

Before One (Mary)

Angels only turn up at Christmas, right?

READING ONE – Luke 1:26-38

²⁶ In the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy God sent the angel Gabriel to a town in Galilee named Nazareth. ²⁷ He had a message for a young woman promised in marriage to a man named Joseph, who was a descendant of King David. Her name was Mary. ²⁸ The angel came to her and said, "Peace be with you! The Lord is with you and has greatly blessed you!"

²⁹ Mary was deeply troubled by the angel's message, and she wondered what his words meant. ³⁰ The angel said to her, "Don't be afraid, Mary; God has been gracious to you. ³¹ You will become pregnant and give birth to a son, and you will name him Jesus. ³² He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High God. The Lord God will make him a king, as his ancestor David was, ³³ and he will be the king of the descendants of Jacob forever; his kingdom will never end!"

³⁴ Mary said to the angel, "I am a virgin. How, then, can this be?"

³⁵ The angel answered, "The Holy Spirit will come on you, and God's power will rest upon you. For this reason the holy child will be called the Son of God. ³⁶ Remember your relative Elizabeth. It is said that she cannot have children, but she herself is now six months pregnant, even though she is very old. ³⁷ For there is nothing that God cannot do."

³⁸ "I am the Lord's servant," said Mary; "may it happen to me as you have said." And the angel left her.

After One

The most well-known angel story of them all –

The angel who tells Mary she is to have a baby.

But it is steeped in a history of angels that stretch right back through the Bible.

Today, we will encounter just some of them.

Some familiar, others not so much.

And perhaps just one or two wee surprises along the way...

Before Two (Jacob's dream)

Do angels always speak to the person who sees them?

READING TWO – Genesis 28:10-18

¹⁰ Jacob left Beersheba and started toward Haran. ¹¹ At sunset he came to a holy place and camped there. He lay down to sleep, resting his head on a stone. ¹² He dreamed that he saw a stairway reaching from earth to heaven, with angels going up and coming down on it. ¹³ And there was the LORD standing beside him. "I am the LORD, the God of Abraham and Isaac," he said. "I will give to you and to your descendants this land on which you are lying. ¹⁴ They will be as numerous as the specks of dust on the earth. They will extend their territory in all directions, and through you and your descendants I will bless all the nations. ¹⁵ Remember, I will be with you and protect you wherever you go, and I will bring you back to this land. I will not leave you until I have done all that I have promised you."

¹⁶ Jacob woke up and said, “The LORD is here! He is in this place, and I didn't know it!” ¹⁷ He was afraid and said, “What a terrifying place this is! It must be the house of God; it must be the gate that opens into heaven.”

¹⁸ Jacob got up early next morning, took the stone that was under his head, and set it up as a memorial. Then he poured olive oil on it to dedicate it to God.

After Two

No words.

Yet so many angels.

Almost as many reasons for their presence.

Are they Jacob's ever-present companions which he rarely sees?

Do they indicate the number of times God's people will face exile?

Is their movement like a dance depicting the rollercoaster ride that is life itself?

Perhaps they represent our prayers going up and God's compassion coming down...

Or maybe it's the ladder that's more important than the angels.

Angels.

Messengers of God.

Mere posties or the mouth of God?

Before Three (Jacob wrestles)

Is it always obvious when a person meets an angel?

READING THREE – Genesis 32:21-31

²² That same night Jacob got up, took his two wives, his two concubines, and his eleven children, and crossed the Jabbok River. ²³ After he had sent them across, he also sent across all that he owned, ²⁴ but he stayed behind, alone.

Then a man came and wrestled with him until just before daybreak. ²⁵ When the man saw that he was not winning the struggle, he hit Jacob on the hip, and it was thrown out of joint. ²⁶ The man said, “Let me go; daylight is coming.”

“I won't, unless you bless me,” Jacob answered.

²⁷ “What is your name?” the man asked.

“Jacob,” he answered.

²⁸ The man said, “Your name will no longer be Jacob. You have struggled with God and with men, and you have won; so your name will be Israel.”

²⁹ Jacob said, “Now tell me your name.”

But he answered, “Why do you want to know my name?” Then he blessed Jacob.

