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Christmas Angels



"JOSIAH HOPKINS"

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by
"JOSIAH HOPKINS"
Parson
of
THE COUNTRY CHURCH
of
HOLLYWOOD

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WE was all a-settin' there in the cross-roads' store one day about a week before Christmas. Sarah had got in one of her tanters about cookin' up cakes fer the chillern fer Christmas. You see, they all had wrote in a-sayin' they'd be home to spend Christmas with us at the parsonage. That never fails to git Sarah all stirred up about Christmas cookin'. So, she made out a list of things she wanted me to git fer the cakes and pies, and she give me several dozen eggs in a basket to go down to the cross-roads' store and trade for the cookin' things.

Brother Rudy was right busy that mornin' with the people doin' Christmas tradin', but I finally give him the eggs and got the different things. I remember it was mince meat, cranberries, and whitenin' sugar fer the cakes, and a lot of them little candy crumbles that you sprinkle over a cake—little hearts and things like that to decorate the cake with, and a couple a fresh cocoanuts, some citron—oh, there was several things. So, I got 'em all, and put 'em in the basket, and thought I would set there by the stove and join in on the talks with the neighbors that was a-settin' around on boxes. We all

talked about first one thing and then another. Finis Purtle was there and Uncle Jack Denny, and Grandpa Whortle, and Plunk Wheelis, the mail rider — oh, there might have been one or two more. I know they was all a-settin' 'round the stove; it was about circled with 'em. Customers was a-comin' and a-goin' and a-tradin'. The air had a Christmas whang in it. And, let me say right here, there ain't nothin' grander than a country store when it's all filled up with nice things fer Christmas: sich as bananas, a keg of fresh oysters, cocoanuts, oranges, apples, candy, and Christmas toys. There's a kind a Christmas smell about it all that comes to me acrost these years. The only trouble with the memory of that Christmas smell was that Uncle Jack Denny had on rubbers and kept a-puttin' his feet on the hot stove and sorter ruind the Christmas whang that was in the air. But everything else was real Christmassey.

The Widow Walton come in to look after the gittin' off of the Christmas box to the orphans in Pumpkin Center. You see, the Ladies' Aid had made her the chairman of the committee to see that the box was packed right and put in the wagon when Doc Hocks left with his load for Pumpkin Center that week. So, there was the Widow Walton, as bright and cheerful as ever, lookin' after the gittin' off of all them things to the poor little orphans that didn't have no mother ner father to look after 'em. It always was sorta tetchin' to see the Widow Walton around Christmas time! Of course, ev'rybody knew that her little Charlie never would git well. Then, she had them four other little chillern to look after, but she never complained! When folks would ask her if she was a-goin'

to have a good Christmas, she would say: "Well, I always do!" Her husband, Doctor Charlie Walton, was jest about as grand a man as there ever was in these three counties, and of course, that made everybody sorter tender towards the Widow and them five little chillern. Like so many country doctors, he never saved nothin', and wore plumb out a-waitin' on people, and died right in the prime of his life. But, as Bill Ivans said once over at Lige Gupton's Shoe Shop, "It's worth dyin' to leave behind all the good that Charlie Walton left."

The Widow Walton said to us a-settin' around the stove: "Some of you men come here and help me put these orphan things in this box."

First one got up and then another and went back to help her with the work, but they couldn't stand it. First to come back was Finis Purtle, a-rubbin' his eyes and a-blowin' his nose. He said:

"I don't feel like I'm fit to help the Widow with them little orphan things. It sure gets me down."

He made out like he wanted to warm his hands, for his biler was jest about to bust. Then, Uncle Jack Denny got up and went back and hope her awhile; then, he come back with his eyes all full of tears, and jerked open the stove door and poked the fire around, then spit in the fire. He looked at me with a kind of a squint in his eyes and said:

"Parson Hopkins, do you know what that Widow Walton makes me think of?"

"I don't know what she makes you think of," I said, "but I know whatever it is, it is bound to be something

good, for there never was a more onselfish ner a grander Christian woman."

Uncle Jack went on: "Well, I'll tell you what it is. She makes me think of them Christmas angels in the Bible. You know, I can't read the Bible fer myself, but I have heerd enough talk on it to have a pretty good idear." Then he asked me, "How many Christmas angels was they there in the Bible?"

Grandpa Whortle spoke up and said: "Well, however many there was, there want enough. This world's been kinder short of angels."

