

"WHERE HAVE ALL THE ANGELS GONE?"
January 7, 1990

TEXT: Matthew 2:16 "Behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, 'Rise, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there till I tell you .'"

I must confess that, when I hear this story, I experience a mixture of emotions. Like the rest of you, I feel a sense of outrage at the terrible thing that Herod did. It was not all that unusual for an Oriental Potentate, but it was terrible just the same. And I also feel a little jealous. I mean, I have not seen an angel in months --not even in a dream-- yet here, in just ten short verses, Joseph sees, not one, but two and possibly a third when he is warned to go to Galilee to live. And look at the part that angels play throughout the Christmas story. First, Gabriel appears, saying that Elizabeth will give birth to John the Baptist. Then he shows up again, this time telling Mary that she will be the mother of Jesus. Then Joseph gets a visit --to make sure that he does not "jilt" the now pregnant Mary. And finally, at the birth of Jesus, nearby shepherds get the news -- you guessed it-- from an angel.

In all candor, however, I have to admit that angels can be a rather mixed blessing. They certainly add a great deal of charm to the Christmas story. So much so that it is hard to imagine Christmas without them, especially at this year's 9:00 a.m. kindergarten pageant, when we must have had a "zillion" of them. At Christmas, angels are not only traditional and charming, they are almost essential.

But they are also a bit of an embarrassment. You see, many people today do not believe in angels any more than they believe in leprechauns, or fairies, or trolls. And the presence of angels can give the Christmas story a kind of fairy-tale character. Perhaps that is why, for many, Christmas has become more pageant than religion.

Even those who believe in angels have their problems. I will not embarrass you by asking for a show of hands, but have you ever seen one? Do you know anyone who has? Billy Graham once wrote a book about angels, but even he admits he has never seen one. Instead, he tells us that he believes in them because they are mentioned in the Bible, and he considers the Bible to be literally true. But where have all the angels gone? Why do they not appear to us the way they did in Bible days?

I confess that I do not have any really definitive answer to that question, but I do not feel too bad about that. After all, Billy Graham wrote 175 pages and he was not definitive either. I suppose only God knows whether angels really exist or if they are just a primitive way to symbolize God's revelation of Himself and of His will. That is what angels do, you know. Both in Hebrew and in Greek, the word we translate as "angel" really means messenger, human as well as otherwise. Since they did not have telephones or fax machines when people in Bible times wanted to communicate with someone else, they sent an "angel," a messenger. And what really concerns us is not the delivery boy who brings it, but the message, itself. So when I ask, "Where have all the angels gone?" what I am really asking is "Why is it that God does not communicate with us the way the Bible says He use to?"

I suppose one conceivable answer is that He no longer wants to. But that hardly seems likely. The Bible says that God is love, and it is the nature of love to seek out its beloved. I have no doubt that we have sorely tried God's patience. But the whole idea of the Incarnation is that God loves us just the same. And, if He does, then, by the very nature of love, He must still be reaching out to us, trying to say, "I love you."

A better reason for poor communication with God might be that we are just not listening. There are those, for instance, who do not really believe in God. At least, they do not believe enough to talk to Him. Certainly not enough to look for any answers. Still others think of God only as some kind of abstract principle: nature or love personified, or something like Paul Tillich's "Ground of Being," which I confess I never fully understood. To them, the thought of any real communication must seem pretty silly.

But the best possibility --and no doubt the most universal-- is that there is just too much interference. As some of you know, I have had an amateur radio license for nearly forty years. I almost said I have been a "ham" for nearly forty years, but I do not want to give my friends such an obvious straight line. At any rate, it often happens in amateur communications that a signal is loud enough but is still what "hams" call unreadable. Unreadable because there is too much interference, either from static or from some other nearby signal. That is especially true today when there are so many more "hams" than ever before.

Could that not account for our difficulty in hearing God? If you check, you will find that Biblical contacts with God --or with His angels-- are almost always found in moments of quiet serenity. Moses out on the hillside, tending his father-in-law's sheep. Samuel as he was about to go to sleep. Isaiah praying alone in the temple. John the Baptist's father, all by himself at the altar of incense. Mary alone at home. The shepherds in the quiet of the night. Joseph in his dreams. Peter up on the rooftop, lost in prayer.

Is it any wonder that most of us no longer hear from God. Our lives are too noisy, too hurried, too crowded. Our ears are constantly bombarded by noise, incessant chatter and what my children call music. Stereos, telephones, television sets, walkmen radios, Muzak. Why, you can not even get put on hold on the telephone without hearing music or --if you are calling the church-- an intermittent beep. If God were to speak to us, when could He do so without being drowned out?

One obvious answer is in the sacrament, of which we are now about to partake. Our hearts and minds will be turned toward God. There will be quiet, save for the gentle caress of the organ. The elements of communion will be there as physical reminders of Him who was, and is, God's Holy Word made flesh. Perhaps during these moments --if we listen carefully enough-- we will hear God's gentle whisper. And, if we do we will hear two things. We will hear Him say, "I love you, My Child." And we will hear Him say, "I need you." Perhaps not hear it exactly, but sense it just the same.

God seeks us all the time. For God is love, and that is the nature of love. But if we let Him get through to us now, perhaps we shall hear Him better elsewhere. "Where have all the angels gone?" Surely they are with us still, and no place more than here at our Lord's table. Draw near, then, with faith, and receive this holy sacrament to your comfort and growth. And perhaps you will see an angel. Or, even better, perhaps you will leave this place prepared to be God's angel to someone else.