



CHRISTMAS

LUKE 2:20

The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

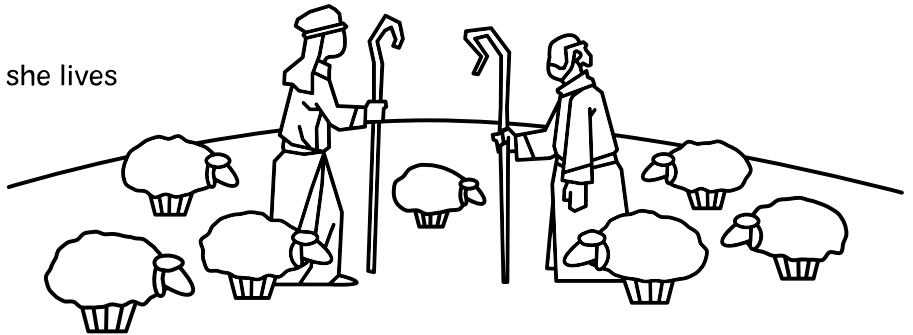
When the angels visit the shepherds in their fields, the angels' rejoicing fills the sky.

Their celebration happens as they announce a promise that's come true. The shepherds leave their stations to the sound of the angels' rejoicing. When they return, the shepherds' own song is what carries them back. *What they have heard and seen pours forth from them as praise.* But I wonder what of the angels' first visit remains with them and how it lives in their memories.



When the angel first comes to Mary, it's with wildly unbelievable news.

But as Mary's belly grows rounder, as she lives the proof of that announcement, I wonder how her memory of the angelic encounter begins to change. *I wonder if she ever thinks of the angel as the first friend with whom she could celebrate.*



And I wonder if the angel returned to Mary as Jesus was growing up. If she timed her visits for when Mary needed her most, at the crucial junctures in a child's life.

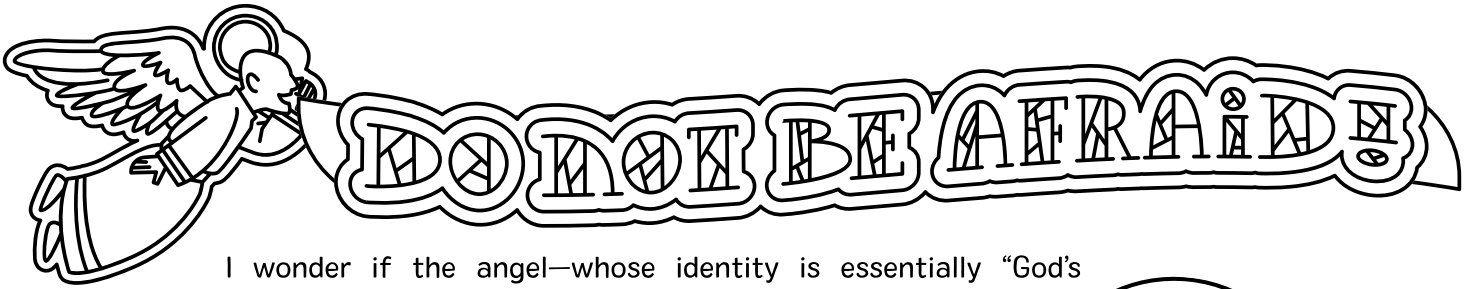
“Do not be afraid, Mary: he's teething, and it's painful, but he's okay, and he'll eventually stop screaming.”

“Do not be afraid: he's walking and talking now, and he's quicker and more curious than you suspect. He might disappear when you look away, but he won't be gone for long.”

“Do not be afraid: I know you feel unprepared for, and overwhelmed by, these adolescent

years. But you are not alone. You do not have to carry all of this by yourself.”