"I reckon you're right, Grandpa," says I. "That's the thing this pore world needs the most of today: people to do like them angels done in the Bible."

About that time, Finis Purtle, he come back and said they had the box all nailed up, and marked and ready to go. Then, he got in on the angel talk. First one word brought on another until finally one of 'em asked me to tell 'em about these Christmas angels. So, I went out to the buggy and got my Bible and come back, and we gethered there around the stove while I turnt through the pages of the Bible and read to 'em about it.

We found five Bible pieces there about the Christmas angels; there are three of 'em in Luke, and two of 'em in Matthew.

I think it was Uncle Jack Denny that said: "Parson, did you notice that all the angels there in the Bible at Christmas begun their talk with the very same words?"

When I told him that I never had noticed that, he said: "You read it agin."

When I did, sure enough, every one of them Christmas angels began their talks with these words: "Fear not." I thought that was such a grand thought, and that's just exactly what the world needed then, and that's what it needs now — to git rid of its fears. Every one of these people that these angels talked to had fears about different things. But, the angels used the same words for all of 'em: it meant this — "Whatever is a-troublin' you, why, don't be scared."

That sure is interestin' to have these visitors come out of Heaven with such encouragin' messages.

One of them angels was Gabriel. It says right there in Luke 1:19: "I am Gabriel, that stand in the presence of God; and am sent to speak unto thee, and to show thee these glad tidings." If this angel, Gabriel, who had been a-standin' there in the presence of God in Heaven, tells us that we ain't got nothin' to get scared about — why, it ought to help up everybody a whole lot. You see, the trouble with lots of people is they are scared of God. That's one of the reasons why Jesus Christ come down here and stayed on the earth about thirty-three years as God in the flesh. He came so people could see how God talked, and how God done, and how much God loved 'em, so as they never would be scared of God. So, that's what these angels said to them people the first Christmas: "Don't get scared, let the Lord help you work it out!" Christmas ort to be a time when everybody buries their fears. If the Lord come down out of the Ivory Palaces and made His home here in this world, bein' borned in a stable, livin' poor like He did, dyin' fer people that

that makes life worth the livin'—what all these folks need is to hear from Heaven. It would be a message of good news! I reckon that's why real Christian people have such happy, shinin' faces! They've heard good news!

The angel's visit to Zacharias so paralyzed him that he couldn't speak when he come out of the Temple, and he was dumb until the little child, John the Baptist, was borned. Yes, he was so accustomed to the fadin' world about him, the hate and prejudice, the janglin' noises of the world, that when Gabriel come out of the white light of God's throne, and brought him good tidin's, he like to a-passed out. Fellers that go away up into the high air above the earth bring back word that the lights are so bright up there that it mighty nigh puts their eyes out. That's just the way it is when we git above the fogs and clouds of the earth, we are dazed in the brightness of the heavenly light!

We found in readin' up on these angel visits that right there in this same first chapter of Luke, that very angel, Gabriel, come back to bring a message to Mary, who was to be the mother of the Christ. This angel scared Mary about as bad as he did Zacharias. It tells us in the twenty-ninth verse that she "was troubled at his saying." You see, the angel had told her, "Hail thou that art highly favored, the Lord is with thee; blessed art thou among women." Now, there wasn't nothin' in this to skeer anybody, but it jest goes to show you that we git so accustomed to disappointment and sorrow in this world that when the light breaks from Heaven on life's darkened path, and the glorious voice of an angel announces the

glad tidin's from God, people git the limber-neck and mighty nigh faint. Mary had everything in the world to be happy over. It says here that she was "Highly favored", and "The Lord is with Thee", and "Thou hast found favor with God." Why, such statements as that a-comin' from Heaven is worth more than fer somebody to give you all the silver and gold and precious stones in the world!

The angel went on to tell her that she was to be the mother of the Christ. I think it was Grandpa Whortle that brought out the thought that the angel couldn't find a word in the human language to describe this child, and simply referred to the Baby as, "That holy thing which shall be born of thee." You see, they never had been anybody like that borned on the world, and there has never been one like it since.

