

If we are angles or messengers what message is God calling us to bring to the world today? Last May I was in Bethlehem. The group I was with gathered for worship overlooking the hills where the shepherds would have been watching their flocks by night. This view 2000 years ago would have included a multitude of angles singing a message that told about the birth of Jesus. This scene felt a lot like the western North Dakota, where I grew up in—dry, small shrubs, brown grass. As we worshiped I felt an increasingly strong connection to the land and to the scene that took place on the night of Jesus' birth. The holiness of this place began to overwhelm me with a sense of peace. The sermon ended, we prayed and Pastor Paul Slick, who serves a church in North Minneapolis, said the benediction. As he said the benediction he invited us to continue looking out at the hills that the shepherds left to go and tell the message. If we are angles or messengers what message is God calling us to bring to the world today? As we looked out my eyes refocused on something I hadn't noticed—the horizontal line in the bottom picture is the separation wall built by Israel to keep the Palestinians contained. The wall is like a prison wall, keeping the Palestinians in an economic prison.

Jews have long been persecuted, but at the beginning of the 1900's the persecution increased—Russia first, then Nazi Germany. Jews were leaving their homes and settling in Palestine. Some of today's major cities, like Tel Aviv, were created by Jewish refugees. In May of 1948 Jews declared a state and war. The result of 10 months of fighting was 700,000 Palestinians refugees. In 1967's Six Day War Israel took what is now: Golan Heights, West Bank and Gaza strip. There is no side innocent in this conflict but right now it is the Palestinians that are being persecuted and dehumanized.

So as I looked out my heart sank, this holy moment and view was defiled by this ugly wall symbolizing the oppression of a people. I was angry; my holy moment was taken away. My time to connect to the first Christmas—God's entering into the world for the sake of the world was taken away by a wall. If we are angles or messengers what message is God calling us to bring to the world today?

The reason Jesus' family was in Bethlehem instead of Nazareth, their home town, is the economic and military oppression of the Romans. Today as we prepare for Christmas, we decorate our homes and sanctuary, sing songs of joy and peace. They are filled with the love of God come down in the love of a child, Jesus. As we gather with friends and retell the stories, we prepare our hearts and world, for Jesus coming. Like in Jesus time, there is darkness: story after story about how women haven't been treated fairly, insecurity among nations, and within our own lives we remember people who aren't here this year or ways we used to celebrate the season that we just can't anymore.

The message our world needs to hear and the message we need to hear is Jesus came into the midst of the darkness to be light. Jesus is the light in our lives/world. The light shines in the darkness and we gather to tell that story and to sing, like the angles, rejoicing Glory to God!