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## *Where Angels Tread*

**A sermon by Dean Sam Candler**  
**Advent 4 – Year C**

Who in the world would dare stand at the very tip top of a Christmas tree?

When households decorate Christmas trees, many of us carefully place a star at the very top. And that makes a lot of sense. Stars stand for light; and, on the top of the tree, stars can preside with glory. Their light oversees the room.

But, for some glorious reason or another, my household (for generations!) has always placed an angel on the top of the tree.

Every year, even if just for a fleeting second, I have wondered how that angel feels about being perched at the very top of a tree. I don't know if any of you have ever climbed trees, but surely you know that the farther up the tree you climb, the more precarious and unsteady the perch becomes. At the very top of the tree, where the trunk slims down to its thinnest, a climber is swaying with the wind.

Well, I have figured it out. I have figured out why angels sit on the top of Christmas trees. It's because angels—angels!—are always at the most precarious places of life. My grandmother used to ask us every year: Do you know why angels can fly? Because they take themselves lightly. My grandmother was an expert on angels.

But, it was not an expert on angels who came up with the phrase, "Fools rush in where angels fear to tread." Surely you've heard that phrase before, used in a dreadful warning way. It was apparently Alexander Pope who coined that phrase, while writing a piece of literary criticism. "Fools rush in where angels fear to tread?" Well, the phrase may apply to cautious writers, but it does not apply to angels in scripture, or to angels in our tradition. People who use that phrase must not know a lot about angels.

It seems to me that angels do not fear to tread anywhere. There is no place, no time or space, where angels fear to tread. There is no place where angels are afraid to perch.

In fact, it is when we human beings are in our scariest places, that angels do show up. Consider the conniving Jacob, who had tricked his brother, Esau, out of his birthright and blessing. Jacob had doublecrossed his brother Esau. By the way, have any of you tricked, or betrayed, your siblings this year? Have any of you disappointed your loved one? Done things truly wrong?

Jacob sure had. He fled his brother, Esau. On his way out, camping by the river, angels appeared to him in a dream. They were not afraid, ascending and descending, on a ladder to heaven. They appeared in his distress. Years later, on his way back home, back to meet his brother, Esau, Jacob had no idea whether Esau would accept him or not. During that long night before meeting his brother, Jacob met an angel again. And that angel, you may remember, was not afraid of walking right into Jacob and wrestling with him.

Angels do not fear to tread into squabbling sibling relationships. Angels do not fear to tread into bitter and angry human relationships.

During times of emptiness in scripture, times of bitterness, angels show up. Consider the so many women in the Bible who had a hard time having children. There is Sarai, Abraham's old wife. There is Hannah, the mother of Samuel. There is Elizabeth, the mother of John the Baptist. To each of them, in their lonely worry, angels appeared.

And, of course, an angel appears to Mary, too, the mother of Jesus. Mary, the young woman betrothed to Joseph, struggling to do the right thing, forced to travel to a new town because of still another government regulation, is visited by an angel.

Angels do not fear to tread into the pains and sadnesses of our lives. It is in those very places that angels do show up.

And, throughout scripture, there is one primary message which angels almost always deliver. Angels seem to be programmed to deliver one primary message. They may have other things to say later, but, almost always, the first thing they say in the Bible is, "Do not fear."

Where, exactly do angels fear to tread? Nowhere. Angels do not fear to tread anywhere. In fact, they show up precisely in order to relieve people of fear!

It's an angel that speaks to Moses from a burning bush! It's an angel who is speaking to Moses from a fire! And the angel will lead Moses from that fire into quite a complicated and dangerous political situation. The angel will commission Moses to do something quite socially dramatic; to lead his people out of slavery and into new life.

And consider, too, the chaotic political situation in which the prophet Isaiah spoke. Isaiah lived in a divided country, with its unfaithful king, Ahaz, being so erratic and unpredictable about which alliances to make. Isaiah sees fire, too, and angels are carrying around those fiery coals with tongs, coming right to Isaiah. Those angels sure don't seem afraid. In fact, they are singing, "Holy, Holy, Holy," and actually leading Isaiah to have a son as a sign against Ahaz. Yes, that son would be a sign; he would be named "Emmanuel." Be holy, say the angels; do the right thing.

Friends, Family, Christians, Pilgrims of all sorts: At the most critical parts of our sacred story, places of fear, there are always angels! When we are scared and wandering, there are angels. When we have lost, there are angels. When we are called to do new and courageous things, there are angels.

When Jesus had spent forty days fasting and alone in the wilderness, when he had faced the temptations of Satan himself, it was angels who came to him. Angels were out in the wilderness, tending to Jesus himself.

Angels are all over the place in our tradition, and in our lives. They are certainly here with us, in the crazy and cluttered days around Christmas, when some of us are happy; but others of us are fighting and lonely. When some of us are comfortable, but others of us have no idea where we are going. When some of us are celebrating a great year, and others of us are scared to death.

Angels do not fear to tread in such places. Angels, the messengers of God, send us one message this time of year. They say, "Do not fear."

"Greetings, favored one," said the angel to Mary, "the Lord is with you. Do not be afraid." And later, to the shepherds, the angels said the same thing, "Do not be afraid, for I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people; for today is born for you a Savior, who is Christ the Lord." Those were angels talking.

No matter what age we live in, we need angels. And no matter what age we live in, angels do show up. Angels tread in even the toughest ages, as Abraham Lincoln knew. In his 1861 inaugural address, said "We are not enemies, but friends ... Though passion may have strained, it must not break our bonds of affection. The mystic chords of memory ... will yet swell the chorus of the Union, when again touched ... by the better angels of our nature."

No matter what age we live in, we always need those better angels. And no matter what age we live in, the angels of God do tread.

Place an angel on your Christmas tree this year. The angel does not need to be at the top. She, or he, can be anywhere, really, a sign that angels appear anywhere in our lives. But especially in the places of our lives that are the most difficult. Angels do not fear to tread there. They are the daily glorious messengers of God, saying to everyone, "Do not fear. Do not fear, favored ones."

The effect of the angels' message will be glorious. Mary, the mother of Jesus, is our example today of that effect. What happens when we believe angels? Well, when we believe the angels of God, we begin to sing. It is an angel that causes Mary to sing her glorious song "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my savior."

Yes, something wonderful happens when angels touch our lives. When angels touch our lives, it is the Lord who is magnified. The Lord is enlarged. The Lord grows glorious. The Lord is exalted. When angels touch our lives, "Our souls magnify the Lord, and our spirits rejoice in God our Savior."

AMEN.

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