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Advent Devotional "The Angels"

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Advent Devotional
Friday, December 17, 1999
The Angels
Luke 2:9-14

It is Veteran's or Remembrance, formerly Armistice, Day as I write about angels, and my mind is drawn to things military. Personal and vicarious military experiences instruct me that personal envoys from commanders never bring welcome news. Even those on the home front are not exempt. A movie full of powerful scenes, "Saving Private Ryan" has none more so than that involving Ryan's mother. We see the stars in the window, share her glance over the sink at the approaching car. We know what she's going to hear, and our hearts sink with her as she collapses on her porch. We know that messengers mean bad news.

That is, after all, what angels are: God's messengers, who often purvey death and pestilence as agents of His judgment. Hebrew history relates no stronger story than that of the Death Angel passing by blood-smeared doorposts on his way to Egyptian first-born. Scripture ascribes a variety of duties to these envoys, who camp unseen round about them that fear God. The list of Hebrew and Christian faithful contains the names of those to whom angels appeared: Abraham, Hagar, Lot, Moses, Joshua, Gideon, Manoah, Elijah, Daniel, Zacharias, Mary, Jesus, Peter, James, John and Paul. For all of their familiarity today on TV shows ("Touched by an Angel") in movies ("Michael" and "City of Angels"), in books and as collectibles, angels are still awesome, powerful celestial beings who speak and act for God.

Their extraordinariness and power cannot completely account for human reaction to their presence. Undoubtedly their authority, derived from their Source, daunts us most. Like Ryan's mother, we KNOW that the news will be bad, for it emanates from an authority over which we have no control.

The story of Jesus' birth is filled with the presence of angels. Zacharias, Mary, and the shepherds initially react quite differently to angelic presence, perhaps because of the difference in appearance and numbers. But in each case the angels give the same message—don't be afraid—and in each case the ultimate reaction by their hearers is the same: obedience.

Many possible lessons emerge from the angels' presence. Perhaps they call us to join them as God's messengers, proclaiming the Child's birth. Perhaps they call us to remember that our message of Good News banishes fear. In my own case, on this Remembrance Day, the message is even more personal.

Messengers bring bad news because they come from authority to tell us things over which we have no command, things we cannot change, things we must endure. I've never relished submission to authority, preferring my own way instead. A friend delights in reminding me that at heart, I'm an anarchist, and that my nature is that of a rebel. As I stand with the shepherds, beholden to no one, tending my sheep in my own way, the angels come to say that my way offers fear and death but that the Child's way offers joy and life. They come, as one did to the Israelites just outside Gilgal, to rebuke my stubbornness and call me to repent of my disobedience to God's commands. They come on God's behalf and at His bidding to promise great joy, if

only I will look into the Child's face and, impelled by love, choose the right way.

Ray Granada