One of the sweetest things that was done by the Christmas angels is told there in Matthew 1:26-38. Not only did the angels come and tell Mary that she was to be the mother of the Christ, but the angel of the Lord went also to Joseph and told him not to fear, and gave Mary a clear receipt, signed by God, Hisself. You see, Joseph's trouble was the fear of criticism about Mary, the woman that he loved. The angel said to him: "Fear not." You see, his fear was what somebody would say, er what somebody would think when Mary became the mother of the Christ by the Holy Spirit. The message of this Christmas angel was to assure Joseph concernin' the fears that were borned out of Mary's condition. Yes, neighbor, God has a cure for every fear that is in your heart!

Did you ever notice, neighbors, that there was two different things talked about in the Bible that never had been before? One was Adam when God made him there in the Garden of Eden. There never had been a man before in the universe. There had been the three persons of the Godhead, and then there had been angels, but this was a new step when God made man. Then, here in Luke 1:35, there's another step when God made a body to put over the person of His Son. In other words, God and humanity was joined in the same person. That sure was strange, wasn't it? I reckon that's why the Bible picks out these two and speaks of the first man, Adam, and the last Adam, who was Christ. You see, they are the two heads of everything: Adam, the head of the human race, and Christ, the first of a new spiritual race, or humanity raised to the level of the Divine!

I reckon we was there four or five hours, a-settin' 'round the stove and talkin'. Brother Rudy got a kind a soft place in his heart and brought us some grapes to eat. Yes, he had a little keg of 'em there in the store, with the grapes all packed in sawdust. They had come from some fur-off place, and he treated us all to grapes. He said: "You all just make yourselves to home." Somebody stirred up the fire, and we went on again.

We come there to where it tells about the angel of the Lord and the shepherds. That's in Luke 2:8-20. It is a mighty interestin' Bible piece. These angels come to tell that the Saviour had been borned in Jerusalem, the city of David. That's the only birth on this earth that brought an angel and a heavenly delegation out of Heaven to

celebrate the event! Notice, the angel of the Lord come upon these shepherds at their work just like Gabriel walked up on Zacharias a-goin' about his duties there of burnin' incense in the Temple. This just brings out the thought that the Lord wants to honor people and bless 'em while they go about their ordinary work in life. These shepherds got scared just like Mary and Zacharias did. It says there in verse nine, "And lo, the angel of the Lord shown round about them: and they were sore afraid."

People are just that way today about Heaven, or anybody that's connected with Heaven. You take a country horse that ain't seen nothin' ner been nowheres, and take him into Pumpkin Center. When a train comes through, why, that poor, fool horse will have the Saint Viter's dance and a conniption fit all at the same time — all jest because he ain't never seen nothin' like that before. That's why human beings are scared of the Divine and the miraculous. It's just out of their line of thinkin'.

So, this angel done just like all them done before; he said: "Fear not; for, behold I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people." Notice here the heavenly visitor brings good news again. It says here that it was fer all people. Nobody's got a right to build a fence around the heavenly blessin's and shut anybody out. All the news that Heaven has ever sent to this world was general news; it was for everybody. It says here: "Which shall be to all people." White man, black man, brown man, any man, anywhere, all the time!

Just as that angel announced that they'd find the Baby wropped in swaddlin' clothes, a-layin' in the manger, the

heavenly multitudes broke loose in the grandest song that this old world has ever heard. There ain't no tellin' how many of 'em was there in that angel choir. It says here in the thirteenth verse that it was a "multitude of the heavenly host." And, wasn't that a song that they sung? In verse fourteen, it tells us what it was: "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men." You see, Heaven tried to start a song on this earth the night that Jesus come. The song died out on those hills that night, and the angels went back to Heaven, but men have never taken up that song in a great human chorus. Every now and then, some feller will sing a sorter solo like that song, all by hisself, a-tryin' to tell the world of the glory of God and of God's desire to have peace on earth and good will between all men. Sometimes a few would pick it up and then get a choir of a few voices to hist a song of peace, but then, it would fade out agin.

It's kinda like it was the time that poor, weak-minded boy walked right into the middle of the band that was a-playin' here in Goose Creek on the Fourth of July. The band was doin' right well, and this poor boy come right into the midst of 'em a-suckin' on a lemon. Well, one horn went to blubberin', and then another one, and finally they all just blubbered out and quit. All from that little old boy a-chewin' on that lemon right there where they could all see him. That's just what happened to God's song of peace. It would start and then blubber and fade out. But, there is bound to come a time when humanity will take up the angels' song of that first Christmas night, when the war drum will really "throb no longer", and "the battle flags be furled." But in my

humble jedgment, it will never be till the Lord, Hissself, comes back and leads in the song of universal peace.

