Luke 1:19 *Christmas Presence: Angelic View of Christmas*

We called our Christmas series of messages this year Christmas Presence. It’s a play on words. Obviously, right now a lot of us are thinking about presents. We are thinking about gifts under the Christmas tree. We’re wondering if we got a new phone, or a new sweater, or maybe even a new car.

But the point of Christmas is not just the exchanging of gifts, it’s the presence of God come to earth as the Holy Child Jesus. We are celebrating God’s presence in our midst.

And so, the question we asked was: what happens in the Bible when God’s presence shows up? And to pick our passages each week, we simply opened up our Bible app and searched for the words: the presence of God.

And the passage of scripture we found that connected most closely with the Christmas story was Luke 1:19. Here’s what **Luke 1:19** says:

**19**The angel said to him, “I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to tell you this good news.”

This verse is part of the story of John the Baptist. The Christmas story starts with the prediction of the birth of Jesus’ cousin John. For 400 years, since the prophet Malachi, God has been silent. But then He sends His angel to a priest named Zechariah to tell him that he and his barren wife are going to have a child. John the Baptist is the forerunner to Jesus, and his miraculous birth sets the stage for Jesus’ miraculous birth.

Luke 1:19, then, is the angel Gabriel identifying himself to Zechariah. He essentially gives his job description. As an angel, he has two jobs. He stands in the presence of God. And He announces good news. Angels are heavenly beings who attend to God. And they are messengers. In fact, the Greek word from which we get the word “angel” is a word which originally meant “to send a message.”

And it occurred to me that angels play a big part in the Christmas story. We often put angels on the top of our Christmas trees and we like Christmas cards that portray the angels singing to the shepherds. Usually when we picture an angel we imagine golden hair, a lot of white robes, a lot of light, and wings.

In reality, we have no idea what an angel looks like. Scripture tells us that there are angels engaged in protecting us, but they are invisible. It is rare to actually see an angel—but sometimes the Bible tells us that an angel will appear in physical form. Whenever that happens, the response is invariably great fear and terror. We can assume that angels are awe inspiring and beyond anything we can imagine.

So angels stand in the presence of God, and they deliver good news on God’s behalf. In particular, they were instrumental in delivering the good news of Jesus’ birth. And so, that got me to wondering, what if we told the story of Christmas from the angels’ point of view. **What did Christmas look like as the angels saw it?**

***Before the Throne***

What I’m going to do today is share a number of scripture passages that show angels engaging with Jesus on His first trip from heaven. With each passage, we’ll ask the question: What did the angels see? Our goal is to get an angelic perspective on the Christmas story.

I’m going to read several passages of scripture, and when I do, it will appear—almost miraculously—on the screen behind me.

And I want to start by trying to get a sense of what the angels saw before Jesus came to earth. So we will begin in the Old Testament. **Isaiah 6:1-4:**

1 In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord seated on a throne, high and exalted, and the train of his robe filled the temple. 2 Above him were seraphs, each with six wings: With two wings they covered their faces, with two they covered their feet, and with two they were flying. 3 And they were calling to one another:

“Holy, holy, holy is the LORD Almighty;
the whole earth is full of his glory.”

4 At the sound of their voices the doorposts and thresholds shook and the temple was filled with smoke.

This is a picture of angels standing in the presence of God. God is seated on His throne and these seraphs—which is another name for angels—are hovering around this glorious majesty and calling out to one another “Holy, Holy, Holy is the Lord Almighty.” It is nearly impossible for Isaiah to describe these creatures: six wings, covering their faces and their feet, flying to and fro, and with voices that shake the foundations of the temple.

This is a glimpse of Jesus before the incarnation. This is where Jesus was before He became a fetus growing inside of Mary’s womb. He was seated on the heavenly throne receiving un-ending worship from angels. He is the Almighty God, attended to by thunder and earthquakes and a heavenly choir.

Think of the words that describe Isaiah’s vision: Worthy. Glorious. Majestic. The King. That’s what the angels saw.

***Hail Mary!***

But now fast-forward to the New Testament. Luke, chapter 1. A tiny village in Galilee called Nazareth. A young girl—probably barely a teen-ager—at her prayers. And the angel Gabriel—fresh off his announcement to Zechariah--has the joy and privilege to come to her and make this historic, world changing announcement. **Luke 1:26-38:**

26 In the sixth month, 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 favored! The Lord is with you.”

Right away, Gabriel starts with God’s grace. Mary is highly favored. The Lord was with her. **Verse 29:**

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 favor with God.