³⁰ Jacob said, “I have seen God face-to-face, and I am still alive”; so he named the place Peniel. ³¹ The sun rose as Jacob was leaving Peniel, and he was limping because of his hip.

After Three

Oh Jacob.

Tricky Jacob. The fast-talking smart guy. Wide boy of the Patriarchs.

You got more than you bargained for eh?

Once upon a time you tricked your brother out of his inheritance, his birth right.

Now you must go back and face the music.

And on the way, who is this dark stranger you must overcome, to cross the ford...

As you return, to be reconciled to your brother?

Sometimes, angels come, not so obviously, wrapped up in mystery,
under cover of the night.

And God is there too.

Before Four (Gideon)

So, maybe angels don't just appear, when things are going well?

READING FOUR – Judges 6:11-24a

¹¹ Then the LORD's angel came to the village of Ophrah and sat under the oak tree that belonged to Joash, a man of the clan of Abiezer. His son Gideon was threshing some wheat secretly in a wine press, so that the Midianites would not see him. ¹² The LORD's angel appeared to him there and said, "The LORD is with you, brave and mighty man!"

¹³ Gideon said to him, "If I may ask, sir, why has all this happened to us if the LORD is with us? What happened to all the wonderful things that our fathers told us the LORD used to do—how he brought them out of Egypt? The LORD has abandoned us and left us to the mercy of the Midianites."

¹⁴ Then the LORD ordered him, "Go with all your great strength and rescue Israel from the Midianites. I myself am sending you."

¹⁵ Gideon replied, "But Lord, how can I rescue Israel? My clan is the weakest in the tribe of Manasseh, and I am the least important member of my family."

¹⁶ The LORD answered, "You can do it because I will help you. You will crush the Midianites as easily as if they were only one man."

¹⁷ Gideon replied, "If you are pleased with me, give me some proof that you are really the LORD.

¹⁸ Please do not leave until I bring you an offering of food."

He said, "I will stay until you come back."

¹⁹ So Gideon went into his house and cooked a young goat and used a bushel of flour to make bread without any yeast. He put the meat in a basket and the broth in a pot, brought them to the LORD's angel under the oak tree, and gave them to him. ²⁰ The angel told him, "Put the meat and the bread on this rock, and pour the broth over them." Gideon did so. ²¹ Then the LORD's angel reached out and touched the meat and the bread with the end of the stick he was holding. Fire came out of the rock and burned up the meat and the bread. Then the angel disappeared.

²² Gideon then realized that it was the LORD's angel he had seen, and he said in terror, "Sovereign LORD! I have seen your angel face-to-face!"

²³ But the LORD told him, “Peace. Don't be afraid. You will not die.” ²⁴ Gideon built an altar to the LORD there and named it “The LORD is Peace.”

After Four

Things were not going well for Gideon:

A hero,

and a man steeped in the stories of his God and his people.

Who knew what they said God did in the past...

But what about the now? What about the present?

Let's pause, quietly a moment,

And think on all the 'Gideons' of this world, perhaps the 'White Hats' of Aleppo?

And all the people alive today who long to hear:

“Peace. Don't be afraid. You will not die.” “The LORD is Peace.”

Before Five (Elijah)

So, angels are just about freaking us out and bringing us difficult or challenging messages from God?

READING FIVE – 1 Kings 19:3-9a

¹ King Ahab told his wife Jezebel everything that Elijah had done and how he had put all the prophets of Baal to death. ² She sent a message to Elijah: “May the gods strike me dead if by this time tomorrow I don't do the same thing to you that you did to the prophets.” ³ Elijah was afraid and fled for his life; he took his servant and went to Beersheba in Judah.

Leaving the servant there, ⁴ Elijah walked a whole day into the wilderness. He stopped and sat down in the shade of a tree and wished he would die. “It's too much, LORD,” he prayed. “Take away my life; I might as well be dead!”

⁵ He lay down under the tree and fell asleep. Suddenly an angel touched him and said, “Wake up and eat.” ⁶ He looked around and saw a loaf of bread and a jar of water near his head. He ate and drank, and lay down again. ⁷ The LORD's angel returned and woke him up a second time, saying, “Get up and eat, or the trip will be too much for you.” ⁸ Elijah got up, ate and drank, and the food gave him enough strength to walk forty days to Sinai, the holy mountain. ⁹ There he went into a cave to spend the night.

