



The Angels of Christmas

HEARING GOD'S VOICE IN ADVENT

SUSAN ROBB

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THE ANGELS OF CHRISTMAS
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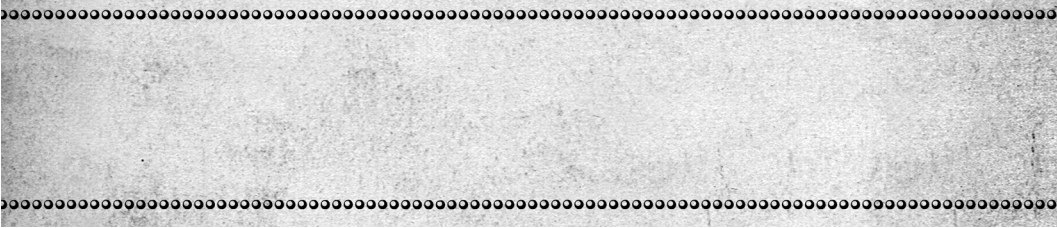
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MANUFACTURED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

*For Don and Fran,
ordinary angels who have made an
extraordinary impact on countless lives*

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INTRODUCTION

What images first come to your mind when you think of Christmas? Is it of your family gathered around the Christmas tree on Christmas morning? Hanging ornaments together and recalling the delight of seeing again your favorite decorations that had been boxed away for the rest of the year? Memories of sitting atop Santa's lap as a child, or watching the joy on your own children's faces as they carry on that old tradition? Or perhaps singing "Silent Night" in a darkened sanctuary during candlelight services on Christmas Eve with friends and family? Whatever images of Christmas we think of first, as Christians our imaginations do not take us far before visions of angels appear in our minds. For most, thoughts of Christmas almost always include gossamer images of winged angels appearing to Mary, Joseph, the shepherds keeping watch over their flocks by night, and, if we really dig deep in our memories, to Zechariah, the father of John the Baptist. (Yes, Zechariah and his wife, Elizabeth, and the angel that brings them the good news of their son's impending birth, are an integral part of Jesus's birth story as well.)

We cannot relate the Christmas story, watch a Christmas pageant, or even walk city streets or the aisles of otherwise secular department stores during the Christmas season without encountering images of

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angels. Some of our most enduringly popular Christmas movies, such as *It's a Wonderful Life* and *The Bishop's Wife*, have angels in central roles. They appear not with wings but as everyday human beings sent to earth to teach the meaning of Christmas and offer hope to distracted, misguided individuals who have lost their way—to bring hope and light into the bleakness of their lives.

Angels are not unique to the Christmas story. They appear throughout the Bible during significant moments in the history of God's people. However, their role as God's messengers of hope, peace, salvation, direction, warning, and especially of Jesus's identity, make their words in the birth narratives of Jesus messages we all need to hear, heed, and claim today in this season of Advent.

The word *Advent* comes from the Latin word *adventus*, which means “coming.” Specifically, it referred to a visitation by the emperor—an event that required people to make special preparations. During Advent, as Christians have done for centuries, we prepare and wait expectantly for the coming of our King; for the birth of the Christ Child in the midst of our lives and hearts once again, for the return of Christ, whose arrival was announced by John the Baptist, inaugurated at Jesus's birth, and evidenced in his life on earth; and for the consummation of his kingdom.

The angels in the stories of Jesus's birth are significant to our time of waiting and preparation in Advent. That's really the reason for this book. Angels are not just beautiful decorations for our trees. They are more than the coolest costumes for the Christmas pageant. But it's dangerously easy to reduce them to such roles, even in our formal celebrations. Think about the Christmas hymns we know well. Notice how many of them include, or even begin with, the angels:

“Hark! The herald angels sing, ‘Glory to the newborn King.’”

“Angels we have heard on high, sweetly singing o'er the plain.”

“It came upon the midnight clear, that glorious song of old, from angels bending near the earth to touch their harps of gold.”

The one role angels have in each of these hymns—singing—is not mentioned at all in the Gospel stories. I don’t wish to burst any bubbles here, but in the Gospel accounts angels don’t sing. They speak. Of all the most familiar Christmas hymns, the only one I can recall that makes this key distinction begins like this: “The first noel the angels did *say* [emphasis mine] came to certain poor shepherds in fields where they lay.” The word *noel* is a borrowing from French that refers both to news and to a birth. In the Middle Ages it came to mean specifically the news of the birth of Jesus. The angels in the birth narratives of Jesus aren’t actually depicted as singing. Yet, we refer to the words of praise that Jesus’s mother, Mary (Luke 1:46-55), and Zechariah (Luke 1:68-79) offered at the announcements of their sons’ births as “songs,” due to their beautiful poetic nature. The words of the angelic host in Luke 2 have similarly captured our imaginations—and those of the writers of our favorite hymns—as a song of the good news of Christ’s birth. So, with no bubbles burst, we can join with the angelic chorus in “singing” the good news of Christ’s birth!

This book attempts to bring our focus during Advent back to the central role of angels as bringers of news. The word *angel* derives from the Greek *angelos*, meaning “messenger.” The angels of Christmas came to deliver important messages to people who were hoping for God to intervene in a mighty way, both in the fears and darkness of their personal lives and in their world. One of those angels reminded the doubt-plagued recipient of his message, “I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God” (Luke 1:19)—implying that the messages the angels bring are to be heeded as carefully, and met with the same awe and wonder, as messages that come straight from God. More than that: messages from God through the angels demand a response from us, by word or action.

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So, over the course of this book, we will look at the messages delivered by the angels regarding the birth of Jesus. We will carefully read, study, and, hopefully, ponder them in our hearts, as Mary did, not just for the four weeks of the Advent season, but far beyond. We will also examine how these human recipients responded to the messages from God. And I hope we will ask ourselves not just how we would have responded had we encountered the angels in these gospel stories, but how we recognize and respond to the angels that I believe are still in our midst.

*The angels of Christmas still bring
“good news of great joy for all the
people,” including you and me.*

Just as they did two thousand years ago, the angels of Christmas still bring “good news of great joy for all the people,” including you and me, and the tidings they bring can allay our own fears and bring “great joy” into a hurting world desperately in need of hope (Luke 2:10). Upon hearing such news, whether it’s for the first time or the thousandth time, the question for us today is, How we will respond?

