

Christmas Angels

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Whenever I hear the story of the angels announcing the birth of Christ, I picture the meadow on the farm where I grew up with its huge maple tree, its branches spread over a big rock where my sisters and I used to sit.

That's where we would have been had we been the shepherds: tending our flock and watching the stars.

You could see the Milky Way then; the stars were brilliantly lit pinholes in an immense black velvet blanket.

We lived in the tiny village of Sheldonville, Mass., a part of the rural town of Wrentham. It was a wealthy town, but we didn't share in that wealth. My father had cataracts surgery in 1958 and it wasn't a one-day procedure then. He was in the hospital for 10 days for each eye and out of work for months.

When he was ready to return to work, there were no jobs, so he waited tables, slaughtered chickens, picked apples and tried to sell his stories to magazines.

I think the angels would have come to us. In a sense I think they did because we got by. Those years in a tiny rented house on someone else's farm were the best of my life.

We knew we were poor, especially when Christmas came and other children we knew were asking Santa for bicycles and dolls that moved or talked, confident that that's what would be under the tree on Christmas morning.

I remember one group of people who thought they were being Christmas angels. They brought a box of used toys to us. I wasn't supposed to see it, but I did. My mother opened the box and there on top was a filthy doll with matted hair.

My mother closed the box quietly and handed it back with a "no thank you." We were poor but we deserved better than somebody else's cast-offs under the tree.

We as a society still see poor people in much the same way, as though they deserved something less than the rest of us. As though they should be happy with soiled and torn clothing and broken toys. As though they don't deserve as good an education or quality medical care, a fair wage for their labor or a decent, safe place to live.

Where I work, we park in a lot bordered by the Salvation Army shelter and A Hope, a day program for people who are homeless. A few homeless people have set up camp in a corner of the lot, sleeping amid plastic bags that contain their few belongings.

A lot of people are afraid to walk there, but I think that's where the angels would go to tell their good news of great joy if it had happened today.

The shepherds of Jesus' day were poor and they were social outcasts. That they should be the first to hear of Jesus' birth tells me a lot about who Jesus was and what his life meant.

We are called to spread the word of hope to the hopeless. Not by proselytizing, but by feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, visiting the sick and incarcerated and giving of our wealth and ourselves.

Our actions toward the outcast spread that word. That I am here to offer decent clothing, nutritious food or simple comfort or to work for justice all year makes me a Christmas angel. Even by smiling and offering a friendly greeting instead of crossing the street to avoid that homeless person, I can offer something of value: respect for a fellow human being.

I believe in angels. I believe they are among us in the form of the doctor who treated my son's cancer free of charge, the church women who run a tiny food pantry for homeless people in Nyack, NY, the man who opened several homes for unwed mothers and allowed them to stay until they finished their educations and got jobs so that they could keep their babies.

Angels are the lesbian couple who took in three children so they wouldn't wind up in the foster care system, or the Massachusetts pastor and his wife who adopted six special-needs children, trusting that God would provide for their needs.

Angels are the messengers of God, and so should we be.