Text: Hebrews 1:1-12

**Introduction**

The difference between Christmas Eve and Christmas Day is one of the biggest in the church. Christmas Eve is the big production. Christmas Day is more contemplative.

Although I did have Annessa look up attendance numbers for Christmas Day here at Mt. Zion in the past and I was somewhat shocked. I’ve had some chuckles in the past week at the discussion in the general media about the churches, mostly big places, canceling services today. I chuckle because where I came from in NY, we were the only place other than the Roman Catholic Church to have a Christmas Day service. And even then attendance was a cozy number. So when I saw the attendance numbers here in the recent past I said something was different.

So, though something is different, I’m hoping that my settled take on the difference between the two services isn’t that far off. Christmas Eve – amidst the pageantry and nostalgia - I’ve taken as a service about the basic proclamation. It is a yearly opportunity to try and remind people why they feel that nostalgia and long for the pageantry. It is a chance to blow some oxygen on the embers of faith in the hope that a heart fire returns. If Christmas Eve is about telling the old old story, Christmas Day I’ve taken about challenging us to ponder the ineffable.

I used contemplative for a reason, because this is the old monastic longing. God, Christ, the mystery of the incarnation, these are all things that ultimately we are just too limited to understand mentally. And if we think we do, well, what we understand isn’t really the mystery. If the fulness of the grace given to us is what brings us to yearly “come and see what all this is about” like the shepherds at the announcement, it is the great and mighty wonder that has us come and worship.

**Text**

And Hebrews, the appointed Epistle Lesson, is an encouragement to contemplation and right worship. The one bit of historical context that we should have is that the intertestamental time period wasn’t a complete blank that our modern Protestant editions of the Bible might lead us to think. The Apocryphal books come from that time. Luther never really meant for them to disappear. They were part of his translation work. He just wanted them to go back to what they had been. Works of piety, not scripture. And part of the piety of that time was an overwhelming interest in Angels. Only two angels are named in the Scriptures: Michael and Gabriel. The Apocrypha names three more: Raphael, Uriel and Jeremiel. And further works of the time produce endless lists of names of further angels. The pious Jewish imagination had been taken over by thoughts of angels. And not exactly in the mode of Clarence seeking his wings, or our sentimental pictures of Guardian Angels over children, or fat cherubs. Their thoughts were of majestic powerful beings who would bring the righteous judgements of God and free His people.

It is worth pondering for a minute, what do we think brings the righteous judgements of God? (Pause) The easiest answer I think is that we don’t think God is in the righteous judgement business. If we think about God at all, he is just the biggest of those Cherub-y angels. The great warm fuzzy in the sky. But if we deny judgement to God, it always comes back somewhere. Usually somewhere much worse. If twitter is any measure, lots of people seem to think that political parties should bring the righteous judgements. (And that was part of the Jewish rebellions of that time too.) Lots of people on twitter are convinced that they know exactly who should be in gulags or struck with fire and brimstone. But in our age I think Luther’s advice from the Large Catechism is probably right. Whatever we fear, love and trust the most is our God. And it is that – whatever we personally fear, love and trust – that we think should bring the judgement. Our piety can be focused on something outside of us, but it is just as often our own gut that we fear, love and trust the most. Part of the work of contemplation is discerning what we fear, love and trust above all things.

**Christology**

The argument of the author of Hebrews is that there is only one that God has said “you are my son.” There is only one Son that God has placed on the throne. Whatever piety – be it better or worse piety – it has to take second place to what God has done through his son. If once God spoke by prophets, now He has spoken by his son. If once, God revealed stuff about himself through the world he created, now the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature is found in Christ. This child whose birth we worship today, has paid for all our sins and now sits and the right hand of Majesty on high. Whatever piety or love has captured our imaginations – whatever are our angels – we need to contemplate them in the light of Christ. Because his name is more excellent than theirs. All of our secondary loves will wear out like garments and be rolled up like robes. But Christ is the same, and his years will have no end. His throne is forever and ever. And the scepter of righteousness is the scepter of His kingdom.

There is only one who brings the righteous judgements of God. And on that cross he bore them for us. And in his Kingdom we can rightly order our loves without them devouring us, or letting them usurp places they don’t belong.

**Moral**

And the start of that discernment is to start to do the same things the writer of Hebrews does for the pious Jewish Angels.

Which of our angels, our messengers of God, has God ever said “You are my son, today I have begotten you.”

And we shouldn’t laugh that hard at this. How many devotional candles with images not of saints but of Robert Mueller or Ruth Bader Ginsberg or the celebrity of the moment, or how many painting of Trump with Jesus over his shoulder have we seen. And maybe politics isn’t our idol but examine ourselves rightly. Is there anything in our lives that we sanctify and put in that place? To which of them did God say “you are my son?”

What things in our lives have we made godlike and sanctified beyond their place?

The second thing that the author of Hebrews encourages his audience to ponder is the right object of worship. “When he brings his firstborn into the world he says, “Let all of God’s angels worship him.”

We can probably tell the things that we’ve made godlike by the fact that we worship them. We have little rituals around them. We spend all our day on their word. And if we don’t have that, maybe the biggest tell in our day is these are the things that we don’t accept blasphemy against. We will cut off friends who would dare to laugh at what we’ve placed in the high places.

The encouragement is to get the order correct. There is one who is to be worshipped – God alone. And all of his angels – all of our secondary loves – need to accept this ordering. If they don’t we have a problem. It is not that these secondary loves are bad. “He makes his angels winds, and his ministers a flame of fire.” These loves can be pious, they can tell us of the love God has for us. They can be the messengers of God’s love for us. They can stir-up the flame of faith. But they are not objects of worship.

Are we worshipping something that should not be?

**Eschatological**

Knowing who or what is our God and what we worship is the start – and the continued struggle - of any pious life. Long ago, in many times and ways, God would speak by prophets.

Today, we have His Son.

Today, we see how much God has loved us by taking our humanity into God. He did not consider it unworthy to leave heaven to be born in a stable of the virgin Mary.

Today, by seeing the pattern of Christ we see the path of God. A path that walks through the cross. A path that does not disdain suffering. A path that leads past death to life.

Today, we see our promised redemption.

We still today deal with Satan’s deceptions and idols of our own making. But today we live in the light.

And tomorrow, all idols perish and Satan’s lying ceases. When this garment is rolled up and changed. When this worn out garment is replaced with that new one in the pattern of our brother. And the scepter of righteousness becomes the scepter of eternal peace.

A great and mighty wonder. Worthy of worship and praise.