



Roanoke, Virginia  
December 22, 2024

## ***“Angels”***

Sing in Exultation Sermon Series Part IV

*Luke 2:8-14*

**George C. Anderson**

<sup>8</sup> Now in that same region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. <sup>9</sup> Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. <sup>10</sup> But the angel said to them, **“Do not be afraid, for see, I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: <sup>11</sup> to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. <sup>12</sup> This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.”** <sup>13</sup> And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, <sup>14</sup> **“Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!”**

A couple of weeks ago, Millie, Emory and I went to Richmond and had the Van Gogh Immersive Experience.

- Imagine using a VR headset as you float through one painting after another looking in every direction to explore what Van Gogh has painted:
  - the bedroom,
  - the pub,
  - the field....



- Imagine spending 35 minutes in a large room where every wall is a screen bringing his paintings to animated life;
  - water shimmering,
  - birds flying,
  - leaves floating
  - waves breaking-
  - a train traveling past fields,
  - shoji doors opening to Japanese gardens,
  - lights flickering on in a dark town under a starry night.

“*Starry Night*”<sup>1</sup> is, of course, the name of what might be Van Gogh’s most famous painting. This scene of shining stars and swirling galaxies over a darkened town was painted while Van Gogh was a patient in an asylum. He was near his life’s end. The night sky was what he saw outside his room window, and he imagined the town beneath.

Van Gogh never explained the meaning of *The Starry Night*. Maybe he was only painting what he could see from his window to pass the time.

Maybe.

But given his despondent mental state, I can see why art critics have seen much more in the painting. Though most of his career, Van Gogh found inspiration in the world around him- fields, flowers, faces of workers, the flow of water. But in *Starry Night*, the world has gone dark with lights flickering only in a few windows. Perhaps symbolizing the lost faith of a minister’s son who at the beginning of his adult life tried to be a missionary, the town church is completely dark. Standing tall is a cypress tree, a common symbol of death. All movement and color are now only found

- in the sky,
- in the stars,
- above and beyond.

I imagine Van Gogh thinking, while painting this scene, “[Wouldn’t it be wonderful if those stars could speak to me.](#)” Is there some meaning to his life they could explain? Can they tell him his fate?

Van Gogh was unique as an artist, but looking to stars for answers is not unique. In a December 16 podcast,<sup>2</sup> Russell Moore spoke of a friend living in India. His friend is part of a coalition made up of physicists, astronomers, economists, legislators- some are religious, some are atheists. This coalition was formed to combat the growing popularity in India of astrology. They do not think that superstition is helpful in a country whose future is so tied to science and technology.

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<sup>1</sup> Technically, *The Starry Night*.

<sup>2</sup> The Russell Moore Podcast, Episode 137: *More to the Point: The Star of Bethlehem Is a Zodiac Killer*.



One might think, this being India, that what the coalition is concerned about is a comeback of an ancient obsession with astrology, but that is not the case. The obsession with astrology is actually a recent import from North America- from our own country. In the United States, as faith has declined, fascination with astrology has increased. Moore reported two statistics he gained from reading Tara Isabella Burton's book, *Strange Rites; New Religions for a Godless World*:

- first, 40% of atheists believe in psychics (which is no different from the general population);
- second, 30% of atheists believe in astrology (which is 3% higher than the general population).<sup>3</sup>

Odd, isn't it, that so many who have come to think that belief in God is irrational are drawn to believing our future can be told by lines in one's hand or by the stars in the sky?

Yet, maybe not so odd if we think about how much we human beings need to know our fate in the world. We are storytelling creatures and we want to know if there is a larger meaningful story being told as stars swirl above and as we exist below. Many people these days are trying to get away with saying that it is up to each of us to create our own meaning, but deep down we know that any final answers about the meaning of life have to come from beyond ourselves. What we make up is made up. And, in *looking for* those answers, it is only natural to *look up*.

I haven't done the research on this, but I would not be surprised if there was *not a religion to be found* that did not have sacred stories and practices of looking up to the sky for answers. Modernists make fun of these sacred stories and practices saying that they do not take seriously the fact that we live on a round planet. "How silly," they say of Christians, "to confess in a creed that Jesus 'rose to heaven.'" Those criticisms seem ignorant of psychology and poetry. To look up for answers is a natural reflex of people

- whose yearning pulls them up
- while gravity keeps them down.

The habit of looking to the stars is certainly found in the sacred stories of Jews and Christians. Some of the best examples can be found in the psalms. "The heavens declare the glory of God," says Psalm 19. And in Psalm 8 we hear,

When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers,  
the moon and the stars that you have established;  
what are humans that you are mindful of them,  
mortals that you care for them?

And, there is our passage about shepherds out under the starry, starry night. The stars are not explicitly mentioned, but how can you not imagine them in this story.

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<sup>3</sup> The general population statistics were AI generated.



Only take note: in this story, there is a reversal. Instead of human voices being raised to the heavens, a message comes from heaven to earth. Shepherds are in a field outside of Bethlehem where Mary has just given birth. It is nighttime, but the shepherds are not outside to enjoy

- fresh air,
- the night sky,
- or to seek inspiration and ask questions.

They are working. They are the working poor doing their job. In the eyes of many, that's all they are good for. Otherwise, they are dirty, smelly, poor, untrustworthy. Who would expect that they would be the ones to whom angels come? Certainly, *not* the shepherds.

Let's not miss the significance of this. From paying the fees of psychics to sending probes into outer space, finding answers to life's mysteries can cost a lot of money. But, these shepherds can only afford to live their lives. Yet, it is to them that a revelation comes that so many hope for when they look to the stars.

Out of a universe that so many find to be a void-

- and perhaps on its own *is* a void-
  - the shepherds learn that to *them*
    - a child is born,
    - a son is given,
    - and he will be a savior who will bring peace on earth.

Put another way, they hear that there is

- a God who cares-
- a God who shares life with them-
- a God who brings justice and reconciliation to earth.

“Peace on earth” goes way beyond conflict ceasing between warring factions. It is about making whole what is broken in human spirits and communities that leads to personal, social and political conflict. It is about justice and reconciliation.

So, again, why is it that shepherds get to be the one to hear what so many of us want to hear when we search the stars.

- We yearn to know if within the fabric of creation there is purpose and meaning to existence.
- We yearn to know that there is a God,
  - that there is a moral order to the universe that God has made,
  - and that this God of moral order is not just a God of cold justice,
    - but a God who knows us by name, loves us and will be there for us when we die.

The shepherds get to hear this.



The stars, no matter how beautiful, do not reveal this. Angels do. That is to say, that they understand that justice, mercy and compassion really do matter is a divine gift to them.

That means that the shepherds can't prove that the love and justice of God are real and can shine in our world. Not in the way things are proved by science. That's because faith is an awakening, not a proving. You don't know that you are loved because it's proven. You know you are loved because you are loved. There are signs though. I won't call it proof, but I will call it evidence, that the truth of what the angels sing has more weight precisely because the gift of God's love is made clear to those who can least afford to buy it.

On Friday, I read a wonderful illustration of what I am trying to say. Both Andrew Whaley and Cynthia Lawrence sent me a link to Dec. 12 David Brooks column in the *New York Times*.<sup>4</sup> Brooks used the Christmas season to explain why he, once a Jewish agnostic, is now both a believing Jew and a believing Christian- why he believes there is a good and loving God and there is a moral order to life.

Brooks was not converted by proof and argument. He now realizes that genuine faith is more in yearning and searching than it is in answers and proofs. So, when he speaks of how he came to faith, he speaks of what the shepherds receive.

- illumination-
  - moments of a dawning awareness that come convincingly to him...
    - as if angels have spoken.

Here is one of his moments. In 2013, Brooks was in a crowded subway car underneath what he said is some of “the ugliest spots on the good green earth,” the corner of New York’s 33<sup>rd</sup> Street and Eighth Avenue. He looked at the other people in the car;

- most going home from work,
- and most showing evidence of lives lived hard.

They were not the kind of people the world noticed, and they were not really interested in being noticed as they rode home.

But Brooks saw them that night. They became the lights of his night sky because it was suddenly clear to him that each person in that car had a soul. He wrote,

Each of them had a piece of themselves that had no size, color, weight or shape, but that gave them infinite value. The souls around me that day seemed not inert but yearning — some soaring, some suffering or sleeping; some were downtrodden and crying out.

It dawned on him that these people not only had souls but *these souls had been given to them*. If there is a spiritual element to being a person, then there is “a spiritual element to the universe as a

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<sup>4</sup> New York Times, “The Shock of Faith: It’s Nothing Like I Thought It Would be”, December 12, 2024.



whole.” He sensed a radical goodness and a moral order in the “hidden reality of things.” He wrote,

What we call good and evil are not just *preferences* that this or that set of individuals invent according to their tastes. Rather, slavery, cruelty and rape are wrong at all times and in all places, because they are an assault on something that is sacred in all times and places, *human dignity*. Contrariwise, self-sacrificial love, generosity, mercy and justice are not just pleasant to see. They are fixed spots on an eternal compass, things you can orient your life toward<sup>5</sup>.

That’s a lot to be revealed in a single moment. But I have had those moments, haven’t you, when epiphanies pile up and tumble over each other?

An awful lot can be contained in a moment when angels speak. When the shepherds hear what they hear, good news clicks into their consciousness. In the moment they know that lives matter. All lives matter because shepherds lives matter. Lives matter because God lives with shepherds. God’s salvation is born among them.

They are not given proof that this is true, but the angels give them a sign. The sign of the glory of God being among them will not now be revealed when they look up to the stars and swirling galaxies, but when they look down and see that the child that is born has been placed in a feeding trough. Wow, God’s love reaches here because God’s love is everywhere.

If the truth of his story is illumined in you, that God’s love can shine on us and through us bringing peace, then how can you not help but do what the shepherds do and that is return to your life “[glorifying and praising God for all you have seen and heard.](#)”

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<sup>5</sup> Italics mine.