After Five

Elijah. A prophet.

The story goes that Elijah has called fire down from heaven.

The prophets of Baal were all burned up.

Ahab and Jezebel were outraged, scandalized.

Now, Elijah is fleeing for his life.

He is a man at the end of his rope.

A man in need of an angel. A messenger.

Bringing hope, sustenance... food and drink.

The very sources of life itself...

Before Six (burning bush)

What if the word 'angel' points to something that appears not so predictably angelic?

READING SIX - Exodus 3. 3-10

1 One day while Moses was taking care of the sheep and goats of his father-in-law Jethro, the priest of Midian, he led the flock across the desert and came to Sinai, the holy mountain. **2** There the angel of the Lord appeared to him as a flame coming from the middle of a bush. Moses saw that the bush was on fire but that it was not burning up. **3** "This is strange," he thought. "Why isn't the bush burning up? I will go closer and see."

4 When the Lord saw that Moses was coming closer, he called to him from the middle of the bush and said, "Moses! Moses!"
He answered, "Yes, here I am."

5 God said, "Do not come any closer. Take off your sandals, because you are standing on holy ground. **6** I am the God of your ancestors, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob." So Moses covered his face, because he was afraid to look at God.

7 Then the Lord said, "I have seen how cruelly my people are being treated in Egypt; I have heard them cry out to be rescued from their slave drivers. I know all about their sufferings, **8** and so I have come down to rescue them from the Egyptians and to bring them out of Egypt to a spacious land, one which is rich and fertile and in which the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites now live. **9** I have indeed heard the cry of my people, and I see how the Egyptians are oppressing them. **10** Now I am sending you to the king of Egypt so that you can lead my people out of his country."

After Six

No wings.

No halos.

But bring light.

Holy light.

All aflame but not burning up.

Yet, still that message from God

God has heard the prayers of God's people.

God will use Moses to rescue them.

God's mission.

Done through a fallible, stuttering human being.

Angels aren't so predictable.

They are Words of God given shape and form (from *Shadow Fall* by Simon R Green).

Often their message isn't either.

Before Seven (Balaam's donkey)

Are angels only seen by really special people, like Jacob, Moses and Elijah?

READING SEVEN - Numbers 22. 22-35

22 God was angry that Balaam was going, and as Balaam was riding along on his donkey, accompanied by his two servants, the angel of the Lord stood in the road to bar his way. **23** When the donkey saw the angel standing there holding a sword, it left the road and turned into the fields. Balaam beat the donkey and brought it back onto the road. **24** Then the angel stood where the road narrowed between two vineyards and had a stone wall on each side. **25** When the donkey saw the angel, it

moved over against the wall and crushed Balaam's foot against it. Again Balaam beat the donkey. **26** Once more the angel moved ahead; he stood in a narrow place where there was no room at all to pass on either side. **27** This time, when the donkey saw the angel, it lay down. Balaam lost his temper and began to beat the donkey with his stick. **28** Then the Lord gave the donkey the power of speech, and it said to Balaam, "What have I done to you? Why have you beaten me these three times?"

29 Balaam answered, "Because you have made a fool of me! If I had a sword, I would kill you."

30 The donkey replied, "Am I not the same donkey on which you have ridden all your life? Have I ever treated you like this before?"

"No," he answered.

31 Then the Lord let Balaam see the angel standing there with his sword; and Balaam threw himself face downward on the ground. **32** The angel demanded, "Why have you beaten your donkey three times like this? I have come to bar your way, because you should not be making this journey. **33** But your donkey saw me and turned aside three times. If it hadn't, I would have killed you and spared the donkey."

34 Balaam replied, "I have sinned. I did not know that you were standing in the road to oppose me; but now if you think it is wrong for me to go on, I will return home."

35 But the angel said, "Go on with these men, but say only what I tell you to say." So Balaam went on with them.

After Seven

Angels. they only appear to special people, yes?

'Oh, no they don't'!

'Oh, yes they do'! (Do this like at a panto?)

It might surprise us to discover, that the Bible isn't just all holiness and mystery...

There's a bit of pantomime in there to. Knockabout stuff.

Take Balaam and his talking donkey.

