

**“Becoming Angels”**  
**Based on Luke 4:14-21 and Isaiah 52:6-9**  
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The prophet Isaiah describes a messenger, and Jesus as he reads Isaiah lays claim to the mission of that messenger. His emphasis is on the word, “me,” when he reads from Isaiah, “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me.” I have been sent here with a message, he says, and then again, I am the message I’ve been sent here with. Jesus is the messenger and Jesus is the message, but both of those realities tell us an additional message, which is that God speaks to humankind. God relates to us, and God has something to say to us. And as usual, that is good news from one perspective, and not so good news from another.

Isaiah 52 tells us that The feet of the messenger who brings good news, the feet of that messenger are beautiful, Isaiah says. How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of the messenger who brings good news. Feet are not usually noted for their beauty, even now. And as I think I mentioned a couple of weeks ago, in the ancient Middle East, where shoes were almost always sandals and the roads were dusty when they were not mud, people’s feet would have been really, really dirty, much of the time. And the messenger who has been travelling long enough to get up and down those mountains—that guy’s hard-working feet are probably blistered and calloused and bruised in places, as well as being dirty. But the prophet Isaiah says that guy’s new is so good, that it makes you want to kiss the dirty, sweaty feet that brought it to you. How beautiful those feet are, the feet that bring the good news.

Jesus is the star messenger, the most important and the ultimate messenger in the Bible, but he’s certainly not the only messenger there. The Bible is full of messengers and messages—it is a message, after all--or a whole lot of messages-- from God. Sometimes in the Bible God speaks with people one on one—he walks with Adam in the garden, having regular evening chats with him. And God speaks from the mountaintop to Moses. But more often, God sends a messenger. In fact, the word “angel” comes from a Greek word that originally meant not some shining white, harp-playing, winged creature, but simply “messenger.” The angels in scripture are simply God’s messengers. They are not fantastic beings in themselves, but they are made holy and magical by the divine message that they carry.

Have you ever noticed how the angels in the Bible are always greeting people with the phrase, “Fear not!” “Don’t be afraid,” as the Good News Bible has it. Why do they need to say that, I wonder. Are the angels, these messengers from God, so frightening? Or is the fact that you’re getting a message from God the scary part? In any case the angels take care to reassure us. Don’t be afraid, they say. Don’t be afraid that a messenger from God has just appeared in your livingroom or outside of your tent, and don’t be afraid that God has decided he needs to contact you, and don’t be afraid of what God has to say, don’t be afraid of the message. Fear not.

But the people gathered at the synagogue in Nazareth are afraid. They are afraid that Jesus claims this great authority for himself, that he claims to be the messenger and the

message predicted by the prophet. They are afraid that this boy who was so familiar to them has become very unfamiliar, and that he is going to tell them what to do, and that they are not going to like what he tells them. Good news to the poor sounds fine, but then you get to release to the captives—wouldn't that be dangerous? And then that the oppressed should go free—in the Roman Empire, setting the oppressed free has got to be illegal. The message Jesus is hear to announce, it's not exactly reassuring, even if it is good news.

Mind you, these are good, faithful synagogue-attenders. They've heard the passage from Isaiah before. They've listened to the nice sounding words as most of us do every Sunday and even nodded in agreement, and felt all warm and fuzzy inside, and then left the synagogue and went on with their lives. But the words from Isaiah that have been so worn down by time sound very different when Jesus says them—more threatening, more real. Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing, he tells them. So the ordinary response to the prophet, was something like, “yeah, yeah, someday the oppressed will be set free, won't that be nice.” But the people at the synagogue can't get that comfortable response going, because Jesus is in front of them saying, yes, the oppressed will be set free, not someday, but right here and now. That's good news for the oppressed, some of whom are in the synagogue, but it's going to mean going up against the Roman empire, and probably the Jewish hierarchy. Good news, but also unnerving news.

To say that the feet of those who bring good news are beautiful is not a statement about a certain breed or class of people who happen to have particularly nice feet. It is not a statement about the messenger. It is a statement about how good the message is, which makes everything about even the lowliest messenger look good in its light. How beautiful, the prophet says, but of course good news is only good if you are ready to hear it. People have been known, after all, to kill the messenger who brought them news they didn't want to hear.

Thinking about messages and messengers this week brought Pat Robertson to mind. I don't enjoy thinking about Pat Robertson, I have to say. But he is a messenger—whether or not his message is from God we each have to decide, but he is a very public and well-known and widely heard messenger. When Pat Robertson says that God sent the earthquake to Haiti as punishment for the sins of the Haitian people, there's more than one message there. One message is about Haitians—Robertson thinks that the Haitians are being punished for getting their independence from France, something that happened in 1804—so it's taken the Almighty a while to get around to this earthquake, apparently. The bigger message here is what Christianity is all about. Robertson is telling the world what we Christians stand for and what it stands against—and what he tells the world we stand for is judgment, anger, and apparently we are against independence and freedom. Doesn't sound like Christianity to me. But for good or ill, whether they agree or disagree about it, people are listening to him. Robertson is a messenger—not an angel, not by a long shot, but he is a messenger.

And that should remind us that we are all messengers. If Pat Robertson seems to be glad that the Haitians are suffering from an earthquake, someone needs to get out there and say, loudly—that is not the gospel. After all, what would be the good news in that? Someone—or a great many people—need to stand up for what we know is the gospel truth, over and against what people like Pat Robertson say is the gospel truth. We can't let Pat Robertson be our messenger.

The church is, or should be, must be, a messenger. The fact that we are here, the fact that we are singing, the fact that we are giving food and welcoming the Kids Kampus kids and AA and NA and the scouts and Song of Praise's congregation in our building—these are together a powerful message. We have to make sure that our message gets heard.

St Francis of Assisi is supposed to have said, "Preach the gospel at all times; if necessary, use words." That is our mission—to tell the world that God has something to say to them—and we tell the world this message in our every word and action, not only in the words that are preached from this pulpit or taught in our Sunday school classes or prayed with the sick in hospital rooms. There was a great scene at the end of the movie *The Color Purple*, when the daughter who has not spoken to her pastor father for years walks back into his church, just all the congregation is singing—"God is trying to tell you something!"

Jesus' message is that the oppressed must go free, that the captives will be released, that the poor will hear the good news, and that now is the time. But Jesus' message is also that God is trying to tell you something. Not several thousand years ago, but now. And right up there among the things that God is trying to tell you is, you are God's messenger. Like it or not, what you do, and what you say tells everyone you meet something about God. Our job is to make sure that what our lives and what our words say about God is true. When we bicker, when we fail to resolve our differences, when we fail to love our neighbor because our neighbor has issues, when we refuse to do the difficult thing we know is right, when we would rather criticize than try—we are telling the world that God's power hasn't gotten through to us. We are showing the world that our faith hasn't changed our attitudes; it hasn't affected our daily lives.

You all are worried that I'm leaving, and I understand that. A church needs a pastor, if only as a kind of switchboard for all the incoming and outgoing messages, an operator for communications. I'm worried about you as well. But then I remember—whether this church thrives or not has never been up to me. A pastor can encourage and support the ministry of the church, a pastor can be a resource, but you are the church. You are the messengers, individually, and you are the message of this church. Your words, your actions are so much more powerful than any preacher's are ever going to be—they have the power to convert, the power to spark faith, and the power to crush it as well. You are the angels, the messengers from God, and the gospel, the message that Jesus brought, and the message that Jesus was, the gospel is in your hands. Preach it always, and if necessary, use words. Amen