Here’s something that happens a lot with angels. Angels show up, and people are afraid. Angels are almost always saying “Do not be afraid.”

It’s almost like they have this training session for angels that are going to appear to humans. “So, first you say hello. Then, they’re probably going to freak out a little bit.” “Well, what do I say?” “Just say, ‘Do not be afraid.’”

But I don’t know how much it helps. It’s like, if I’m going to have surgery and I’m lying on the table and the surgeon says to me: “You look kinda scared” and I say, “Well, I guess I kinda am” and he says “Well, do not be afraid”…. I’m sorry, but that doesn’t really help. “You’re not the one having surgery, I am. So don’t tell me not to be afraid.”

So you have to sympathize with the angels a little bit. I guarantee you; if an angel showed up in this room right now, we would all be afraid. There would not be a casual observer among us. **Verse 30 again:**

30 But the angel said to her, “Do not be afraid, Mary, you have found favor with God. 31 You will be with child and give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name 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 the house of Jacob forever; his kingdom will never end.”

34 “How will this be,” Mary asked the angel, “since I am a virgin?” [Good question.]

35 The angel answered, “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called 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 barren is in her sixth month. 37 For nothing is impossible with God.”

38 “I am the Lord’s servant,” Mary answered. “May it be to me as you have said.” Then the angel left her.

Here’s the angel carrying out his job description: He comes from the presence of God—where he’s been calling “Holy, Holy, Holy”—and he announces good news. He geys to announce the coming of the “holy…Son of God.”

This angel looked into the eyes of Mary, the mother of Jesus. And she was scared and confused.

But she was also humble and believing. Mary gets this astounding news, and she says: “I am the Lord’s servant, may it be to me as you have said.” This is a great act of faith. And we should honor her for it, without ever worshipping her. Mary found favor with God. God acted on her behalf.

And Gabriel saw it all.

***Joseph***

But somebody had to tell Joseph.

Imagine you are Joseph for a minute. Mary comes to you and tries to explain what is happening. Imagine what that must have felt like: this girl for whom he has kept himself pure has come to tell him that she is pregnant. Imagine the anger and hurt. And then she cooks up this outlandish story about still being a virgin, says that the angel Gabriel came to her and explained she was giving birth to God’s Son. Imagine how hard that story would be to swallow. How fanciful.

Joseph does not believe that story. So angelic intervention is required. **Matthew 1:18** and following:

18 This is how the birth of Jesus Christ came about: His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be with child through the Holy Spirit. 19 Because Joseph her husband was a righteous man and did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly.

Joseph is a kind man. Commendably so. He has to divorce Mary, but he wants to do so in a way that spares her as much humiliation as possible. He resolves to end the engagement quietly. And then he drifts off to sleep, just like he does every night, but this time with an understandably heavy heart. **Verse 20:**

20 But after he had considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, “Joseph son of David, do not be afraid [There’s that line again] to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. 21 She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins.”

22 All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: 23 “The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel”—which means, “God with us.”

24 When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife. 25 But he had no union with her until she gave birth to a son. And he gave him the name Jesus.

This time the angel is unnamed. And he comes to Joseph in a dream and confirms everything Mary has told him.

Imagine—informed speculation, we do not have an account—but imagine the conversation the next day as Joseph seeks Mary out and says: “I believe you. I know.”

Imagine their bond as together they share the knowledge that God is up to something unprecedented. Imagine their shared faith, sticking it out in the face of public opinion that must surely think they’ve gone off the deep end.

And, again, it is an angel who leaves the presence of God and has the privilege of delivering the Good News.

***Light the Night Sky***

Now, upon the Savior’s birth, the angels are again involved. Jesus is born in Bethlehem and the angels cannot be restrained from expressing their excitement. **Luke 2:8:**

8 And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. 9 An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. 10 But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid. [!!] I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. 11 Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord. 12 This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.”

13 Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying,

14 “Glory to God in the highest,
and on earth peace to men on whom his favor rests.”

A black sky—untainted by artificial light of any kind—suddenly torn open by not just one, but a great company of the heavenly host—and they are praising God and singing. No wonder the shepherds were terrified.

Heaven cannot contain its excitement at what is happening.

Now, think about it from a heavenly perspective. Think about what they see. The One Who sits on the throne, the One that they are eternally engaged in worshipping, now lies wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger. The Darling of Heaven has become Mary’s little boy. Imagine the angels’ wonder.

