

5In the time of Herod king of Judea there was a priest named Zechariah, who belonged to the priestly division of Abijah; his wife Elizabeth was also a descendant of Aaron. 6Both of them were upright in the sight of God, observing all the Lord's commandments and regulations blamelessly. 7But they had no children, because Elizabeth was barren; and they were both well along in years.

8Once when Zechariah's division was on duty and he was serving as priest before God, 9he was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to go into the temple of the Lord and burn incense. 10And when the time for the burning of incense came, all the assembled worshipers were praying outside.

11Then an angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing at the right side of the altar of incense. 12When Zechariah saw him, he was startled and was gripped with fear. 13But the angel said to him: "Do not be afraid, Zechariah; your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you are to give him the name John. 14He will be a joy and delight to you, and many will rejoice because of his birth, 15for he will be great in the sight of the Lord. He is never to take wine or other fermented drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit even from birth. 16Many of the people of Israel will he bring back to the Lord their God. 17And he will go on before the Lord, in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous—to make ready a people prepared for the Lord."

18Zechariah asked the angel, "How can I be sure of this? I am an old man and my wife is well along in years."

19The angel answered, "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. 20And now you will be silent and not able to speak until the day this happens, because you did not believe my words, which will come true at their proper time."

A parishioner asked if I believe everything I say in sermons. I replied "Yes, of course I believe everything I say in sermons, why else would I say it?" I've been thinking about that exchange and have to admit that I may have answered too quickly. As I considered her question, I realized that some of the things I say in sermons are things I desperately want to believe, indeed things I know are True with a capital "T", things I know I, indeed we, should believe and yet things that are quite difficult to believe in our post-modern, rational context. But it's not just the post-modern, age of reason in which we live that causes us to doubt—doubt is nearly as old as time, indeed doubt is just a second younger than belief. There's a story in the book of Luke in which a father brings his ill son to Jesus to be healed. Jesus asks, "How long has he been like this?" The father says "from childhood . . . if you can do anything, take pity on us and help us." Jesus replies, "If [I] can[?!?!] Everything is possible for him who believes." Immediately the boy's father exclaimed, "I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief!" And this is the way I, and I'm guessing that many of you, sometimes feel when it comes to matters of faith. We believe but we have our doubts and our greatest desire is to believe to more fully, with our fullest conviction, free from any doubt.

I find this to be especially true for me when it comes to a topic that is popular during Advent and Christmas—angels. A few years ago someone recommended to me a book about angels and while I nodded pleasantly and thanked her for the recommendation I confess that inside I was thinking, "Yeah, right, like a serious theologian such as myself is going to read a book about angels." It was all just a little too "Oprah" for me. I think that is why I've chosen to explore the topic of angels throughout this Advent and Christmas—I think it might be a way for me to "overcome my disbelief".

And yet who am I to question the existence of angels? We find accounts of celestial beings throughout scripture. In this morning's passage Zechariah, the future father of John the Baptist, is visited by an angel who declares to him, "Do not be afraid, your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son . . . He will be a joy and delight to you, and many will rejoice because of his birth." It's a beautiful story and the angel's prophesy comes true. I don't question that story. And yet, if I read on a tabloid cover about someone who had been visited by an angel who proclaimed that his elderly wife who had always been barren would soon bear a child, I would think it was a bunch of bunk. Does this mean I think that God is somehow less active, that angels are somehow less real, today than they were 2000 years ago. Sometimes

I'm tempted to think just that—and then I hear about someone or someone[s] who I think might very well be modern-day angels and it causes me to reconsider.

I heard just such a story on my way to work last Monday morning. Here's a clip from that story. Today in *Your Health*: preventing teenage suicide. We'll hear about the latest research after this story: how parents are working to keep teens safe in Palo Alto, California. Within the past six months, four teenagers from the same area high school killed themselves. Now volunteers are maintaining a safety watch aimed at preventing another tragedy. Elaine Korry reports.

ELAINE KORRY: Twice each hour, the same routine unfolds. First, the warning bell sounds, as the crossing gates lower to block this busy railroad intersection in a neighborhood of Palo Alto.

(Soundbite of bell ringing)

KORRY: Twenty feet away, the parents huddled along a chain-link fence freeze mid-sentence and look down the tracks toward the approaching headlights. They watch as the massive silver commuter train bears down and then hurtles through the crossing.

(Soundbite of train horn blaring)

KORRY: And then, just like that, it's over. The gates go up, faces relax, and the adults resume their quiet conversations.

Ms. CAROLINE CAMHY: Well, we're out here to show the community and the kids that we care about them and that we want the misuse of the tracks to stop.

KORRY: Caroline Camhy, the mother of two young children, started this Track Watch days after the last suicide occurred here a month ago. As school and city officials agonized and conferred, Camhy says she and other volunteers felt compelled to act.

Ms. CAMHY: We want the deaths to stop, and we want people to know that if they would just open their hearts and look around them, they'll find people who care. We're not the only ones.

Mr. PAUL GREGG: An hour or two of my time every day is a small price to pay to keep anything from happening at this intersection. There's been no incidents since we've been here.

KORRY: Paul Gregg lives a quarter-mile away. He has two children who graduated from Palo Alto schools.

More than 70 volunteers have come to watch these tracks so far. They arrive in down jackets and knit caps, setting up camp chairs, sharing a thermos of coffee. Marie Elena Mendoza said she sleeps better if she stays until 1 a.m.

Ms. MARIE ELENA MENDOZA: This way, I know I'm sure that one o'clock is the last train. I can go home and rest completely, knowing that there will be no more trains.

It seems to me that these volunteers who stand out in the cold, dark night as a way of telling the troubled young people in their community that they are loved—it seems to me that these people are modern day angels. Indeed, I've experienced such angels in my own life—a man who stopped to help me get my car out of the ditch one cold February morning. A gate agent at the Gulfport, Mississippi airport who saw that I had a terrible cold and upgraded me to first class where he thought I would be more comfortable. And I can name a dozen other times, and I'm guessing that you can too, when I've been in a pickle and someone who was not obligated to do so has helped and as they walked away I thought, "Oh, what an angel!"

And while I thank God for these people who have been angels to me, I admit that I've never knowingly had an encounter with an angel—like a "this has to be an angel in the wings and halo celestial being kind of a way because there's no other way to explain the situation." Therefore, my temptation is to doubt the existence of angels because I don't think I've encountered one first-hand.

But perhaps my hang up with the official job description and uniform of an angel—my need to distinguish between people being angelic and actual angels—I think that I'm missing the point. The point of an angel—be it one who "earns its wings every time a bell rings", the Leelanau County farmer who stops to pull a Chevy out of the ditch, or folks standing by a railroad track on a cold, California night—all reveal the love and care of God. All come to us—either literally or by implication—to tell us "Do not be afraid, your prayer has been heard."

And that is the message of this second Sunday of Advent—the Sunday when we light the candle of peace. For what could possibly bring us more peace than being alleviated of our deepest fears? Jesus came to bring peace on earth, angels—in whatever form—come to bring peace too—peace to simple folks like you and me. They come that we, too, might live and sleep in heavenly peace. Thanks be to God.