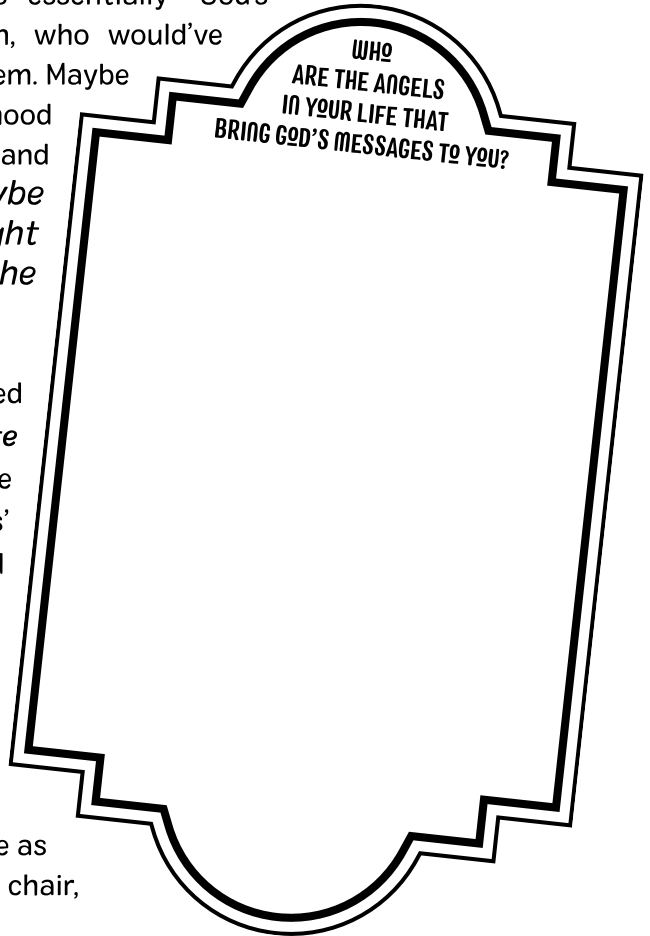
“Do not be afraid: he is ready to be on his own. He will always be your baby, but he is also a man now, and the world needs him—and he needs it—in a way he must respond to. There will be times it may feel like you have lost him. But he will forever be yours: a truth that will comfort you and break your heart.”



I wonder if the angel—whose identity is essentially “God’s messenger”—returns in the guise of Elizabeth, who would’ve faced these same struggles just before Mary came to them. Maybe the angel spoke through other parents in the neighborhood who rejoiced with her when Jesus said his first words and commiserated with her when he started to talk back. *Maybe the angel spoke through the rabbis who taught Jesus the stories and songs of his tradition as he grew.*

Or maybe the angel spoke through a stranger who remarked to Mary once, with a knowing smile, that Jesus was *quite a kid*. I wonder if Mary ever saw a shepherd who’d come to town and felt transported back to the night of Jesus’ birth; perhaps her heart warmed to remember those who’d come to keep her company at the very beginning and to welcome her son to the world.

I wonder if the angel returned to the shepherds after they returned to their pastures. Maybe as curious neighbors urging them to repeat the story of “all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.” Maybe as kids tugging on their sleeves, elders pulling up an extra chair, people all around making space for the shepherds’ tale.



“Do not be afraid, shepherds:
YOUR STORY IS AN OUTRAGEOUS ONE,
 but it needs to be told.”

Those “angelic visits” were most likely not as dramatic as their first encounters with the angels.

Still, maybe it was helpful to Mary and the shepherds to notice **God breaking in during the joys and struggles of their more ordinary moments**, too, cloaked in the faces and voices of people they encountered every day. I wonder if we all have those angels that appear throughout our lives in different guises, each time with an urging toward courage and a reminder of God’s goodness.

I WONDER IF WE ALL MIGHT BE THOSE ANGELS, TO AND FOR EACH OTHER, WHEN WE OFFER EACH OTHER THOSE GIFTS.

Perhaps this Christmas, the angels might come to say to us:

“Do not be afraid.

There is much to mourn and a great deal to resist.

Do not be afraid. Be careful. Be wise.

HOLD out **HOPE** for one another.

Work to **BRING PEACE**—just and lasting peace—to the world.

PRACTICE JOY regularly, so you do not lose that muscle.

CHOOSE LOVE at every turn, in every way you can.

Do not be afraid.

God is with us in all things, always.

Even now.”

Absolutely now.



QUESTIONS TO DISCUSS

What details do you imagine were part of the shepherds' story of "all they had heard and seen"?

Who has been present for you, urging you not to be afraid, right when you needed to hear that most?

GOING DEEPER

What are people in your community fearful of this season?

What's one way, without using words, you could encourage people not to be afraid?

Where have you found hope, peace, joy, and love, even in the midst of your fear?