***Attending***

Move ahead. Let’s keep the angelic perspective as we look at the rest of Jesus’ story. At the inception of Jesus’ public ministry following the baptism by John, Jesus is led by the spirit into the wilderness where He fasts for forty days and forty nights and then He is tempted by the devil. At the end of the temptations, **Matthew 4:11** says this:

11 Then the devil left him, and angels came and attended him.

Here’s what the angels saw: they saw the Creator of the universe on His knees wracked with hunger. They saw the Holy, Holy, Holy God subjecting Himself to temptation at the hands of a rebel angel. And they saw the Righteous One send Satan packing with the sharp sword of God’s Word.

They observed. They studied. They saw. And then they were sent to minister to Him after He had successfully withstood this attempt by the Evil One to undermine the plan of God. They saw it all.

***Strengthening***

We don’t hear much more about angels in Jesus’ story until Gethsemane.

On the eve of the darkest day in human history Jesus finds Himself alone in prayer—in agony really—asking His Father to find some way to take the cup away from Him. And the response? Silence.

So Jesus prays again. And again the response is silence. So bad was His distress that we are told His sweat was like drops of blood falling to the ground. But Jesus prays again, and says: “Father, if you are willing…yet not my will, but yours be done.”

And then **Luke 22:43** tells us:

43 An angel from heaven appeared to him and strengthened him.

Alexander Whyte, the famous Scottish preacher of the 19th Century, once said that when he gets to heaven, after talking with Jesus, he’d like his first conversation to be with this angel. “Who knows what depths of suffering this angel came to witness.”

Imagine the scene. The angels of heaven are intently watching the Savior. He is staggering under the knowledge that He is about to face all the wrath of God poured out against sin. They overhear Him praying to the Father. They take notice of the Father’s silence. He prays again. The Father is silent again. Then the Savior commits to do the Father’s will. And suddenly an angel is given an assignment. The Father chooses an angel and He says, “I want you to go and strengthen My Son.”

Imagine you are that angel. What did that angel see? When that angel arrived and looked into the eyes of Jesus remember that he is looking into the eyes of the One Who created Him! This is the Son of God by whom and for whom all things have been made—including the angels. This angel, as he looked into the Son of God’s eyes, is perhaps remembering the first time he ever laid eyes on the Son of God—when, immediately upon being created, he would have beheld the Savior’s glory and would have begun crying: “Holy, Holy, Holy is the Lord God Almighty!”

And now, as this angel attends to and strengthens Jesus he looks into the eyes of the Creator and he sees the horrific reality of Calvary reflected there. He saw what nobody had ever seen before.

***Straining at the Bit***

Now, after this, the angels find themselves unable to get involved.

Shortly after this prayer the chief priests and the elders come to arrest Jesus. They come with swords and clubs and in a brief moment of bravado Peter and the others rise up to defend their Master. But **Jesus says**:

52 “Put your sword back in its place, for all who draw the sword will die by the sword. 53 Do you think I cannot call on my Father, and he will at once put at my disposal more than twelve legions of angels? 54 But how then would the Scriptures be fulfilled that say it must happen in this way?” (Matthew 26:52-54)

At this point I imagine the angels lined up on the launch pad of heaven. Ready to go, if God just says the word.

But God says nothing.

* They could only observe as Jesus was arrested.
* They could only observe as the One who created them was falsely accused.
* They could only observe as He was mocked.
* They could only observe as He was beaten.
* They could only observe as He was spit upon.
* They could only observe as a crown of thorns was pressed upon His head.

They could only observe.

Oh, they wanted to intervene. They were poised to spring to His defense. They were straining at the bit. But from this point on, they could only observe.

They would have no role as He made His way to Calvary. They would have no role as the nails are driven into His hands. They would have no role as He gasped for breath. They would have no role as He suffered.

Legions of angels could only watch as hour after hour passed and He slowly became unrecognizable as a human being. They could only watch as He strained against death, breaking the silence only with an occasional cry of pain. They could only watch as He whispered, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”

And they must have wondered: “Yes God, why?”

* They must have been looking at the Father, begging Him to just say the word and they would fly to Jesus’ aid.
* Just say the word and they would end His suffering and put Caiaphas and Pilate and their cronies in their place.
* Just say the word and Jesus would be removed from the cross and restored to His rightful place as the object of worship for all the cosmos.

JUST SAY THE WORD!