The angels and the heavenly choir done their work well! And just so, it allers has been: Heaven has done its part, but man has failed!

The shepherds tore out to Bethlehem, where the angels said the Baby was. He said He would be borned in Bethlehem, the city of David. And, sure enough, there they found the Baby, a-layin' in a stable jest like the angel said. Then, the shepherds come back to their flocks, a-glorifyin' and a-praisin' God. They told what they had seen and heard to everybody; but that story, like the song of the angels, sorter faded out. People just said it was wonderful, and that was about all; there was nothin' special done about it. Christ come, suffered, died, went back to Heaven and left the story of His life and death to jist a few Galilean fishermen. Thank God, we've got the record of it all in the Bible. But, the poor old world went right on with men a-killin' each other and a-hatin' each other — each one a-grabbin' to get his'n. But, there's allers been people who have believed the happenin's of that first Christmas night, and have built their lives upon their hope in Christ and God's plan to bring human bein's back to Hissself.

About the purtiest thing in this whole story here is the nineteenth verse where it says: "Mary kept all these things, and pondered them in her heart." She ain't the last one that put this story away in the heart like Sarah puts away keepsakes in the cedar chist. When you put this story in your heart, it changes your life. There's a

site of people that will have Christmas celebrations; but the only folks that will know the real Christmas sperit, will be the people who have tucked the story of the first Christmas in their heart.

The angel come back to warn Joseph in a dream about takin' the child, Jesus, away from that old King Herod that had made up his mind to kill Him. This is in Matthew 2:13-23. Heaven sure was a-lookin' after that little Babe of Bethlehem! All the hopes of Heaven to redeem man, and all the chance man will ever have to git back to fellowship with God was wropped up in the destiny of that little Baby!

The angel come back when Herod was dead, and told Joseph: "Arise, take the young child, and his mother, and go into the land of Israel: for they are dead which sought the young child's life." Just that same way will every stumblin' block to God's plan for human happiness some day be taken away. Through the centuries, God has guarded the treasure of Christian testimony, and has passed on this Christmas story so that every generation could hear about God's visit to the earth in the person of Jesus Christ, and the doin's of that first Christmas night, and not only that, but about the life and the death of the One whom the wise men saw in the cradle as the Babe of Bethlehem.

So, we set there and talked around the stove at the cross-roads' store that day of Christmas week, and finally, the Widow Walton walked past us and said: "Good-by, I hope you all have a Merry Christmas." She went out the door, and we all set there and watched her leave.

About that time, Plunk Wheelis, who'd come in and heard the last part of our talk, said: "Well, it's been a right smart while since a real angel walked the paths of this old world, but the Lord sees to it that there are people who keep up the work of the Christmas angels."

I reckon that's so, neighbors; every Christmas, there are people who see that the hungry are fed, that the naked are clothed, that the poor are comforted, and that the orphans and widows are looked after. That's the work of the Christmas angels today, and God bless 'em all! May all sich folks have a happy Christmas — the people who fergit theyselves in makin' others happy. I've got a sneakin' notion that's just about like we are goin' to find it in Heaven ef we git there. We'll be so happy in the happiness of others that Heaven'll be mighty sweet to us!

I was a-settin' there, a-pokin' the fire in the stove when Plunk Wheelis says to me: "By the way, Parson, I jest come by the parsonage, and Sister Hopkins says she's a-waitin' fer them cake and pie things that you come down here to git early this mornin'."

It sure got me down. I'd fergot all about time. So, I gethered up my basket and wropped the newby around my neck and told 'em all good-by, and went out and got in the buggy. Me and Dan drove down the road to the parsonage, but my heart was plumb full of this story of the Christmas angels.

When I come in, Sarah was kinda riled until I told her what we'd been a-talkin' about, and that the orphanage box was ready, and that Sister Walton had done her work mighty well. Sarah had some nice hot potatoes there in

the stove, and she give me one with a nice glass of milk. I sat there in the kitchen while she was a-gratin' up some cocoanut, and told her about it. Every now and then, I could see a tear fall on the grated cocoanut, but I says to myself: "Well, I don't reckon it'll hurt the cake none." Yes, tears like that at Christmas seem to add a little extra sweetenin' to all the Christmas cookin'.

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