Angels in the Bible

The appearance of angels in the Hebrew Scriptures didn’t necessarily conform to the way we depict angels in Christian art and in our Christmas pageants.

When the parents of John the Baptist, Elizabeth and Zechariah; and Joseph, Mary, and the shepherds encountered angels, they could process what they were seeing and hearing based on what they knew of the appearances of heavenly beings in their own Scriptures, which we

know as the Old Testament. So, to better understand their reactions, we need to understand how angels were presented in Bible stories that predate Jesus's arrival by many centuries.

While the word *angel* in Greek, as noted earlier, means “messenger,” in Hebrew, the language of the Old Testament, no single word precisely corresponds to the word *angel*. Instead, there is a rich and varied vocabulary to describe these celestial beings. They are called “sons of God,” “heavenly beings,” and “hosts” (see, for example, Genesis 5:22; Job 1:6; Psalm 103:21). They don't necessarily appear with wings and wearing white robes. It's not always even clear who they are. Genesis 18 describes an occasion when three “men” show up at the camp of Abraham and Sarah. Displaying hospitality was an essential part of ancient Near Eastern culture, so in this narrative, Abraham invites the visitors to stay, while Sarah prepares them a veritable feast. After they tell the couple that they will have a son in their old age, Abraham must realize that he is in the presence of heavenly messengers. The text abruptly shifts in tone, and “the LORD” begins to speak. Was God there all along, as one of the three? Were these men angels? It's not clear, but the author of Hebrews hints that they were angels (Hebrews 13:2).

When Abraham is preparing to sacrifice his son Isaac—a command that, according to the narrative in Genesis 22, comes directly from God—the order not to follow through is given by “the angel of the LORD,” who then reaffirms God's promise to make Abraham's descendants as numerous as the stars. There's similar blurring between God and angels in the stories of Abraham's grandson Jacob. In Genesis 28, as he camps overnight, Jacob sees a stairway to heaven—one of those “thin places” where our realm and the heavenly realm come close—with angels going up and down. Then the LORD appears directly and speaks to Jacob. Later, when he is once again camped alone, on his way back to face his brother, Esau, Jacob wrestles all night with a stranger, who gives Jacob a new name, Israel (which means “wrestles with God”), and whom Jacob understands to have been God.

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Angels function in a variety of ways as messengers. An angel comforts the slave girl Hagar after she runs away from Sarah. As with Jesus, centuries later, angels announce the coming births of Isaac, Ishmael, and Samson (Genesis 18:10; 16:10; Judges 13:2-5). Angels commission people to a specific task (think of the angel of God who appears to Moses from the burning bush). They speak God's words to prophets, redirect or guide someone's actions at a critical moment, or act in ways that offer protection for God's people.

The list could go on, but we will discover that the angels in the birth narratives of Jesus functioned in many of these roles as well. Their appearances in Matthew and Luke's Gospels are meant to echo similar or parallel stories from the Hebrew Scriptures, connecting the old stories of God's faithfulness and action in the history of Israel with God's continued faithfulness and new action through the life of Jesus.

But angels can also be frightening bringers of bad news, not "good news of great joy for all the people" (Luke 2:10). God sends a heavenly being, a *cherub*, with a flaming sword, to prevent Adam and Eve from returning after their expulsion from the Garden of Eden (Genesis 3:24). Two of the angels who visit Abraham's camp travel on to Sodom, where they encounter his nephew, Lot, who also shows them great hospitality and invites them to stay overnight in his home. Instead of welcoming these strangers, the men of Sodom try to abduct the "men" from Lot's home to bring them violent harm. So, the angels bring about the destruction of the city as punishment for its wickedness against the strangers in their midst, and for its known prevalent injustice. An angel with a drawn sword blocks the path of the pagan diviner Balaam; at first, only Balaam's donkey can see the menacing angel, but then the Lord opens Balaam's eyes, and he bows his head to the ground in fear and submission (Numbers 22:21-34). Given these stories, it is little wonder that Zechariah, Elizabeth, Mary, Joseph, and the shepherds might have been perplexed and frightened by the angels' appearances—and why they (like the women who encountered them at Jesus's empty

tomb that first Easter morning) needed to hear the reassuring words, “Don’t be afraid.”

Are Angels Real? And Does It Matter?

In conversations I’ve had with people through the years, I have found that some are wholehearted believers in angels, while others’ sense of logic does not permit their embracing that sort of belief in supernatural beings. For the latter group, angels belong in the same category as Santa Claus, Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer, and the Easter Bunny. I find that some of these people ascribe the appearance of angels to a literary device used to support the biblical author’s theological message; others have walked away from the faith entirely because the Bible includes angels as well as historical, archaeological inaccuracies and supernatural occurrences that do not mesh with their knowledge base and reliance on reason. And that is tragic, because we need to understand that the biblical authors of the first century and earlier were not writing to an audience that expected absolute historical accuracy. They were writing in the literary styles of their day, to people who viewed events through the lens of their own cultures. In particular, the Gospel accounts of Jesus’s birth that we will read in Luke and Matthew seek to help us find the points of connection between the good news of the birth, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus to God’s saving action in the stories of Israel, and to the Gentile world into which the early church had spread.

If you’re skeptical about the identity of angels, you’re not alone. Even in Jesus’s era, faithful people were divided on the belief in angels (see Acts 23:8). But whether you are a devoted believer, a wistful hoper, one who sees the inclusion of angels in biblical narratives as mostly literary device, or purely a skeptic, you can still experience through their messages the grace, power, hope, awe, and mystery of what God was and is doing in the world through the incarnation. This study is not an apologetic for the reality of angels. Instead, I intend to focus on

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the role of angels in the birth narratives of Jesus, what their messages tell us about the One born in Bethlehem, and his role in the salvation of the world. And that's good news for all people!

Each of the four chapters in this book, corresponding with the four weeks of Advent, connects us to human beings who received messages from angels: Zechariah and Elizabeth; Mary; Joseph and the magi; and the shepherds. As we explore together the richness of these stories, we'll pay particular attention not just to what God's messengers said but also to how these people responded to the message.

That's where the stories connect to us. God did not stop attempting to communicate with human beings once the Bible was written. Just because we don't read stories from our own time of people seeing angels filling the night sky, or encountering men in dazzling white robes, that doesn't mean God no longer sends messengers to interrupt our everyday existence. As you'll read in this book, some people are convinced they have been in the presence of an angel whose message brought them hope and strength or even changed the direction of their lives. Others have wondered, after an unexpected encounter with a stranger, whether they might have been visited by an angel. I love the spiritual advice that the writer of Hebrews, reflecting this sensibility, gives to his readers: "Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it" (Hebrews 13:2).

Angels in the World

Whether or not you believe in the existence of divine beings who can assume human appearance, here's what matters most, what I want you to take from this volume: God still reaches out to us through messengers, whether they're heavenly or purely human, complete strangers or people we know well. There are times in your life and mine when, in the words of the old spiritual, "God is trying to tell you

something.” How can we orient ourselves to those moments, so we can grasp what God is saying? Once we comprehend the moment and the message, how will we respond? And finally, how will we perform our own part in this unending story of the arrival of the Prince of Peace, God arriving to experience life as one of us? How will we convey what we have heard and seen to the broken places and beleaguered people around us? How will we spread the good news to all people that the kingdom is here, and we are invited to live in it together as members of the beloved community? How do we go from being shepherds who receive the good news, to serving as angels who share it, who allay fears and provide guidance for God’s people?

I’m so glad you’ve joined me on this journey of discovery this Advent season as we open these beautiful narratives in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke. As we prepare our hearts for the birth of the Christ Child once again in our lives this season, and as we await his return with eager anticipation, may we all listen closely to what God has to say to us through the messages of the angels of Christmas. As we hear anew these ancient stories, my hope is that we come away from this study transformed by the wonder and joy of Christ’s birth—and by a renewed sense of purpose in response to their messages. May we, too, make connections between what God has done in the past, not only in the history of God’s people, but in our own lives as well, and may we embrace whatever new thing God is calling us to through the gift of the One who came to bring light and life into the world at Christmas.



CHAPTER 1

*Standing in the
Presence of God*

Gabriel and Zechariah



CHAPTER 1

STANDING IN THE PRESENCE OF GOD

Gabriel and Zechariah

In the days of King Herod of Judea, there was a priest named Zechariah, who belonged to the priestly order of Abijah. His wife was a descendant of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth. Both of them were righteous before God, living blamelessly according to all the commandments and regulations of the Lord. But they had no children, because Elizabeth was barren, and both were getting on in years.

Once when he was serving as priest before God and his section was on duty, he was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to enter the sanctuary of the Lord and offer incense. Now at the time of the incense offering, the whole assembly of the people was praying outside. Then there appeared to him an angel of the Lord, standing at the right side of the altar of incense. When Zechariah saw him, he was terrified; and fear overwhelmed him. But the angel said to him, "Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you will name him John.

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You will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, for he will be great in the sight of the Lord. He must never drink wine or strong drink; even before his birth he will be filled with the Holy Spirit. He will turn many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God. With the spirit and power of Elijah he will go before him, to turn the hearts of parents to their children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous, to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.” Zechariah said to the angel, “How will I know that this is so? For I am an old man, and my wife is getting on in years.” The angel replied, “I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to bring you this good news. But now, because you did not believe my words, which will be fulfilled in their time, you will become mute, unable to speak, until the day these things occur.”

Meanwhile the people were waiting for Zechariah, and wondered at his delay in the sanctuary. When he did come out, he could not speak to them, and they realized that he had seen a vision in the sanctuary. He kept motioning to them and remained unable to speak. When his time of service was ended, he went to his home.

After those days his wife Elizabeth conceived, and for five months she remained in seclusion. She said, “This is what the Lord has done for me when he looked favorably on me and took away the disgrace I have endured among my people.”

Luke 1:5-25

Christmas Eve of 2001 is as clear in my mind as if it were yesterday. I had been attending seminary just over a year and joined our home church staff a few months earlier. Highland Park United Methodist Church is very large and at that time had a clergy staff of nearly twenty ministers. As in all churches, Christmas Eve was an “all hands on deck” event, offering sixteen services at our main campus alone. We often rotated associate ministers and those in the ordination process in liturgical roles in various services, but I was in what you might call my rookie year. So, I was shocked and honored beyond belief when our

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senior minister invited me to serve as liturgist in three of our Christmas Eve candlelight services. There were many other, more qualified people to choose from. How could I have been so fortunate to have been selected for this honor?

The invitation, and the evening itself, were among the most humbling, sacred, awe-inspiring, and (to be honest) fear-inducing moments of my early ministry. Christmas Eve is such a holy night that it always fills me with a certain awe. As a minister, you want everyone to experience the presence of God in a mighty way, and you desire to represent God to those you are serving in such a way that God's grace and love come shining through your words, presence, gestures, and actions. That responsibility should strike a healthy fear and sense of awe in all of us. It certainly did for me on that evening. But there was also the fear of messing up. No one wants to fall on her face, either literally or figuratively, in front of several thousand people. In preparation for the evening, I was fitted for and ordered my first clergy robe. I also wrote and rewrote prayers and rehearsed climbing the stairs to the pulpit and reading the Christmas scriptures over and over and again. Finally, I practiced how the candles representing the light of Christ should be lit (just before the singing of "Silent Night"), when they should be shared by walking the aisles and lighting others' candles (on the first stanza), and finally, when they should be lifted (last stanza).

When Christmas Eve finally arrived, I carefully donned my vestments for the first time, exhibiting an outward sign of God's unique call and claim on my life. It truly was a holy moment for me. I had served the church in many capacities before, but this act was symbolically fulfilling a new call and a new way of living out my faith.

The presence of God was palpable for me that evening. Toward the end of the service, as is always the case on Christmas Eve, all the lights were turned off in the sanctuary. The only light remaining was the tiny flame of the Christ candle on the Advent wreath reaching up into the massive darkness of the cavernous Gothic sanctuary. From the

Christ candle, the senior pastor lit his candle, then shared that light with me. We then slowly walked the center aisle, sharing the light of Christ with a person on each pew we passed. Each person who received the light shared it with the next person in the pew, and slowly, slowly, light began to flicker and replaced the retreating darkness. The senior minister and I raised our candles and began to sing, “Silent night, holy night, wondrous star, lend thy light.” Everyone else in the room joined us, filling the sanctuary with the light we all received from Christ. Tears filled my eyes (as they do every year now during the third verse of “Silent Night”) but gone was any fear that I had brought into the room that evening. My angst had been replaced with wonder, joy, and peace. I sensed the same was true for everyone present that evening.

I had come seeking to serve God that night feeling honored, humble, awestruck, and a little afraid, and I left feeling even more honored, humble, awestruck, and full of wonder and joy. That range of emotions, it seems to me, was similar to what happened to the priest Zechariah as he came to serve God in the Temple over two thousand years ago.

An Unbelievable Day in the Temple

When we ponder the Christmas story, Zechariah isn't the first name that typically comes to mind. Actually, his name might not come to mind at all. We are more likely to remember his wife, Elizabeth, whom Luke describes as a relative of Mary, the mother of Jesus. But Zechariah and Elizabeth both hold an important place in the story of Jesus's birth.

As the scripture reminds us, Zechariah and Elizabeth lived in the time of King Herod the Great. The author of Luke, who informs his readers that he seeks to provide “an orderly account” of the life of Jesus (Luke 1:1, 3), also loves to set the historical stage for us. Zechariah and Elizabeth, like all of the Jews in Judea in that era, lived under the

oppression of the Roman Empire and Herod, its despotic puppet king. Zechariah was a priest from the order of Abijah, and his wife was a descendant of Aaron, Moses's brother.

Part of the law given to Moses on Mount Sinai ordained that Aaron be a priest, along with all of his male descendants from that time forward. Elizabeth is from Aaron's line, but so is Zechariah. According to 1 Chronicles 24, Aaronic priests were ordered into twenty-four divisions, each named for Aaron's twenty-four sons, and they took turns serving at the altar in the Temple, much as our clergy do at church. This ensured that there was always a priestly presence at the Temple and that responsibilities were fairly distributed to each division of priests. Zechariah is from the order of Abijah. It was expected that women born into priestly families would marry priests.

Why is the point about the priestly lineage of Zechariah and Elizabeth important for Luke? Because he wants to underscore for us their righteousness. They have impeccable credentials. They lived "blamelessly" concerning matters of piety and upholding the law of Moses (Luke 1:6).

"But they had no children, because Elizabeth was barren, and both were getting on in years" (v. 7). Right now, bells would be ringing in the heads of first-century Jewish readers of this story. If there is an old barren couple mentioned in the Hebrew Scriptures, what can we expect? You guessed it. God will definitely be intervening in their lives in a miraculous way to give them a son. And when God does this, the baby born will be no ordinary child. Invariably, the son is given for an extraordinary purpose. Isaac marks the beginning of the "great nation" that God promises to Abraham and Sarah (Genesis 12:2). Jacob, whose name is changed to Israel (by a "man" he wrestles with all night), becomes the father of the twelve tribes of Israel. Samuel becomes a priest, judge, and prophet who anoints the first two kings of Israel. So, as readers, we know that something incredible is about to happen, but when and how? Let's see.

Zechariah is one of the priests whose section was called to be on duty at the Temple. He and Elizabeth live in the hill country near Jerusalem, but there would have been accommodations at the Temple to house the priests during their time of service there. Zechariah is no doubt honored that it is finally his division's turn to go and serve at the Temple. I can imagine that he packs his best linen robe and prayer shawl to wear while he's in service. Who knows? He may have even had a new one made. He has practiced the words to his prayers and his role. But when he arrives in Jerusalem, he is shocked that out of all of the priests there, when the lot is cast to see which priest should go into the holy place alone to represent the people before God, he is chosen. We don't know if this is the first occasion when this honor has fallen to him, but given the large number of priests, at the very least it must have been a rare occurrence, and the person on whom the lot fell (much like dice to us) would have been seen as God's choice.

*Angels were not always
bearers of good news.*

Taking his role seriously, Zechariah approaches the altar in the holy place to make his incense offering on behalf of the praying worshipers gathered in the courtyard just outside. Suddenly, an angel appears on the right side of the altar. As noted in the introduction to this book, angels were not always bearers of good news. Not knowing if this is good news or bad, Zechariah's first impulse is fear. And then the angel speaks calming words: "Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard" (Luke 1:13). Everyone who is visited by angels in the story of Jesus's birth—Zechariah, Joseph, Mary, and the shepherds—will hear those same opening words: "Do not be afraid."

The angel goes on to declare that he and Elizabeth will have a son. They are to name him John, which means, “God is gracious.” The angels tells them how much joy this child will bring to Zechariah and his wife, and also to “many . . . for he will be great in the sight of the Lord” (vv. 14-15). And then there are detailed instructions for how the child should be raised.

As someone steeped in Israel’s Scriptures, Zechariah would have known this was hardly the first time that God had acted graciously for childless couples. He knew the story of Abraham and Sarah, to whom God had given a child in their old age. He’d have known the anguish of Hannah, who was the object of taunting over her infertility and so distraught that she promised that if God would give her a son, she would dedicate the boy to the Lord’s service (see 1 Samuel 1:1-2, 6-7, 9-11, 27-28; 2:1-10). In particular, he’d have known how these various figures reacted when faced with God’s blessing them with a special child of promise. Abraham falls on his face. Sarah laughs. Hannah breaks into a “song” of thanksgiving.

Why the Gospel Writers Tell the Story Differently

Before we go further, let’s take a moment to consider why we even have the story of Zechariah and Elizabeth in our Gospels. After all, we read nothing about them except in the first chapter of Luke. What’s going on here?

The story that we present in Christmas pageants is so familiar that we think of it as a unified narrative in the Gospels. It may come as a surprise to some that only two Gospels, Matthew and Luke, tell us anything about Jesus’s birth, and each of them is quite different in nature and content. For example, Matthew mentions nothing of the shepherds. Luke mentions nothing of the wise men. Understanding the audience and purpose of the various Gospel writers can give us

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insight into why these witnesses often choose to emphasize different details about Jesus's life and ministry—and perhaps lead us to deeper insights into what their messages offer to us.

Mark, author of what is believed to be the first written Gospel, opens his story with a fully grown John the Baptist appearing in the wilderness. The earliest Christians would have had an institutional knowledge of who Jesus was. They also believed that Jesus's return was imminent. Thus, Mark may have felt no need to describe the details of Jesus's birth. The urgent message is: "Believe and respond now."

The author of John, who wrote in the late first century and was the latest of the Gospel writers, may have skipped over Jesus's birth because his emphasis was on helping people grasp Jesus's oneness with God the Father. John presents the arrival of Jesus in cosmic terms ("In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God"), with a lyrical and poetic parallel to Genesis 1 conveying Jesus's preexistence with God (John 1:1). In the person of Jesus, God engaged in a second bold and marvelous act of creation, becoming a human being and living alongside us. Even if John had knowledge of a birth story, its inclusion in his Gospel might muddy his theological intent.

Matthew, author of the most Jewish of the Gospels, is probably writing to a community of Jewish Christians. For several decades, these followers of Jesus were widely regarded as another of the many groups within Judaism. By the time of Matthew's writing, sometime after the destruction of the Temple by the Romans in 70 CE, these Jewish Christians are being turned out of their synagogues. For this audience, who are experiencing doubt and confusion as to whether they can still cling to the stories and scriptures of their past, Matthew presents Jesus as the new Moses and the fulfillment of the Jewish Scriptures. Like Moses's, Jesus's life is threatened as an infant by the ruling powers. Like Moses, he is sent to save God's people. That's one reason it's important for Matthew to give us the story of Jesus's birth.

Luke, meanwhile, is writing primarily to Gentile Christians in the wider Mediterranean world. He, too, emphasizes the importance of Jesus's connection to, and continuation of, the traditions of the past while embracing the full inclusion of *all* people. The author of Luke, who also penned Acts, is believed by many to be one of Paul's missionary companions. If so, he would have heard Paul's message that within the community of believers, there were no distinctions between Jews and Gentiles, male and female, enslaved and free persons. He would have seen how people at the bottom of Greco-Roman society, women and slaves, flocked to these early Christian communities. So, while Matthew's audience, interested in proof of Jesus's royal kingship, reads of the wise men, Luke chooses to emphasize a different detail: that the word of Jesus's birth came first to poor and humble people. And it's no surprise, given that Luke includes so many stories of Jesus's interactions with women, reinforcing the message of spiritual equality, that he chooses to focus on the angel's visit to Mary and her amazing response.

For both Matthew and Luke, including Jesus's birth narratives in their Gospels would also have satisfied the curiosity of the growing number of Christians who, due to the span of time and geographical distance, would not have had prior knowledge or memories of Jesus's life. But most important, the inclusion of these birth narratives and the messages the angels deliver in them offers additional support to the theological and Christological claims of the Gospel writers—to elaborate on what the resurrection proved. The resurrection brought to light what had been true from Jesus's infancy (or as John would declare, from before creation). So, the infancy stories are actually an infancy gospel.¹

Everyone's Prayer Has Been Heard

“Do not be afraid . . . Your prayer has been heard.” Those words are not just for Zechariah and Elizabeth, who have been longing for a child

their entire married lives. They are also for the crowd that has been left praying outside. The people in the crowd, representing the nation of Israel, have prayed for generations for a Messiah to deliver them from the oppression of their enemies. They sought deliverance from slavery under the Egyptians, and God sent Moses. Later, they prayed for deliverance from the oppression of the Assyrian, Babylonian, and Persian empires, and from the stranglehold of Hellenistic leadership and the murderous reign of Antiochus Epiphanes IV (175–164 BCE). Now they seek God's help in delivering them from the crushing oppression of the Romans.

Zechariah and Elizabeth's deepest prayer will be answered, just as it was for Abraham and Sarah, for Isaac and Rebekah—and for Hannah. Hannah, like so many other women mentioned in the Old Testament, was barren. Her husband, Elkanah, adored her, but Elkanah also had a second wife—one who had been blessed with children and who constantly taunted Hannah for her apparent infertility. God graciously answered Hannah's prayer for a child. Her son, Samuel, was the answer not only to Hannah's prayers, but also of a nation that felt spiritually barren and constantly provoked by its enemies, the Philistines.

As priest, Samuel turns the hearts of Israel back to their God. As a judge, he leads them into battle when needed and keeps them safe from their enemies. As a prophet, he anoints the first two kings of Israel, Saul and David, as God instructs. It was customary for prophets to anoint kings by applying oil to their heads, signifying that they were chosen by God.

The baby who is about to be born to Zechariah and Elizabeth, like Samuel (who was also raised as a Nazirite), is going to be a beacon of God's grace, turning the hearts of those who are praying toward their God and each other, to ensure that they are ready to recognize and receive God's greatest gift when it arrives: their Savior and King. Just as Samuel anoints the heads of the first kings of Israel, John the Baptist anoints Jesus's head with water in his baptism, signifying God's anointing of him with the Holy Spirit for his ministry on earth.

The answered prayer of Zechariah and Elizabeth is a blessing and an answered prayer for others as well. I imagine that if the parents of Franklin Roosevelt and Winston Churchill, Martin Luther King Jr., and Marie Curie prayed for them when they were born, they had no idea that their children would later become answered prayers of a world engulfed in war, a country plagued by systemic racism, and countless others desperate for a treatment for cancer.

What prayers have you had answered that wound up being a blessing for others as well? Years ago, my husband and I prayed for God to lead us to a volunteer opportunity where we could both serve together—one that we would both enjoy and in which we would find fulfillment. That opportunity came in the form of our church's involvement in building homes for Habitat for Humanity. God answered our prayer, but in the process also answered the prayers of many people who were desperate to raise their families in a decent, affordable home. No doubt, your answered prayer to find the right fit for a volunteer opportunity was someone else's answered prayer for food, clothing, an affordable home, or a compassionate listening ear. Perhaps your answered prayer to find the right job became someone else's answer to prayer for a great mentor. Perhaps you didn't know that when your prayer to find the right house for your growing family was answered, it was also an answered prayer of other parents who hoped their children would find warm and welcoming friends and a safe, nurturing place for them to gather.

After Zechariah hears the astounding news that Elizabeth is going to bear a son, it's not surprising that he, like Abraham and Sarah, might have doubts about how this could happen. Sarah's response to the news that she would bear a child in her old age was to laugh. Was she laughing for joy, or because she found the angel's news laughably absurd? I don't know, but Zechariah doesn't laugh. Instead, he asks for a sign: "How will I know that this is so?" (Luke 1:18).

It may be that the angel expects that one who is so well versed in the Scriptures—one who is so faithful and pious and righteous—might

fall on his face in gratitude to God for answering his prayer in the same way that, as he already knows, God has answered the prayers of his ancestors throughout Israel's history. But Zechariah seems to ignore the good news of the past and cling to the same doubts that seem to plague our own minds. "Does God really still care about what's happening in my life and in the lives of those around me?" we ask. "Does God really still answer prayer in such magnificent ways? How could God make something that seems so impossible happen? I need more proof."

I Stand in the Presence of God

In answer to his question, the angel offers Zechariah some significant information to aid his doubting mind—along with a huge sign.

First the information: "I am Gabriel. . . . Let that sink in, Zechariah" (Luke 1:19, paraphrased). The old priest would have known exactly who Gabriel was. God sent Gabriel to Daniel to help him interpret one of his visions (Daniel 8:16), and later as an answer to Daniel's prayer, to give him insight and understanding (9:21). As if Zechariah needed a reminder, Gabriel says, for emphasis, "I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to bring you this good news" (Luke 1:19). Because Gabriel stands in the presence of God, Zechariah should know that the angel's words come from God's own self.

Now the sign. Because Zechariah disbelieves the good news Gabriel has shared with him and wants a sign, Gabriel will give him one: Zechariah will be struck mute until John is born.

Wait! The laughing and incredulous Abraham and Sarah weren't struck mute. That doesn't seem quite fair, does it? But we do find that Daniel became "speechless" for a short time after Gabriel interpreted his vision (Daniel 10:15)—not from doubt but perhaps from awe. Maybe being struck mute for his disbelief was as much to help Zechariah—and us—make the connection to Daniel as it was a punishment.

I wonder if there aren't times when we have all been struck mute by doubt. Maybe there have been times when we could have been giving

thanks for God's good news, but instead our lips remained unmoved because we weren't quite sure we could believe it. Or maybe we've been struck mute out of fear that others will doubt or mock the good news we have experienced in our own lives. Have you ever been there? Sadly, I have.

*I wonder if there aren't times
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Zechariah will be unable to speak as long as Elizabeth is pregnant. Nine months is a long time. As I have pondered Zechariah's gestational season of silence, it has dawned on me that perhaps the sign Gabriel inflicts upon Zechariah is more of a gift than a punishment. Maybe it will be a great gift for him to not be able to speak as he ponders what Gabriel has proclaimed; how God has miraculously worked to bring life and light to the middle of his people's yearning, barrenness, and darkness in the past. Maybe it will be a gift for him to silently watch his wife's formerly barren belly swell and move with the life God will provide within. Maybe it will be a blessing for him to just listen in silence to what God has to say to him.

In that silence Zechariah might have recalled another lesson from Israel's past: a time when God's prophet, Elijah, has been threatened with death by Queen Jezebel. People are worshiping idols throughout the land, and other prophets are being killed. Elijah, who has just witnessed the power of God in a showdown on Mount Carmel against the prophets of Baal, flees for his life into the desert wilderness after Jezebel vows to kill him (1 Kings 19). An angel provides food for him along the way. Elijah is hiding in a cave when "the word of the LORD"

comes to him and tells him to stand on the side of the mountain while God passes by. First, there is a wind strong enough to tumble boulders. Then there's an earthquake, then a fire. The LORD appears in none of these.

Finally, God speaks to Elijah in the “sound of sheer silence” (v. 12). God asks him, “What are you doing here, Elijah?” (v. 13). Read it with the emphasis on the last word: “What are you doing *here*? I need you back in Israel, to speak and witness for me.” Amid the sound of silence, Elijah is able to gain clarity. He understands his mission, what God is calling him to do—and then he does it. I'd like to think that Zechariah's quiet period helped prepare him for his role in understanding and carrying out his mission. When we are surrounded by silence, we may discover, if we listen, that we are in the presence of a great teacher.

Maybe it could be a gift for us to find some extended time in the Advent season to be speechless, to listen—to God, to friends, to the yearnings of others—and to ponder God's goodness in our own past. What if we blocked out some of the noisy chatter in our lives over those four weeks to listen to what God may be saying to us? Maybe that pondering could bring us a season of greater belief, hope, joy, and peace. Maybe it could help prepare us for the work God calls us to do.

When Zechariah finally emerges—people at the Temple had to have wondered why it was taking him so long—it's obvious from his gesturing and inability to speak that he's had a powerful experience of God's presence. They believe something extraordinary has happened. In several months many of them will understand that their wait was worth it and that their prayers for a deliverer were answered.

Zechariah arrives at the Temple that day humbled and honored to have been chosen to serve the God he loves. He leaves humbled, honored, awestruck, and overwhelmed at being in the presence of a messenger who stands in the presence of God. He leaves believing the angel's message. He leaves knowing what Sarah and Hannah learned centuries before, that with God all things are possible. He leaves

knowing what Abraham learned—that he is blessed to be a blessing to others. His answered prayer will in some way be an answered prayer for many.

When Zechariah returns home, even though he cannot speak, my guess is that the excitement revealed in his animated gestures conveys to Elizabeth that this has been no ordinary visit to the Temple. It was not just another day at the office. God is at work in their lives.

This Is What the Lord Has Done for Me

“After those days Elizabeth conceived.” The good news comes to pass! But Elizabeth goes into hiding for five months. Why? Maybe she just wants to savor this moment alone with Zechariah for a time, or maybe she wants to ensure that she has an unmistakable bump before going out in public. Or perhaps she needs time and solitude—as Zechariah’s imposed silence provided him—to process what God is doing through her.

In Elizabeth’s society, children were considered a blessing from God, and being a mother conferred a certain status. While producing children was not regarded as part of a woman’s religious obligation, being childless nevertheless could be a source of anguish.

I have known people who have been told by fellow Christians in their church community that suffering their family had experienced—a child born with a congenital illness, for example—was God’s punishment for sin. (Thankfully, in my experience such occasions have been rare.) Christianity teaches no such thing. Judaism doesn’t teach it either. Nevertheless, this point needs to be emphasized because in Elizabeth’s day and in our own, some people try to impose such judgments on God’s behalf. Elizabeth may have experienced it, just as people do today. Perhaps she heard quiet murmurs as she passed other women shopping in the marketplace or saw questioning glances and shaking heads. Because I have seen blameless people believe they are

The Angels of Christmas

somehow in part to blame for unfortunate and unavoidable situations, it's possible for me to imagine that Elizabeth might have borne a burden of self-imposed guilt.

Even Jesus's own close followers were not immune to sometimes thinking, wrongly, in terms of blame. Chapter 9 of John's Gospel recounts an occasion when the disciples came upon a man who had been blind from birth. Was it because the man had sinned? they asked. Or was it because his parents had sinned? Jesus immediately corrected them. "This is not about sin," he said. Then he showed them the proper response to suffering: he healed the man, who then joyfully told everyone around what Jesus had done for him.

That is how Elizabeth responds to the news that her infertility is over. A great emotional burden has been lifted from her through this miraculous blessing. She is filled with joy! When it's obvious that she is pregnant, she gives thanks to God, "This is what the Lord has done for me when he looked favorably on me and took away the disgrace I have endured among my people" (Luke 1:25). Her and Zechariah's years of yearning, their years of tears and disappointment that bound them so closely together, have come to an end.

Have you ever felt like Elizabeth? Have you experienced a time of barrenness in your life (either physical or spiritual)? If so, you are not alone. You are feeling what millions of others have also felt. You are experiencing what Elizabeth experienced. And only from the depths of such despair is it possible to understand the Everest of joy that comes with the kind of amazing news that Elizabeth finally receives.

There are others whose "barren times" never come to an end. The blessing or deliverance they yearned for never arrived. Are such persons less worthy somehow of God's mercy, as some might judge whose first response is to assign blame? Of course not. The answer, as the Gospels always show us, is to follow Jesus's example: Heal the sick; reach out to the hurting; be the conveyor of God's love and grace. Be an angel.

The Birth and Naming of John the Baptist

If you know Luke's story well, you know that Mary is next on Gabriel's visitation list. But let's skip ahead a bit in the narrative, to Luke 1:57-80, the birth of Zechariah and Elizabeth's child promised by the angel. As the angel predicted, Elizabeth gives birth to a son, and all her neighbors and family are as joyful as she is over his arrival (something also foretold by Gabriel). Many of them gather eight days later to celebrate John's circumcision. As part of the ceremony, the attending rabbi turned to Elizabeth—the only one of the parents who could speak—and asked, "What name is given this child?" Everyone behind her was saying "Zechariah, of course!" Not in all areas, but obviously in theirs at the time, it was customary to name a firstborn son after his father. Many of us do the same thing today. We all know someone who is a "Junior" or "the Third." Our son's name has been passed down for four generations in our family.

"No," Elizabeth answers to those around her who assume the baby's name will be Zechariah. "He is to be called John." It is the name given to him by Gabriel, given to him by God. Everyone turns to Zechariah, who confirms Elizabeth's answer on a writing tablet. The crowd is amazed. And true to Gabriel's word, the sign that Zechariah had asked for is lifted. He hasn't spoken in nine months. His last words expressed doubt. His next words are nothing but praise!

The gathered crowd, perhaps many of the same ones who were at the Temple on the last day Zechariah could speak, realize that this child not only has been sent by God as a gift to Zechariah and Elizabeth, but that he is also destined for something great. "What then will this child become?"

Notice here how the roles suddenly shift. Zechariah has had nine months to contemplate the message that Gabriel brought to him. Now, filled with the Holy Spirit and able again to speak, it is Zechariah who becomes God's messenger to the people. The message of praise comes pouring out of him like a song.

Zechariah's Song

Zechariah's song has come to be known as the Benedictus. It is named for the first word of Zechariah's song in Latin: *Blessed*. "Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he has looked favorably on his people and redeemed them" (Luke 1:68). In his beautiful song—reminiscent of Hannah's song (1 Samuel 2:1-10), and Mary's song, the Magnificat (Luke 1:46-55)—Zechariah gives thanks, not only for what God has done in his life, but for what he now knows God is doing in the life of his nation. His gratitude looks beyond what his son will do and toward the One his son, John, will point others to: "a mighty savior" from "the house of his servant David" (Luke 1:69). Zechariah's words pour forth with strength and authority, recalling the promises of God and the words of the prophets from the past. His son will "go before the Lord to prepare his ways" (v. 76).

I love the way Zechariah ends his Spirit-filled song: "By the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us, to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace" (vv. 78-79).

Light has broken into Zechariah's and Elizabeth's darkness, but it is also beginning to break into the lives of those in their nation who are living in the darkness of political oppression and poverty. Elizabeth's all-but-dead womb has brought forth life out of God's graciousness and power. Light is about to dawn on those who also sit in the shadow of death, to guide our feet in the way of peace.

We all experience our own personal darkness, whether it's the darkness of worry for the health and security of our children, parents, family members, and dear friends, or the darkness of our own addictions, financial insecurities, failing health and relationships, or physical or spiritual barrenness. Additionally, we as a nation have been living in the darkness of a global pandemic that, as of this writing, has claimed more than one million American lives, perhaps including some

of our own dear family members and friends.² Health-care workers' spirits are being crushed by the relentless bombardment of critically ill patients and death. We remain surrounded by the darkness of political divisiveness, the plague of racism, and the constant strain of global tensions and the fear of looming war. So, we pray for light to shine in our darkness, for a glimmer of hope, for a moment of peace in our lives, in our nation, and in our world.

*We all experience our
own personal darkness.*

The Gospel writers meant for us to find ourselves in this story. Nowhere is this more evident than in the original ending of Mark's narrative of Jesus's resurrection (Mark 16:1-8). As in the other Gospels, Mary Magdalene and other women come to the tomb early on Easter morning. They discover that the stone sealing the tomb has been rolled away, and a young man dressed in a white robe tells them the amazing news that Jesus has been raised. Additionally, he tells them to go and share the news with the disciples that Jesus has been raised and will meet them in Galilee.

But the three women are clearly still so traumatized from witnessing Jesus's brutal, torturous death, still so shrouded in the deep darkness that has come over their lives, that they cannot process what the angel is telling them. As Mark describes it, "terror and amazement had seized them" (16:8). And so, despite the angel's words, "Do not be alarmed" (v. 6), they run away and tell no one.

Eventually, the women find their voice and fill the role of God's messengers, as the eleven verses that apparently were added later to the end of Mark explain. Perhaps, as some scholars think, those final verses

had been part of the story all along and somehow were lost in early copies of Mark, then recovered. Or perhaps, as most believe, the writer ended the story abruptly so that we, as readers, would ask ourselves, “What would we have done in that situation? What will we do when we are faced with fear of sharing the good news? When we are rendered mute with doubt and fear?”

These are questions that we may ask of all encounters with angels, from Elijah to Zechariah to Mary Magdalene to our own time. How will we respond? What will we say to others? Will we run away in fear, like the women on that first Easter morning, or react with disbelief, like Zechariah? Or will we, also like the women at the tomb, overcome our fears and the darkness that surrounds us through faith, find our voice, and tell the world what God is doing?

In the middle of our darkness, whatever that may be, God is preparing us for a light that leads our feet into the way of peace. God is preparing us to *be* a light that leads others to peace. God is preparing us to be a light that *brings* peace. It was so for Abraham and Sarah, for Isaac and Rebekah, for Hannah and her husband, for Zechariah and Elizabeth, and for you and me. May we, like Zechariah, find our voice and proclaim the message of the angel: Blessed be the God of Israel, who is at work, in ways we cannot see, in ways we can scarcely imagine, to bring light into the darkest times and places. In response to this news and what it means for a hurting world, how can we keep silent?

ANGELS GATHER AMONG US

Roberta, a member of my Bible study group, had driven her husband to MD Anderson Cancer Center in Houston, where he was to receive a lifesaving stem cell transplant. Before the transplant could take place, however, her husband required a very high-risk surgery. The doctors were honest as they told Roberta and her husband, Tom, that his chances of surviving the surgery were less than 50 percent.

Other than Tom's medical team, Roberta knew no one else in the hospital, and she'd had no conversations with others. Knowing the odds were not in her husband's favor, Roberta sat alone at a table in the waiting room while he was in surgery, laid her head down on the table, and began to sob. After a few minutes, a woman she had never seen before approached and introduced herself. She said that she and her mother had recently flown to Houston from Egypt, and her mother was having surgery that day. Then she reached out and touched Roberta's hand and said, "I just came over here to tell you that your husband is going to be okay." Roberta later said that when the woman touched her hand, a complete sense of peace washed over her, and her words and her voice filled Roberta with a deep sense of assurance and comfort.

Hours later, Tom came out of the surgery—alive. He made it through the critical hours of the night, and by the next day it was apparent that he would be able to receive his stem cell transplant in the near future. Roberta asked the nursing staff if they would lead her to this woman's mother's room so she could properly thank her for the words that brought her through the ordeal with a sense of peace. However, none of the nurses she spoke with had seen anyone fitting the woman's description, and they insisted that no one from Egypt had been admitted to the hospital.

Later that day, Roberta asked her husband's surgeon if he knew anything about the woman and her mother. The doctor affirmed the medical staff's assessment: "We don't have anyone here from Egypt." He went on to say, "We get stories like this all the time here at MD Anderson. You've just experienced an angel sighting!"

Sometimes angels appear in our lives in such a way and with such an impact that it's difficult to tell if their presence is human or divine. But one thing is certain: whether the angels we experience are of human or divine origin, the Divine is always at work in and through these messengers to offer assurance, guidance, comfort, peace, love, and protection to God's children.

Experience the angelic visits surrounding the birth of Jesus

The Angels of Christmas: Hearing God's Voice in Advent explores the angelic visits surrounding the birth of Jesus with Zechariah, Mary, Joseph, and the shepherds in a four-week Advent experience. In this study, the reader will explore the visits and dive deep into the history of the angel Gabriel and other angels in the Bible. The messages of the angels hold meaning for listeners both then and now.

In her new work, *The Angels of Christmas*, writer Susan Robb leans into our curiosity and beautifully articulates the significant role the angelic messengers of God play in the stories of Advent. An incredible resource for young and old alike, *The Angels of Christmas* helps us rediscover how God communicates hope and meaning to earth-side humans—a fresh study for all generations.

—**RACHEL BILLUPS**, pastor and author of *Be Bold: Finding your Fierce*

Susan Robb shares the Christmas story with attention to the angels and intersects those miraculous happenings of 2000 years ago with the experiences of people's lives—their joys, sufferings, and hopes. What a beautiful way to hear and study the Nativity story and discover new perspectives.

—**MICHAEL MCKEE**, Bishop, North Texas Annual Conference, The United Methodist Church

Susan Robb is a gifted pastor and scholar. This book truly captures the voice of both.

—**REV. PAUL RASMUSSEN**, Senior Minister, Highland Park United Methodist Church

The Angels of Christmas is an inspirational, practical look at the angelic messengers of the Advent/Christmas story. Written with Susan Robb's trademark clarity and eloquence, with many stories and real-life applications, it is ideal for personal growth or small group study. Churches will find it helpful for all-church studies tied to sermons during Advent.

—**ALYCE MCKENZIE**, Le Van Professor of Preaching and Worship at Perkins School of Theology, Southern Methodist University, Dallas, Texas



SUSAN ROBB recently retired as the Senior Associate Minister at Highland Park United Methodist Church in Dallas, Texas, where she was part of the church staff for 20 years. God's call to ministry led her to pursue a Master of Divinity degree at the Perkins School of Theology at Southern Methodist University. She graduated *magna cum laude* in 2006 with an award in Homiletics. Susan's area of expertise lies in writing and teaching Bible studies and exploring the idea of listening to and responding to God's call. She is married to Ike, and they have two children, Caroline and James.

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