

**TEXT: Luke 2:1-20**

**Christmas Eve, 2005**

### **TAKING ANGELS AT THEIR WORD**

**One of my favorite musical comedies is *Fiddler on the Roof*. And while it is a story all about Russian Jews in the early part of the twentieth century, one of its songs could apply just as easily to modern day American Christians. I'm speaking of the song "Tradition." It is a rousing production number in which the whole cast extols the value and importance of those habits and practices that make up the traditional way of doing things. For many American Christians, one of the times of the year most marked by tradition is Christmas.**

**No doubt you have some personal family traditions: hanging up stockings; cutting down a tree; singing carols around the piano . . . so too attending this service!**

**Collectively our congregation also has some Advent and Christmas traditions. Lighting one more candle each week on the Advent wreath; the Community Christmas Feast; lots of special music and luminaries along the driveway are just a few of them. And one of our most endearing and enduring traditions is the annual Angel Breakfast.**

**Every year, a couple of weeks before Christmas, members of our Board of Christian Education turn our social hall into a little bit of heaven. Golden stars are hung from the ceiling, tables are covered with white linens and decorated with shining candles and sprays of gold, and at the front of the room, the stage is festooned with puffy clouds and rays of starlight.**

**All the children in third grade and under are invited to come with their parents on a Sunday morning before worship for a special breakfast. Carols are sung, sometimes there's a craft, and the highlight of the event is a visit by a band of angels.**

**The angels, of course, are young folks in middle and high school, dressed in white robes with golden haloes. In years past it's been all girls. But this year, in recognition of the fact that biblically speaking angels are usually male, the boys were also actively recruited. I'm pleased to report that two young men rose to the occasion, though they did want to be known as guardian angels. Their role in the festivities was to stand watch on either side of the curtain as the girl angels first sang and then descended down from the stage and out into the audience.**

**The loveliest part of the whole affair comes when the angels spread out and, one-by-one, whisper special messages into the ear of each of the children at the breakfast.**

**One of the Dads who was at the breakfast this year told me that his youngest, Jane, who's just three, was spellbound, and very pleased when the angel whispered in her ear, "Jesus is coming!"**

**As things would happen, just as the angel left their table, Jane needed to go to the bathroom. So Dad took her by the hand and out they went to the restroom down the hall.**

**A few minutes later when they returned and came back into the social hall, Jane stood at the door, surveyed the whole scene, and the, looking up at her Dad asked, "So, where's Jesus? Where is he? Where is he?"**

**What a good question! What a good, good question!**

**Where's Jesus? Where is this Christ? This Emmanuel?**

**The shepherds, of course, were given a few clues. The angels on that first Christmas night didn't just *whisper* "Jesus is coming!"—they lit up the whole sky and sang a beautiful chorus!**

**"I bring you glad tidings of great joy," the lead angel told the trembling shepherds. "For to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior . . . And this shall be a sign for you: you will find a babe wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger." (Luke 2:10-12)**

**It was all pretty straightforward. Everybody knew that the city of David was Bethlehem. And while most all babes were wrapped in swaddling clothes, in strips of linen, how many of them would be using a feeding trough as a cradle? Check out a few stables, ask a few questions, and they were sure to find the newborn.**

**Now that's all well and good for the shepherds, but what about us? They had clues—what have we got? They *found* the newborn savior—but like little Jane, we're often left standing at the door asking, "So where's Jesus?"**

**It may seem that we're at a loss, but the truth is we've got some clues as well. For as we read the stories about Jesus as an adult, we discover he can be found wherever there is someone in need. We discover that time and time again he reaches our in love to those who are sick or displaced. He reaches out to the stranger and the outcast. So where's Jesus today? Any place and every place where folks reach out in love.**

**Exactly a year ago this very week the world was shaken as it became more and more clear that the powerful tsunami that stormed through the Indian Ocean had left behind tens of thousands of dead men, women and children, and many, many more who lost their homes and livelihood. Whole villages were washed out to sea—forever lost.**

**Libby North was in coastal Thailand when the tsunami hit. The bungalow where she was staying was flattened by the gigantic wave. And she was trapped inside. But three Thai men, all total strangers to her, scrabbled and dug until they got her out of the rubble and then saw to it that she got to a local hospital.**

**Libby's parents, Patty and Bob North, first heard Libby was injured because another stranger, a young American who met Libby in the hospital, had called them. And then continually e-mailed them to keep them up to date.**

**When Patty and Bob traveled to Thailand, they were given a free room at a local hotel by still more folks previously unknown to them. Help came, over and over again. Three Thai men, an American woman and European hotel owners were willing to reach out to folks they didn't even know because they were in need. As Patty North commented: "If you ever feel like the world's going to hell it isn't. You can find love in total strangers." (Quoted by King Duncan)**

**And so Christ is born again!**

**Earlier this fall it seemed that the hurricane season would never end—we even ran out of names and moved into the Greek alphabet. While Rita, Wilma and others managed to bring about a great deal of destruction, the hurricane that seemed to truly pierce our hearts was Katrina. The great city of New Orleans was laid to waste. Hundreds died, thousands lost everything.**

**One of the places hardest hit was Biloxi, Mississippi. And the Back Bay Mission, a community outreach program run by our denomination in Biloxi was not spared. Several of its staff members lost their homes. And most of the Mission's buildings were destroyed.**

**Still, staff members who could, managed to carry a word of hope into the ravaged community.**

**Executive Director Shari Preston has been making the rounds, providing information and assistance for those in need. On one of her stops in East Biloxi she met a man named Cornelius. At sixty-two, Cornelius is alone in the world. And, since Katrina his home consists of a tiny tent on a bit of brown grass. His house, his belongings—all gone. He hopes for a FEMA trailer, but it's yet to come. His job is gone, and he manages on whatever food he can forage.**

**Shari walked him through his options, told him how to go about getting the help he needs. Then, says Shari, "I clasped [his] hand and offered a tiny prayer, and turned to leave. But [Cornelius] held fast to my hand as if reluctant to let go, and whispered after me, 'I love you, honey.'" (*The Changing Times*, December, 2005, 1)**

**You see its true--Christ is born yet again!**

**Here at Saugatuck another of our Christmas traditions is the Angel Tree. Every year we gather up gift wishes from several local social service agencies: requests for bikes and dolls and sweaters. Often for children and adults who will get no other gifts at Christmas. This year our goal was to meet the needs of over two hundred individuals.**

**Our parishioners are generous folks—and most of the tags on the Angel Tree with their requests were taken. But as the time to collect them drew near, there were still over a dozen tags left. Some fourteen or so adults and children who would probably have to go without.**

**Just about that time I stopped at a local Starbucks to get a cup of coffee. As I walked into the shop I spotted one of our parishioners hunched over his laptop and a cup of java. I walked over to say hi and we started a pleasant conversation when suddenly the parishioner asked, “Are there any Angel Tree gift tags left this year?”**

**“Indeed,” I told him, “Quite a few.”**

**Without batting an eye, he just said, “I’ll take care of them.” He didn’t even ask me how many.**

**And so Christ is born again!**

**Every year at Christmas, we hear anew the angelic announcement. We hear again the glad tidings and the heavenly song. But oh so often, like little Jane, we look around and wonder “where’s Jesus—where is this new born savior?”**

**But friends, you can take the angels at their word: Christ is born—again and again and again! Nor just in the city of David, but in Thailand, in Biloxi, even at Starbucks. For anytime and every time someone reaches out in love Christ is born.**

**Christ is born indeed!**

**Amen  
John H. Danner**