Isaiah 7: 10-16

Psalm 80:1-7

Romans 1: 1-7

Matthew 1: 18-25

The Providence of God Sermon for 12/18/16

(Angels We Have Heard On High)

I've only encountered one person in my life who I believed might be an angel. It happened years ago back when I was driving a big work van around the country and selling books and other things at antique shows. On this particular occasion, I had finished a show somewhere and it was now the following day and I was driving on a two-lane country highway on my way to set up another show in another town. I always used to drive on country roads rather than freeways unless I was in a big hurry to get somewhere, so that's where this was, basically out in the middle of nowhere. I don't remember what state it was - I want to say Missouri but I could be wrong - but I do remember it was late in the afternoon and it was a dreary drizzly kind of day.

And sure enough I blew a tire.

I managed to steer the van onto the shoulder, but now I knew I had a real problem. The only jack I carried was this little screw-type hydraulic guy and my van was loaded to the gills with merchandise, so that added a couple thousand extra pounds to the situation. I knew I'd have to unload the van there by the side of the road, then use this little jack to try to hoist the van off the ground, change the tire, then load the van up again. All of this with evening coming on and in a light but steady rain, which was a real problem because most of my merchandise was stuff made out of paper, so it couldn't get wet or I'd be out of business.

Needless to say this was before the invention of cell phones, and the chances of a helpful cop driving by were slim at best. So I'm sitting there feeling sorry for myself when I glanced to one of the side mirrors and I saw an old beat-up pickup pulling to a stop, and a guy who looked like one of the Deliverance family climbed out. That first sight literally sent chills up my spine, and what I did as he started to walk up to my van was almost instinctual. I grabbed my wallet, took all the money out of it, and stuck the money under the seat. Then I put the wallet back in my pocket and climbed out.

You will have guessed, of course, that he turned out to be a good Samaritan. Without even asking if I needed help, he hauled a professional garage jack out of the back of his pickup, rolled it under my van, jacked it up like it was nothing, and then even changed my tire, a cigarette tangling from his lip the whole time.

The worst part was that I was just starting to offer him something for his trouble when I realized all my cash was under the front seat of the van, so that if I went to get it, he might realize that I'd hidden it there from him. So I didn't offer him anything except thanks, and he was just as friendly as could be as he put his jack away, told me to have a good trip, and drove away.

The reason I tell this story at this length is because, as I watched him drive away down the road, I had a very clear and strong conviction I've never again experienced: the thought struck me with an almost unnerving sense of certainty, that this guy might have been an angel.

Now I've been helped by strangers other times in my life, sometimes out of trouble much worse than this particular occasion, but I never felt anything except gratitude towards them, certainly not that they were angels. I didn’t even believe in angels back then; in fact, I was pretty much a skeptic on all matters having to do with religion.

But right there, on that road on that day, until it faded away, I had a literally irresistible conviction that I had encountered an angel.

The reason I tell you this story today is because provides an opening into our gospel passage for this morning, which describes one of the pivotal elements of the nativity story of our Lord and Savior. Joseph has learned that his young bride to be is pregnant and he decides to break off his engagement and send her away to the life of a disgraced single mother. And then he has a dream, and in the dream an angel speaks to him, and as a result he decides to go ahead and marry the young girl.

Now many find it hard to understand how an intelligent grown Jewish man could make such a decision on the basis of a dream. By normal Jewish reckoning, Mary had committed adultery, a sin punishable by death, and marrying her would be equally adulterous, equally deserving of punishment. Yet on the instruction of a dream-angel, he compromises everything he believes, everything he is, as a Jew, and goes ahead with the marriage.

If this episode occurred in a novel, I think nearly everyone would consider it a weakness in the plot, or perhaps evidence that Joseph wasn't quite right in the head.

But it's not a novel, it's a gospel account of the birth story of Jesus Christ. So what we conclude instead is that the appearance of the dream-angel to Joseph was accompanied by such an overwhelming conviction that he was willing to act in opposition to everything he'd been taught, everything he was, everything he had believed when he lay down to sleep that night.

And what that tells us, I believe, is that Joseph's **conviction** came just as directly from God as did the appearance of the dream angel itself.

And in that very way, each of the elements of the nativity story can be understood best, I think, as various Christmas gifts from God. The star in the East that guided the Magi, the heavenly chorus that serenaded the shepherds in the hills outside Bethlehem: these were gifts of the best kind: Christmas gifts.

And as gifts they speak to the all-embracing, nigh incomprehensible loving providence of God. Without that star to guide them, the Magi would never have been led to the little baby's bedside; without the glorious chorus from on high, the shepherds would have stayed huddled with their sheep that night; and without his conviction, Joseph would have adhered to the unforgiving laws of his heritage. God works in mysterious ways, his wonders to achieve.

Thinking this way, in terms of gift-giving and providence, helps us appreciate even more the tremendous gift we’ve all been given this morning. Out of all the wonderful Christmas hymns and songs they might have chosen to offer in church today, Marcy and Al chose The Little Drummer Boy, a song about a little boy’s precious gift of music to the baby Jesus. Little did they know at the time that their own performance would provide an introduction. An introduction to what? An introduction to a little boy’s precious gift of music to the baby Jesus. Mere coincidence? I don’t think so. I’d call it providential.

In Marcy and Al’s song, Our Lord smiles at the little drummer boy, both accepting and hallowing his gift. With absolute certainty, we know that Jesus was smiling, as were we all, during Colton Smith’s wonderful gift to Him and to us. Surely this is all providential.

And isn’t this a perfect entrance into the marvelous Christian message that all good things - from the very least up to and including His own son - that all good things are gifts of God, that all are equally holy, and that all are equally vital parts of the unfathomable providence of God.

Although I did not believe in angels back then, and although my certainty almost immediately began to fade, nonetheless that mysterious and to me at the time almost embarrassing conviction on that day many long years ago, was undoubtedly something necessary, right then, right there, to feed the process of redirecting a wayward and corrupt child of God back in the direction where lay his ultimate good.

And just so, the conviction Joseph experienced that night was woven into the providence that made him the loving earthly father of God, and thereby the benefactor of all humanity.

We don't run into angels every day - at least I don't - but we do every day run into the gifts of God. If we receive them, they are ours forever, in the sense that God's providential love will incorporate them into a journey that brings us closer to Him. The music we've heard together this morning will be part of that journey. The prayers we pray together will be part of that journey. The love we share is always part of that journey.

Once we’re sensitive to it, we find God’s providence everywhere, around every corner. Usually we call it coincidence, but as the rabbis are fond of pointing out, there is no word in Hebrew – God’s own native tongue – for coincidence. I’ll conclude with one last example. Remember the song Colton played for us, and then before you leave this morning, take a close look at Colton, and at Marcy, and Al, and Shannon. It might be that, just like those shepherds in the hails on that first Christmas night, it might be that Angels we have heard on high.

And so, Lord, let our prayer for this morning be that you enable us to recognize the angels that you send into our lives every day. Open our ears to their voices, even when the voices are still and small. Open our eyes to their beauty, even when that beauty is disguised by old age, by disease, by hardship. Most of all, open our hearts to the limitless love you offer us in the gift of your precious child, Jesus Christ, in whose name we pray.