But the word never came.

***Angelic Limitation***

You see, at Calvary we encounter angelic limitation. Up to this, we have not seen any limits on what angels could do. They announced the Savior’s birth. They attended to Him after the temptation. They strengthened Him at Gethsemane. But at Calvary, they could only observe.

And their role is limited because angels cannot save sinners like you and me. God did not send an angel to save sinners. God sent His Son.

Only the Son of God manifested in the flesh, truly God and truly man, could mediate between God and sinners. Only the Son of God could fully bear the righteous wrath of God against sin through His perfect life. Only the Son of God in full humanity could be a suitable sacrifice of atonement for the sins that you and I have committed. An angel could not do it. Only God in the flesh.

Not only is the angelic role limited, the angelic understanding is limited as well.

Because even though the angels observed what happened at Calvary, what happened there was not for them. Angels do not know sin. Angels do not know separation from God. They are beings of a different order.

And so even though they announced His birth and attended to Him while on earth and observed the cross, they could never fully understand it. Because God did not send Jesus for angels. He did not die on the cross for angels. He did not shed his blood for angels.

God sent Jesus for sinners like you and me.

**1 Peter 1:12** gives us insight into the angels’ perspective. Talking about the gospel of salvation and the sufferings of Christ on the cross it says:

Even angels long to look into these things.

The angels had a privileged position and played a unique role in the story of the Savior coming to earth. They study it and observe it and long to understand the depths of love that brought Jesus to earth.

But His coming was not for them.

His death was not for them.

It was for us.

***The Best Good News of All***The angels have one more job to do in Jesus’ story. It’s on the third day after the cross. Early on the first day of the week. **Matthew 28:2:**

**2**There was a violent earthquake, for an angel of the Lord came down from heaven and, going to the tomb, rolled back the stone and sat on it.**3**His appearance was like lightning, and his clothes were white as snow.**4**The guards were so afraid of him that they shook and became like dead men.

The angel given this assignment must have enjoyed it a great deal. Instead of telling the guards to not be afraid, he lets them get the full angelic effect. And then he rolls back the stone that sealed death’s door and turns it into a recliner. Then, **in verse 5**, he gets to announce the best good news ever:

5The angel said to the women, “Do not be afraid, for I know that you are looking for Jesus, who was crucified. 6He is not here; he has risen, just as he said.

Here’s why the Holy Son of God left the throneroom of heaven and took on our flesh and blood. It was so that He could take on our greatest enemy—death—and then walk out of His own grave. This is how we know that Jesus’ death was effective in buying our redemption: because He didn’t stay dead. He has risen, just as he said.

And when He calls our names, we too will coming running out of our graves.

***What Do You Long to See?***

So now think about the angels’ perspective and our own.

We did not play a part in redemptive history. We did not request Jesus’ coming. Had we been there, we would have acted no differently than anyone else who despised and rejected Him. Without divine revelation we would not have recognized Him. And when He went to the cross, unless God mercifully intervened, we would have joined our voices to those who were crying “Crucify Him!”

We played no role. We contributed nothing. And yet Jesus came for us.

What the angels long to look into we have experienced by the grace of God. What the angels have eagerly sought to understand and follow has actually been God’s love outpoured for you and me.

The angels were a part of the story, but Christmas isn’t about angels. It’s about what they saw. It’s about the good news they announced.

Christmas is about Jesus coming to earth for you and me. To reconcile sinners to a righteous and holy God.

Do we long to look into this good news the same way the angels do?

I’m glad so many of you are here today. Maybe you came because you are home and your family said this is what you were going to do tonight. Maybe you heard our ad on the radio. Maybe you were invited by a neighbor. Maybe you were just driving by and decided you wanted to come.

It’s Christmas Eve, it’s a good day to be in church. I often say that as a preacher, Christmas Eve is like my Super Bowl. I’m glad there are so many people here. It makes me feel good.

But more important than having a nice crowd, I’m glad that you get to hear the good news of Jesus’ coming. I’m glad I get to share with you this reminder that the Christmas story is more than a cute baby and fuzzy sheep and shiny, singing angels. It’s a rescue mission. The Holy God of the Universe came to earth to rescue you and me from death.

He was seen by angels. But He died for sinners.

He died for me. He died for you. And you can put your faith in Him today. You can worship Him, just as the angels around the throne do, because He is the One who died and rose again for your salvation.

No wonder then that **the angel said**:

I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. 11 Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord.