded so well to our plea for financial help in this difficult time. We are grateful for your generosity at this time!

The next service in our building will be on the 24th of December at 18:00. It will be a family service and I would like all the families with children to please attend if it is possible. The service will be a Christingle service. The rest of the services in December and January will be online services - please consult the “worship plan” on the website.

Today's service will be a different Bereavement service. I want to ask you to please get a candle and matches ready to light it during the service this morning for all those who have lost their loved ones! I will announce it at the appropriate time. My prayer is that this service will help you in your journey of grief, loss and bereavement.

Let us worship God through our call to worship (Psalm 91)

If you say, "The Lord is my refuge," and you make the Most High your dwelling, no harm will overtake you, no disaster will come near your tent. For he will command **his angels** concerning you to guard you in all your ways; They will lift you up in their hands, so that you will not strike your foot against a stone.

I greet you in the Name of God the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit! Amen

Lighting the second Advent Candle in Church

Hymn 274 Comfort, comfort now my people

Comfort, comfort now my people; speak of peace – so says your God.
Comfort those who sit in darkness, burdened by a heavy load.

To Jerusalem proclaim: God shall take away your shame.
Now get ready to recover; guilt and suffering are over.

Hear the herald's proclamation in the desert far and near,
Calling all to true repentance, telling that the Lord is near.

Oh, that warning cry obey! For your God prepare a way.
Let the valleys rise to greet him and the hills bow down to meet him.

Straighten out what has been crooked, make the roughest places plain,
Let your hearts be true and humble, live as fits God's holy reign.

Soon the glory of the Lord shall on earth be shed abroad.
All the world shall surely see it, God is ready to decree it.

Opening prayer and The Lord's Prayer

Lord God,

You ask us, to be awake and ready, but we are sleepy and habit-bound people who prefer to do what we've always done.

Yet we long for you, thirsty for the light of your goodness.

Forgive our unwillingness to welcome you, our fear of seeing the shabbiness of our lives in the light of your holiness and our readiness to blame others for our own shortcomings.

Wake us up, gently or urgently, according to our need, to see your face, and to rise and serve you,

Loving God, we are gathered here today because we all have something in common – we lost someone we loved.

Comfort us with Your love O God
Wrap us up in Your strong embrace
Shelter us from the storm
Cover us with Your tender care

By day we pour out our heartbreak to You
By night we give you our racing thoughts

In You we take refuge
In You we will not be afraid
For you hold us strong, You hold us safe
Calm our fearful hearts O God
Still our anxious minds O Lord
For all our life is found in You
All our being is given to You
All our hope begins in You, our comforter, our Saviour, Our Lord in whose name we pray:

ALL:

Our Father, who art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread; And forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For Thine is the kingdom, the power, and the glory for ever. Amen.

Reflecting on God's Word

Luke 1 Readings: The birth of Jesus foretold

²⁶ In the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, ²⁷ to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin's name was Mary. ²⁸ The angel went to her and said, 'Greetings, you who are highly favoured! The Lord is with you.'

²⁹ Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be. ³⁰ But the angel said to her, 'Do not be afraid, Mary, you have found favour with God. ³¹ You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you are to call him Jesus. ³² He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, ³³ and he will reign over Jacob's descendants for ever; his kingdom will never end.'

³⁴ 'How will this be,' Mary asked the angel, 'since I am a virgin?'

³⁵ The angel answered, 'The Holy Spirit will come on you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called ^[b] the Son of God. ³⁶ Even Elizabeth your relative is going to have a child in her old age, and she who was said to be unable to conceive is in her sixth month. ³⁷ For no word from God will ever fail.'

³⁸ 'I am the Lord's servant,' Mary answered. 'May your word to me be fulfilled.' Then the angel left her.

Hymn 277 Hark the glad sound! The Saviour comes

Hark, the glad sound! the Saviour comes, the Saviour promised long;
Let every heart exult with joy, and every voice be song!

He comes, the prisoners to relieve, in Satan's bondage held;
The gates of brass before him burst, the iron fetters yield.

He comes, the broken hearts to bind, the bleeding souls to cure;
And with the treasures of his grace to enrich the humble poor.

The sacred year has now revolved, accepted of the Lord,
When heaven's high promise is fulfilled, and Israel is restored.
Our glad hosannas, Prince of Peace, thy welcome shall proclaim;
And heaven's exalted arches ring with thy most honoured Name.

Scottish Paraphrases, 1781 from Luke 4: 18-19

Sermon

Our reading can be summarised by one sentence namely:

The angel Gabriel visited Mary.

It almost sounds like a newspaper headline. In our predominant secular society, this might have attracted a lot of curiosity – even from readers who do not think of themselves as “religious”.

In Biblical times the same was true for different reasons. It would have been a tale for gossip and sensation – sending shockwaves all through the country.

Why?

Previously Luke told his listeners that AN angel of the Lord appeared in the temple to a priest called Zechariah. This would have been a much more likely thing to be happening, an angel visiting a priest.

But in our reading I think it really took the first listeners by surprise. It was unheard of in that society of an angel of the Lord, who in this case was Gabriel in comparison to an “UNNAMED” angel previously, appearing and speaking to a young unmarried virgin who had no status at all.

He appeared to her in the six month of Elisabeth's pregnancy. In Judaism, “virgins” were young maidens, usually fourteen or younger. Although Judaism had developed quite a list of angelic names, the New Testament mentions only the two who also appear in the Old Testament: Gabriel and Michael. They became the two most popular angels, in which Gabriel was sent on many divine missions.

But more shockingly is the greeting. Neither the title (“favored” or “graced one”) nor the promise (“The Lord is with you”) was traditional in greetings, even had she been a person of status. The phrase “Do not fear” was also common in Old Testament revelations.

Mary here joins the list of those in the Bible who found favor before God like Noah and Moses. The angel said to her that she will become a mother of son who will be identified with the “Mighty God” and who will have an eternal kingdom.

Then another surprise: Against all the ODDS Mary said YES to the Lord. She was unmarried. Joseph could shame her in public and end their relationship. She could have been rejected by her father and her community. But she persevered and trusted. She had faith in the Lords ability to be in control. She trusted the promise of God to be with her

Our story this morning is an illustration of how God intervenes in the mundane lives of people, people like you and me. It is clear that out of the blue, unexpectedly an angel of God appeared to Mary assuring her of the presence of God. Although it must have been quite a lot to take in, I am sure the significance and gravity of the appearance of the angel Gabriel, helped Mary to hold on to God.

In our daily lives we often need God's presence too especially when the going gets tough, when we are ill or alone, when we lose our loved ones, when our relationships breaks down, when we lose our jobs....

It is then in these circumstances that “angels” come, almost unnoticed, without “wings” and take care of us in ways that is unexpected and in some cases life changing, something that Rev Tom Gordon is alluding to in his poem:

“I once had a visit from an angel.
She'd trudged all the way down the street
to my house,
through two feet of snow, in the depths of the winter,
to bring me my mail.
I was waiting for an important message.
She thought of herself only as
'The local Postie'.
But I knew better.

I once had a visit from an angel.
He'd come all the way across town
to my house,
to see me when I was sick, the only one who bothered.
He brought me a bottle of whisky
'We'll finish that together when you feel better.'
He thought of himself only as
'Your mate, Billy'.
But I knew differently.

I once had a visit from an angel.
He'd come all the way from next door
to my house,
to ask if I was OK, with Christmas coming up soon,
and me missing Annie so much.
I enjoyed his quiet company - I always do.
He thought of himself only as
'Freddie from number 23'.
But I knew much more.

I once had a visit from an angel.
She'd phoned, and then come round
to my house,
to give me a break, and walk the dog,
and take the kids to the playpark,
because she knew I was struggling to cope.
She thought of herself only as
'Your little sister, Vera'.
But I knew the truth.

I once had a visit from an angel -
all the way from wherever angels come from,
to my house,
to bring a message and leave a gift,
to offer reassurance and help me to cope.
But there was always more than that.

They thought of themselves as
'Just being me'.
But I know an angel when I meet one."

It is no wonder that we read in Hebrews 13:2 "Do not forget to show hospitality to strangers, for by so doing some people have shown hospitality to **angels** without knowing it." The opposite is true as well... we may encounter "angels" without even knowing it at the time!