Sometimes, maybe the Lord has a laugh at our human pretensions?

Maybe we need to laugh at ourselves as well?

Before Eight (Zacharias)

Can we predict where angels will meet us?

READING EIGHT - Luke 1. 5-25

5 During the time when Herod was king of Judea, there was a priest named Zechariah, who belonged to the priestly order of Abijah. His wife's name was Elizabeth; she also belonged to a priestly family. **6** They both lived good lives in God's sight and obeyed fully all the Lord's laws and commands. **7** They had no children because Elizabeth could not have any, and she and Zechariah were both very old.

8 One day Zechariah was doing his work as a priest in the Temple, taking his turn in the daily service. **9** According to the custom followed by the priests, he was chosen by lot to burn incense on the altar. So he went into the Temple of the Lord, **10** while the crowd of people outside prayed during the hour when the incense was burned. **11** An angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing at the right side of the altar where the incense was burned. **12** When Zechariah saw him, he was alarmed and felt afraid.

13 But the angel said to him, “Don’t be afraid, Zechariah! God has heard your prayer, and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son. You are to name him John. 14 How glad and happy you will be, and how happy many others will be when he is born! 15 John will be great in the Lord’s sight. He must not drink any wine or strong drink. From his very birth he will be filled with the Holy Spirit, 16 and he will bring back many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God. 17 He will go ahead of the Lord, strong and mighty like the prophet Elijah. He will bring fathers and children together again; he will turn disobedient people back to the way of thinking of the righteous; he will get the Lord’s people ready for him.”

18 Zechariah said to the angel, “How shall I know if this is so? I am an old man, and my wife is old also.”

19 “I am Gabriel,” the angel answered. “I stand in the presence of God, who sent me to speak to you and tell you this good news. 20 But you have not believed my message, which will come true at the right time. Because you have not believed, you will be unable to speak; you will remain silent until the day my promise to you comes true.”

21 In the meantime the people were waiting for Zechariah and wondering why he was spending such a long time in the Temple. 22 When he came out, he could not speak to them, and so they knew that he had seen a vision in the Temple. Unable to say a word, he made signs to them with his hands.

23 When his period of service in the Temple was over, Zechariah went back home. 24 Some time later his wife Elizabeth became pregnant and did not leave the house for five months. 25 “Now at last the Lord has helped me,” she said. “He has taken away my public disgrace!”

After Eight

Ok, this was in the temple.

Godly things happen there. Spiritual things. Holy things.

So far so predictable!

How many years had the old man gone there to do his duty?

What does it do to a man,

When the old habit and that custom so faithfully followed, come alive?

And when God’s angel, taps him on the shoulder,

And says, ‘I’ve a job for you....’

Before Nine (Joseph)

So, angels and dreams have no effect on reality, right?

Or

So, dreamers who see angels, have no effect on reality, right? (I Think this one... you?)

READING NINE - Matthew 1:18-25

18 This was how the birth of Jesus Christ took place. His mother Mary was engaged to Joseph, but before they were married, she found out that she was going to have a baby by the Holy Spirit. 19 Joseph was a man who always did what was right, but he did not want to disgrace Mary publicly; so he made plans to break the engagement privately.

20 While he was thinking about this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, “Joseph, descendant of David, do not be afraid to take Mary to be your wife. For it is by the Holy Spirit that she has conceived. 21 She will have a son, and you will name him Jesus—because he will save his people from their sins.”

22 Now all this happened in order to make come true what the Lord had said through the prophet,
23 “A virgin will become pregnant and have a son, and he will be called Immanuel” (which means,
“God is with us”).

24 So when Joseph woke up, he married Mary, as the angel of the Lord had told him to. 25 But he
had no sexual relations with her before she gave birth to her son. And Joseph named him Jesus.

After Nine

Ah Joseph!

What if you had listened when someone said,

‘Argh, it was only a dream, son.

Get your head out of the clouds!

Face reality!’

What then?

What would have happened to Mary?

To Jesus?

To the Davidic line?

To the Son of Man?

Son of God?

Dreams grow.

Get us to aim for the stars.

Maybe angels help us reach them.

They are ascending and descending...

Showing us the way....

Bringing us messages of good news and compassion...