

September–December 2020 sampler



Bible reflections

for older people

Let us go singing
Heather Pencavel

Dawning light
Emlyn Williams

Remember, remember
David Butterfield

God's messengers
Angela Tilby





From the Editor

Welcome to this new collection of Bible reflections.

As a child with waist-length blonde hair I was regularly cast as the angel Gabriel in school nativity plays. ‘Fear not!’ I bellowed at inky-fingered shepherds in dressing gowns and Clarks sandals. A tinsel halo and tinfoil wings completed my costume.

Angels have a significant role in Judaism, Christianity and Islam: they exist to praise God, to interact with human beings and to serve as God’s messengers and agents in the world. Their popularity has waxed and waned down the centuries but has been notably high in recent years, even in the wider, secular world.

From blindingly bright, awe-inspiring – even terrifying – figures to comforting companions and protectors, these divine envoys have a unique hold on our imaginations and have featured prominently in Christian art and iconography through the ages.

This issue of *Bible Reflections for Older People* covers Advent and Christmas, and angels feature prominently here too: from Angela Tilby’s thoughtful series, ‘God’s messengers’, through Denise Line’s charming description of an abbey’s ‘Angel project’, to the words of a much-loved Victorian hymn and a reimagining of the angels’ message to 21st-century ‘shepherds’.

So, with Denise and Angela and all our other contributors, I wish you the joy of the angels.

God bless you.





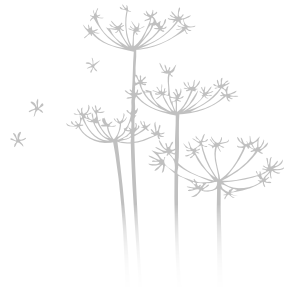
God's messengers

Angela Tilby

As we grow older, we become more aware of how the choices we have made earlier in our lives have shaped us. This can be a source of pride or regret. But whatever we have done with our lives so far, we should never think of ourselves as autonomous beings. We exist with and for others.

This is obvious when we think of those relationships that have sustained us and to which we ourselves contribute. What we are often less aware of is the hidden dimension of our choices, our constant interaction with God. The Bible is rich in references to the angels, God's messengers. They interact with human beings at the critical points in their lives, bringing warning, offering comfort and opening up new vocations. They are part of the unseen company of heaven, reminding us that God's creativity is not limited to what we see.

God is the creator of all things 'visible and invisible', as the creed puts it. Religious belief may be declining in our time, but, curiously, belief in angels is remarkably resilient. For some, they are a stepping stone to faith, evidence that there are indeed 'more things in heaven and earth'* than our current philosophies of life find it easy to imagine.



* *Hamlet* by William Shakespeare, Act I, Scene V.

Genesis 18:1–3 (NRSV)

Entertaining angels

The Lord appeared to Abraham by the oaks of Mamre, as he sat at the entrance of his tent in the heat of the day. He looked up and saw three men standing near him. When he saw them, he ran from the tent entrance to meet them, and bowed down to the ground. He said, ‘My lord, if I find favour with you, do not pass by your servant.’

The appearance of the three men to Abraham is one of the most important hinges in the biblical story, because the visitors come to announce the birth of the son and heir promised by God. Abraham and Sarah were not to end their days in frustration, in spite of Sarah’s childlessness.

Abraham’s humble recognition of the heavenly visitors shows that he had not lost his memory of God’s promise, or his desire to see its fulfilment. There is a challenge here for us. Angels come from the future, and they disturb any tendency we might have to dwell in the past. We need to keep our hearts ready and expectant, open to God’s grace, whatever our circumstances in the here and now.

■ PRAYER

Lord God, we greet you as we look for your coming to us today. Give us grace to see you in those we meet and to be faithful to all your promises. Give us insight to respond to what is unexpected and to receive your guidance with humble and thankful hearts. Amen

Exodus 14:19–20 (NRSV)

The pillar of cloud

The angel of God who was going before the Israelite army moved and went behind them; and the pillar of cloud moved from in front of them and took its place behind them. It came between the army of Egypt and the army of Israel. And so the cloud was there with the darkness, and it lit up the night; one did not come near the other all night.

As Emlyn Williams reflected earlier, the night can be a difficult time, especially when we sense frailty in ourselves and those we love. Sleepless nights can be very long, and we are perhaps most vulnerable to anxiety in those dark hours just before dawn. Yet the night is also a time of mystery, revelation and transition.

God is as present at night as in the day, and his saving acts often occur in the dark. For the Israelites, the terrifying night they spent at the edge of the Red Sea was the time of their divine deliverance from slavery. The angel and the protective cloud which had guided them on their journey moved to come between them and their enemies. This kept them safe while God drove back the sea, making a path to freedom.

■ PRAYER

Lord, the darkness is not dark to you; the night is as bright as the day. Lighten our dark days and our troubling nights by your protective presence, and in your mercy may we trust in you and so come to know our true freedom. Amen

Isaiah 6:1–3 (NRSV)

Realms of glory

In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lofty; and the hem of his robe filled the temple. Seraphs were in attendance above him; each had six wings: with two they covered their faces, and with two they covered their feet, and with two they flew. And one called to another and said, ‘Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory.’

While the prophet Isaiah is worshipping in the temple in Jerusalem, he has a vision of the heavenly temple. The Lord sits enthroned on high, surrounded by winged and worshipping angels. The Hebrew word for ‘holy’ implies separation. God is unlike us, utterly other. The prophet is privileged to look at mysteries humans cannot normally see.

We may find public worship a mixed experience; familiarity and distraction can make it difficult to keep focused. But Isaiah’s vision alerts us to the unseen world beyond us. God’s glory is at the horizons of our vision, the glory which fills the whole earth, surrounding us whether we are aware of it or not.

■ PRAYER

Holy God, lift our hearts up to you and show us a glint of your glory this day. May the knowledge of your presence, in and through all things, be a lamp to our feet and a light on our way, that we may come to this day’s end in peace, having seen your salvation. Amen

Isaiah 6:6–8 (NRSV)

Holy, holy, holy...

Then one of the seraphs flew to me, holding a live coal that had been taken from the altar with a pair of tongs. The seraph touched my mouth with it and said: ‘Now that this has touched your lips, your guilt has been departed and your sin is blotted out.’ Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, ‘Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?’ And I said, ‘Here am I; send me.’

It is a truth we often do not wish to receive that there is no growth, either in body or spirit, without change and sometimes pain. In the spiritual life, complacency is death. Only by disciplined honesty do we become free enough to serve God with the whole of ourselves.

The prophet’s lips need to be seared, his speech purged; only then will he be free to respond to God’s call. Life is full of trials and transitions, some of which may be deeply painful. Yet, often out of these times of anguish a new call emerges. The angel who brings the burning coal to our lips is sent not only to make us whole but to equip us for the service which is also perfect freedom.

■ PRAYER

Lord, send your angel with the fire of deliverance, purge our complaints and our complaining, our bitterness and our murmurings against others. Set us free, once again, to respond to your love. Amen

Daniel 10:10–12 (NRSV)

‘Fear not,’ said he...

But then a hand touched me and roused me to my hands and knees. He said to me, ‘Daniel, greatly beloved, pay attention to the words that I am going to speak to you. Stand on your feet, for I have now been sent to you.’ So while he was speaking this word to me, I stood up trembling. He said to me, ‘Do not fear, Daniel, for from the first day that you set your mind to gain understanding and to humble yourself before your God, your words have been heard, and I have come because of your words.’

When we are overwhelmed with fear or anxiety, it is difficult to hold on to the fact that we are loved by God. Daniel sees catastrophe lying ahead for his people and is physically and mentally overwhelmed by fear of the future. Yet the angel that comes to him comes with reassurance.

The human condition is one of frailty. We cannot always be strong or resilient, and though we can be frustrated at our own limitations, they do not hinder the work of God. Daniel remains God’s ‘greatly beloved’, and so are we. All that is asked of us is faith.

■ PRAYER

Lord, send your angel of consolation to all who despair of the future and see no hope in themselves. Help us to know that we are greatly beloved and that today, tomorrow and forever, the future is in your hands. Amen

Luke 1:26–30 (NRSV)**Annunciation**

In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin betrothed to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. And he came to her and said, 'Greetings, favoured one! The Lord is with you.' But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. The angel said to her, 'Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favour with God.'

These words are so familiar from the Christmas story that we might wonder what they have to say specifically to us. But the point here is that angels are rarely expected. We do not see them coming. Their arrival is a surprise and their message is at first perplexing.

Our human imagination is limited to what we know, hope for or fear, and when the unexpected happens our most basic response is likely to be fear. Yet God looks on Mary with favour. In her, he shows his goodwill towards us all. He desires good things for us, for the human race and for all creation. Today, we can rest confidently in that promise.

■ PRAYER

Lord, you surprise us with your greeting and call us to attend to your promises. Give us the confidence and trust to say with blessed Mary, 'Behold the handmaid of the Lord; be it unto me according to thy word' (Luke 1:38, KJV). Amen

Mark 1:9–13 (NRSV)

Ministering angels

In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptised by John in the Jordan. And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. And a voice came from heaven, ‘You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.’ And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. He was in the wilderness for forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him.

Mark’s gospel shows us Jesus experiencing the extremes of life: both blessing and severe testing. The blessing comes first. He knows that he is God’s beloved Son. So with us, our baptism binds us into a fellowship with Jesus which no trial or adversity can destroy. But assurance is followed by temptation. Jesus is driven out into a place of isolation, danger and temptation.

Like us, he wonders about whether he really is God’s Son and whether his future really is in God’s hands. Like us, he is tempted to give in to the seductive voice of despair. Being ‘with’ the wild beasts, he experiences passivity and helplessness. But even at this point, the angels are on his side. It is their silent ministry that upholds us today, whatever today brings.

■ PRAYER

Lord, give us grace to follow in your steps. And send your holy angels to protect, console and finally deliver us from all evil. Amen

Matthew 28:1–2 (NRSV)

Resurrection angel

After the sabbath, as the first day of the week was dawning, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to see the tomb. And suddenly there was a great earthquake; for an angel of the Lord, descending from heaven, came and rolled back the stone and sat on it.

The resurrection of Jesus is the core of the gospel. It is the unexpected announcement that death is not the last word in the drama of human life. Seen from God's perspective, the end of human life heralds the glory of heaven. The resurrection angel stands in the void of unknowing between the sad expectation of the two Marys and God's heavenly vindication of his Son.

No wonder, in Matthew's version, the arrival of the angel is announced by an earthquake. Fragile human beings are made of earth, with all too earthly hopes and fears. But we are made *for* heaven. Our limited minds can barely cope with the notion of heaven, and our experience seems to show that life is often more tragic than triumphant. But the Easter angel waits to descend into our lives, to bring us the good news from heaven: 'Christ is risen.'

■ PRAYER

Lord, we are creatures of dust and to dust we shall return. As we grieve for all that has gone wrong in our lives, we turn to you in confidence that you can and will restore, revive and remake us, after the pattern of your risen Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen

Matthew 28:5–7 (NRSV)

‘My message for you’

But the angel said to the women, ‘Do not be afraid. I know that you are looking for Jesus who was crucified. He is not here; for he has been raised, as he said. Come, see the place where he lay. Then go quickly and tell his disciples, “He has been raised from the dead, and indeed he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him.” This is my message for you.’

The angel of the resurrection comes with news from the future. Jesus has gone ahead into Galilee and is waiting for his disciples to catch up with him. In later life, we may often find ourselves dwelling on the past. There can be a purpose to this if it opens up for us dimensions of God’s love that we had missed at the time.

The past is always fruitful if it is linked to the future. But if it is not, it becomes a dead end, full of fruitless regret. Jesus goes to Galilee to renew his call to his disciples. As we recall our younger lives, we may be able to respond to God at a deeper and more knowing level than we were able to at the time. He raises us not to our old lives, but to a new life in Christ. Do not be afraid.

■ PRAYER

Lord, as we commit our past to you, so raise us to new life with you, forever. Amen

Revelation 14:6–7 (NRSV)

To God be the glory

Then I saw another angel flying in mid-heaven, with an eternal gospel to proclaim to those who live on the earth – to every nation and tribe and language and people. He said in a loud voice, ‘Fear God and give him glory, for the hour of his judgement has come; and worship him who made heaven and earth, the sea and the springs of water.’

Angels are God’s messengers. In the imagery of the Bible, they travel between earth and heaven. They come from the future and show us where God’s purpose lies, both for individuals and for the whole human race. The eternal gospel is an invitation to all humanity to live with reverence towards God. God is worthy of our worship because he is the source of all that is. We are utterly dependent on him from our first cry to our last breath.

A fulfilled life is one that is shaped by worship, gratitude and dependence on God. Much of our contemporary culture is shaped by the belief that we are alone in the universe; that we should chart our own destiny according to our own whims and impulses. But we are not alone. We are surrounded all the time by messengers of God’s love, encouraging, surprising and guiding us. The gospel is eternal.

■ PRAYER

Lord, teach us fear of you, which is wisdom, and love of you, which is true life, and make us messengers of your joy. Amen

The Bible Reading Fellowship
15 The Chambers, Vineyard
Abingdon OX14 3FE
brf.org.uk

The Bible Reading Fellowship (BRF) is a Registered Charity (233280)

ISBN 978 0 85746 910 6
All rights reserved

This edition © The Bible Reading Fellowship 2020
Cover image © iStock/MMPhotography

Acknowledgements

Scripture quotations marked with the following acronyms are taken from the version shown. Where no acronym is given, the quotation is taken from the same version as the headline reference. **NRSV**: The New Revised Standard Version of the Bible, Anglicised edition, copyright © 1989, 1995 by the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America. Used by permission. All rights reserved. **NIV**: The Holy Bible, New International Version (Anglicised edition) copyright © 1979, 1984, 2011 by Biblica. Used by permission of Hodder & Stoughton Publishers, a Hachette UK company. All rights reserved. 'NIV' is a registered trademark of Biblica. UK trademark number 1448790. **CEV**: The Contemporary English Version. New Testament © American Bible Society 1991, 1992, 1995. Old Testament © American Bible Society 1995. Anglicisations © British & Foreign Bible Society 1996. Used by permission. **GW**: God's Word Translation Copyright © 1995 by God's Word to the Nations. Used by permission of God's Word Mission Society. **NLT**: The Holy Bible, New Living Translation, copyright © 1996, 2004, 2007, 2013. Used by permission of Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., Carol Stream, Illinois 60188. All rights reserved. **KJV**: The Authorised Version of the Bible (The King James Bible), the rights in which are vested in the Crown, are reproduced by permission of the Crown's Patentee, Cambridge University Press.

Every effort has been made to trace and contact copyright owners for material used in this resource. We apologise for any inadvertent omissions or errors, and would ask those concerned to contact us so that full acknowledgement can be made in the future.

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Printed and bound in the UK by Zenith Media NP4 0DQ

A daily companion to keep by your side

Written by older people for older people, these reflections are designed to bring hope, assurance and sustenance, reminding the reader of the presence and love of God. Each issue contains 40 Bible reflections and prayer suggestions to use and revisit as often as is needed.



In the central section, Pioneer of BRF's Anna Chaplaincy for Older People ministry **Debbie Thrower** offers interviews and ideas to encourage and inspire.



Bible Reflections for Older People is edited by Eley McAinsh.

In this issue...

Heather Pencavel writes of the remarkable power of song to comfort and inspire, in her own life and in the Bible. As the days shorten and darken, **Emlyn Williams** explores the eternal promise of the dawn.

David Butterfield considers memory and remembering, and **Angela Tilby** celebrates God's holy messengers: the angels.



The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases,
his mercies never come to an end;
they are new every morning;
great is your faithfulness.
Lamentations 3:22-23 (NRSV)



brf.org.uk