God is Always present and He knows our needs and wants. We need to trust in His promise to be with us too like Mary did. If we do, we will encounter His presence in unexpected ways and interventions, some that we will not even recognise as coming from HIM.

So the message to us is just as clear as it was to Mary. We are never alone and without His constant care and love. We can look forward to celebrate the birth of Jesus, knowing that He never left us on our own. God is through His Holy Spirit constantly at work in and around us, making sure that we are ok... and when we are not, He has different ways of assuring us that He is in control.

So this morning as a reminder of God's loving intervention and presence through the "earthly angels", we want to give you all a wee "knitted angel" which we hope will help you:

- when you cannot settle in sleep,
- when you feel utterly alone,
- when you miss your loved one so much that it actually hurts,
- when you wake up with that empty feeling of hopelessness,
- whenever you feel the need for God's love...and to know in your low moments that help always comes from directions that you did not expect or foresee...

The angels were knitted by our "Balerno Guild". If you would like to receive a knitted angel this Christmas please be in touch with Kay Coull.

Let us not forget that "neither the world above nor the world below—there is nothing in all creation that will ever be able to separate us from the love of God which is ours through Christ Jesus our Lord."

Amen

Act of Remembering our loved ones:

Lighting our own candle:- (each person lights their own candle at home)

We light our candle remembering the love of God that enfolds us and journeys with us each and every day. May it remind us of God's promise to always be with us and with those we love. We acknowledge that love is stronger than death, that our loved ones are a whisper away in God's eternal keeping -until when in the fullness of time we are reunited with them.

Hymn 419 Thine be the glory

Thine be the glory, risen, conquering Son, endless is the victory thou o'er death hast won;
angels in bright raiment rolled the stone away, kept the folded grave-clothes, where thy body lay.
Thine be the glory, risen, conquering Son, endless is the victory thou o'er death hast won.

Lo! Jesus meets us, risen from the tomb; lovingly he greets us, scatters fear and gloom;
let the Church with gladness hymns of triumph sing,
for her Lord now liveth; death hath lost its sting.

No more we doubt thee, glorious Prince of Life; life is naught without thee: aid us in our strife;
make us more than conquerors, through thy deathless love:
bring us safe through Jordan to thy home above.

Edmond Budry, 1854-1932 T.; R Birch Hoyle, 1875-1939

Responding to God's word

Our offerings are given for the ministry and mission of the churchⁱ

Prayer of thanksgiving and dedication

God's mercy is on those who fear him from generation to generation,
and so, confident in God's mercy, we pray: Come, O come Emmanuel.

As Christmas comes, we pray for peace: Come, O come Emmanuel.

As Christmas comes, we pray for justice: Come, O come Emmanuel.

As Christmas comes, we pray for healing: Come, O come Emmanuel.

As Christmas comes, we pray for generosity: Come, O come Emmanuel.

Make us faithful, Lord, as we work for the coming of your kingdom,
and like Mary, help us to say 'Yes' to whatever tasks are put before us.

Come, O come Emmanuel.

Amen.

Hymn 279 Make, make way, for Christ the King

Make way, make way, for Christ the King in splendour arrives;
Fling wide the gates and welcome him into your lives.

Make way, make way, for the King of Kings;
Make way, make way, and let His kingdom in.

He comes the broken hearts to heal, the prisoners to free;
The deaf shall hear, the lame shall dance, the blind shall see.
And those who mourn with heavy hearts, Who weep and sigh,
With laughter, joy, and royal crown He'll beautify.

We call you now to worship him as Lord of all,
To have no gods before him, their thrones must fall!

Graham Kendrick, 1986 Thankyou Music

Benediction Receive the blessing of God and go in peace:

Go into the world.

Speak the good news of Jesus and respond to the messengers that God may send,
that the fulfilment of his perfect plans may draw nearer in our lives.

And the blessing of God almighty, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit Be with you
with all whom you love and all whom you seek to love

This day and for evermore"

Amen.

ⁱ Those who would like to contribute to the Ministry and Mission of the Church can do so by clicking on the donate button on the front page of our website. Please follow the instructions. For you who are in the Church, you can 'drop' your envelopes/money in the offering plate as you exit the Church building.