**Christmas Eve 2022**

**Luke 2**

**Angels Among Us**

**Luke 2:1-27**

In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered. **2**This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. **3**All went to their own towns to be registered. **4**Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. **5**He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. **6**While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. **7**And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

As I mentioned earlier, we’ve been talking a lot about angels this Advent. Angels feature in the whole Christmas narrative which is probably why they end up on top of a lot of our Christmas trees. And they play major roles in a good number of Christmas movies. When you think of angels, which Christmas movie comes to mind for you?

*It’s a Wonderful Life* is the one that comes to mind for me. If you haven’t seen it, it is not too late!

The 1946 film stars Jimmy Stewart as George Bailey, a middle-class banker from Bedford Falls, a small town in New York. Throughout the movie, George is faced with one emergency after another (financial and family alike), which means he never gets to follow his dreams of seeing the world and building great buildings and bridges. He stays home and runs his father’s bank. A devastating issue at the bank causes him to consider ending his own life. Luckily, an angel named Clarence intervenes.

Clarence shows George how valuable he’s always been to his town, his family, and his friends. As Clarence replays George’s life for him, George is reminded of the ways in which he consistently put others first: risking his life to save his little brother who fell through the ice, standing up to the vile businessman Mr. Potter, and starting a beautiful family with his wife Mary. At one point, Clarence also lets George in on a little divine secret; “every time a bell rings, it means an angel gets his wings.” When Clarence first shares that with George, he scoffs. He eventually changes his tune, though, and is thrilled to hear a bell ring at the end of the movie as he holds his daughter in his arms. Clarence got his wings!

“Attaboy, Clarence,” George says.

So, for those of you who have seen the movie, here is tonight’s Christmas Eve trivia question. Without Googling…In the movie*, It’s a Wonderful Life*, if it’s true that an angel gets his wings every time a bell rings, how many angels got their wings throughout the movie? In other words, how many bells ring in the movie?

According to the Internet Movie Database, 42 bells ring throughout the movie. That is a lot of angelic activity in one movie! It makes me wonder…how many angels will get their wings while we worship tonight?

As we’ve read parts of the Christmas story throughout Advent, we’ve noticed a lot of angelic activity in it as well. Which is why it is funny to me, that here, in the author of Luke’s story of Jesus’ actual birth, some would say the climax of the whole story, there is not a single angel mentioned. If Rev. Hubbard had continued reading, she would have gotten to the part about the angels’ encounter with the shepherds. But when Jesus was born, “in the room where it happened,” so to speak, when his parents got their first glimpse of his face and soothed his first cry (and yes Jesus did cry), there wasn’t an angel checking on Mary or reassuring Joseph. Angels visited Zechariah, Mary, and Joseph prior to this, but on the night of the main event, no angel. Doesn’t that seem odd to you?

Wouldn’t you think God would have some kind of message for the couple on this, probably the biggest night of their lives? I would think so, especially since things weren’t going that smoothly. As Joseph, miles from home, placed that new baby in a feeding trough, it seems like that would have been a great time for an angel to pop in and say, “Do not be afraid!” Had all the angels been preemptively dispatched to the shepherds? I wonder, was there something else going on that required a heavy angelic presence that night? What could have been more important than this birth?

What possible reason would there be for the author to leave angels out of this part of the story, perhaps just when an angel would have been most helpful? Where are the angels? Rev. Hubbard read the story from the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible. In that translation, this is verse 7, “And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.” I read the story this week in the New Revised Standard Updated Edition. In that translation, verse 7 ends differently, “[Mary] laid him in the manger because there was no place in the guest room.” Additionally, there was a foot note after verse 7 that said another possible translation for that ending is, “…[Mary] laid him in a manger, because there was no place in their room.”

“…no place for them in the inn,” “…no place in the guest room,” “…no place in their room.” This difference could change the way we read the story. When the verse is translated, “…no room at the inn,” it sounds inhospitable, like Mary and Joseph weren’t welcome. That mean old innkeeper. How could he turn away a pregnant woman and send this couple to sleep with the animals? But, truthfully, the text doesn’t really say that’s what happened.

Is it possible that “no place,” didn’t refer to there not being a room for Mary and Joseph? Maybe there was simply “no place” for the baby to sleep. When the baby was born, there wasn’t a place to put him when he wasn’t being held. A feeding trough was perfect. They could line it with straw and blankets. The baby would be warm and cozy there. A feeding trough really isn’t a great departure from some traditions even now. In Finland, families with newborns are all given a baby box.

There is even research that says baby boxes are safer than other options.

But we don’t have to go all the way to Finland to see babies in boxes. Some parents in the U.S. are opting to use baby boxes and hospitals are giving them to new parents when they are discharged.

And then, there is this little one (pictured on the screen) who lives much closer to us than Finland or even Colorado. She was traveling recently with her parents and seemed pretty cozy in that box when they reached their destination.

What if there was a place for Mary and Joseph to stay? It is likely Joseph had relatives in Bethlehem since that was his place of origin. What if his family made room for them and the whole household bustled around getting the couple what they needed? What if, when Jesus was born, Mary and Joseph weren’t staying with the animals but were warm and safe in their relatives’ house, in the guest room. They just needed a baby box in which Jesus could sleep. If that is what happened, maybe the reason there weren’t “professional angels” present at the birth was because there were plenty of angels already there…Angels that look a lot us, who prepared their room; angels that brought the manger to them, ready for Jesus when he was born; angels who made the couple food and maybe an angel who helped Mary as she fed the baby for the first time. Maybe there was a house full of people who were, indeed, angels. The absence of Gabriel and the other heavenly messengers made room for human beings to step up, and act as messengers of God’s love that night.

This reminds me of a story I heard about an encounter between sculptor Michelangelo and one of his neighbors. According to the legend, one day Michelangelo was pushing a boulder up the hill to his house. The neighbor, observing this, was quite curious. His curiosity only increased when he saw the sculptor take out his hammer and chisel and begin hammering on the boulder. Not able to resist getting closer, the neighbor crossed the street and inquired, “Why are you hammering on that boulder?” to which Michelangelo replied, “There’s an angel inside and I’m trying to let it out.”

Human beings, I think, are a lot like that boulder. Inside each one of us is an angel, just waiting to be let out, just waiting to share God’s message of love with other people. There are a lot of people who could use an angel, maybe even an angel who takes a page out of Clarence’s book and reminds them that they matter, that just by being alive, the world is different and better. There are a lot of people who need an angel to tell them they don’t have to be afraid anymore, or an angel that points them to God’s love.

The Christmas story teaches us that there are always angels among us, even if they don’t yet have their wings, and there are angels inside us, ready to love other people well. And sometimes we are the ones saying, “Do not be afraid,” and sometimes we are the ones who need to hear it. Tonight, we celebrate angels everywhere, the ones who spoke to and cared for Mary and Joseph so long ago, the ones who announced Jesus’ birth to the shepherds on the hillside, and the ones, like you, who herald messages of hope, peace, joy, and love in our world today.

You are all angels as far as I’m concerned. Merry Christmas!