

HEAR THE ANGELS SING
a sermon by Dr. David Palmer, United Methodist Church of Kent
Christmas Eve, 2017

The sermon this evening is entitled, “Hear the Angels Sing.” Let us begin with a moment of prayer . . .

On the Sunday after Thanksgiving, three Kent Roosevelt vocal ensembles gathered to sing at the Christmas tree festival at the John S. Knight center. The singers were on risers in front of the grand staircase. There were rows of chairs for all the people who had gathered to hear them sing, and then behind the rows of chairs there were some round tables with chairs. Off to the side was a snack stand with popcorn, pretzels, and chips. This made for an interesting scenario.

A particularly boisterous group, having just visited the snack stand, settled in around a couple of the round tables. The singers began their mini-concert, sending forth beautiful sounds of uplifting Christmas music; but at the tables, people were conversing loudly, laughing, yelling at their small children, and wolfing down popcorn and chips. The raucous noise kept going through song after song, and reached a crescendo as the Aces ensemble began to sing, “E’en so, Lord Jesus, Quickly Come.” Yes, those of us straining to hear the choir were longing for the second coming of Christ right there at those tables. But instead there occurred simply a striking disjunction. Through the room there floated a sublime melody, as the singers intoned a heavenly message—Peace be to you and grace from him who freed us from our sins, who loved us all and shed his blood, that we might saved be . . .”—while at the tables no one heard. It was as if a choir of angels were singing, and people were oblivious.

Is this not a picture of our human condition? God speaks to us, but many people are so caught in the noise and hubbub of the world that they simply do not hear. And while God sends forth a message of grace and peace, the world is a place of tumult and discord.

This sort of disjunction characterized the first Christmas. When God entered the world in Jesus, most people did not notice. Of course, there was not much to notice—just the birth of a child in a stable. But neither did the Roman world much notice when a Galilean preacher was going about the countryside speaking about God, or when he was put to death later on a cross. You might think that maybe God needed to deal in stronger fashion with humanity, that instead of giving us a lullaby at Christmas, what God really needed to do was to knock us over the head, to shout at us, in order to set humanity straight.

Certainly at the John S. Knight center on that Sunday, those of us who were sitting in the rows of chairs were tempted to stand up, turn around, and yell at the people at those round tables, telling them to shut up and listen to the choir. But we sensed that that would not be very Christmas-y, and in any case, it would probably not have brought a

good response. Those folks would have just thrown their popcorn at us and yelled back. You can't force people to listen to the music of heaven.

So God chooses to deal with humanity in gentler fashion. God does not barge into our world with a booming voice or signs of great power, but relates to us in subtle ways. This allows us the freedom to pay attention to God, or not.

What this means is that if we want to connect with God, we need to attune ourselves to God; and indeed this is at the heart of what faith is—it is the opening of the spirit to God, so that we can hear God's Word and experience the touch of God's Spirit. This is why it is so valuable to do what you are doing tonight—to step away for a moment from the din and the distractions of the world to join in a service of worship where we can let hearts be receptive to the voice of God. Yet even as we seek to step aside from the hubbub of the world around us, we may find that there is still a turmoil within us. We deal with so many worries and pressures and disappointments and frustrations that we may struggle to find enough inner stillness for God to reach our hearts and minds. Our situation is thus well illustrated in this Christmas Eve video . . .

The message of Christmas is that God is here with us; and even within all the swirl of life, it is possible to experience God, right here and right now. It is significant that in the Biblical stories of Christmas Eve, it was precisely within the tumult of daily life that ordinary people encountered the reality of God. Mary and Joseph were traveling to Bethlehem for a census. Fulfilling a government obligation is never fun, traveling was arduous, especially during a pregnancy, and they struggled to find any lodging; but in the midst of all that turmoil and trouble the most extraordinary night in human history occurred. Shepherds were out in the field at night with their flocks, which seems to us a pleasant image, but in reality the daily life of a first century shepherd was most unpleasant. It was cold in the Judean hill country at night, the sheep were dirty, the work was dull, and the ground was hard. But precisely within the drudgery of an ordinary day at work those shepherds heard the voice of angels.

So the Christmas story proclaims that even if life is full of chaos and clutter, and even if we are dealing with struggles and pains, we can encounter God with us; and when that happens, life becomes transformed. Along with the shepherds, and with Mary and Joseph, we can find that God is near, that life has a purpose, and that there is genuine hope for our future. We can experience the reality of God's saving love, and in God's mercy we can begin to relate to other people differently; even towards those people who really irritate us, we can show the grace of God. And when we are so moved by God's Spirit, we begin to change the world around us.

The key for us, within all the confusion and the cacophony of the world, is to direct our hearts toward what is truly important—to connect with how God is reaching to us right now in Jesus Christ. When we open our hearts in faith, then we can hear the angels

sing—we can hear how God is speaking to us—and we can share in the real peace and joy of Christmas.