Title: Angel #5

Date: 11/30/25

Subject: Followers of Jesus Christ can have hope from God.

Scripture:

The four themes of Advent - hope, peace, joy, love - ring like silver bells in the crisp winter air. It's because they reverberate throughout the entire story of the Bible to people who sin like Adam and Eve, to people who face unbelievable suffering like Job, to those who struggle, to the hurting, to ordinary people facing the ordinary challenges of life, to those whose lives seem to be sailing along with only little annoyances.

The themes take center stage in the greatest story that's ever been told - God's gift of his Son entering humanity to be the Savior of the world. The narratives of the Savior's birth in Matthew and Luke show how Joseph, Mary, the shepherds, Simeon, Anna and wise men from the east were drawn to the messages of hope, peace, joy and love. No matter how our lives are going, we need all of them.

Advent is an excellent time to communicate God's story through stories. I'm going to use stories I've shared a while back to show how Christ brings hope, peace, joy and love. Today's story is about hope.

Angel #5. Names like Gabriel and Michael were already taken. But couldn't I have been given a name, some name, any name, something other than being simply being identified by a number - Angel #5?

It was getting a little old. I'd been Angel #5 for years - ever since 3rd grade. It was my fourth year in the Christmas play as Angel #5. I'd hoped to move up the heavenly ladder could be Angel #2 or Angel #3, at least Angel #4. But nope. I was still Angel #5.

The pageant director knew that I knew that she knew that I knew my line. I had it down cold since my first year as Angel #5. It wasn't even a solo part. I joined the other angels to say, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men on whom his favor rests." That was it. Easy, peazy, lemon squeezy. I could handle more …but it seemed like I'd be Angel #5 into junior high and high school. I could see it - I walk across the graduation platform, people would point and say, "Hey. Isn't that Angel #5?"

The director always put on her best Christmas face as she tried to instill in us non-Gabriel angels that we were an integral part of the story of Jesus' birth. We represented the army of angels who were sent by God the Father from heaven to deliver the message of hope to the shepherds. She often asked us, "How else were they going to get the good news if it weren't for the angels?" I was tempted to make a wise crack, but thought I might get demoted to who knows what.

She had a good point. At least I wasn't one of the little kids anymore stuck with being a sheep and crawling on my hands and knees. We numbered angels did an okay job even though one year Angel #4 messed up our one line and the next year Angel #1 tripped over a shepherd as we exited the stage.

I liked the message about hope. My favorite non-Christmas song was "My hope is built on nothing less than Jesus' blood and righteousness." I loved the way the church sang it. It sounded like they were going

to sing their lungs out as they made the rafters ring. At times like those the message of hope just seemed to radiate through my being.

As it turned out, my 6th grade year was my last year as Angel #5. It wasn't because I moved up to become Gabriel or a shepherd or Joseph. Not sure I wanted to take on that role. The change was because of the things that began shortly after Christmas. Dad got laid off from his job and we struggled to make ends meet. The church family was generous and helped us out, as long as they could. But as time went by, it just seemed like our needs weren't being met. Dad tried to find work, but wasn't able to find one.

And things were getting rough at school. It wasn't the classes or subjects. I could handle those. It was the way the other kids treated me. I wasn't the smartest or most athletic so they didn't naturally gravitate toward me. And they knew I went to church and didn't do the things they were getting involved in. They started thinking I was thinking I was better than them, so they called me names and lied about me and didn't want to hang around with me. That stuff can be hard on a young guy.

So I started to change how I acted so they'd like me, or at least wouldn't make fun of me. I started to talk the way they talked, laugh at the crude jokes they told as well as got involved in stuff I don't care to mention.

All of that combined to put a dimmer on hope. The thing that pulled the shade down completely was when my dad got sick. Seemed to come out of the blue and it wasn't long before he died.

I started to wonder where God was, if he really cared. My family only went to church occasionally while dad was out of work. He felt awkward around people who helped him out and didn't like the idea of always receiving. After he died, mom had an extremely difficult time adjusting. No matter how kind people were, she just didn't feel like going very often. It didn't help that she had to find a menial job and still take care of me and my younger brother and sister. I found myself in the position of being the man of the house and tried to hold things together. I gradually lost interest in church, the Bible, and living in a way that pleased God.

When it came time for college, I thought if I moved away from home maybe I could put the painful memories in the rearview mirror. It didn't work. Being in college just opened me up to all sorts of new temptations and sin, which I all too willingly participated in.

There wasn't a whole lot of room in my life for God. Frankly, I figured he hadn't held up his end of the bargain so there wasn't much I was going to do to hold up mine. We'd just go our separate ways.

If you asked me back then how my life was going, I'd have told you things were okay. I had friends, a few girlfriends, and worked a couple of jobs so I had money to do what I wanted to do. I managed to get good grades and was checking out various career paths. Most importantly, there was nobody to boss me around. My hope was in myself as I was the one I could depend upon. Life was okay.

Then the bottom fell out. I began feeling like Job from the Bible. Forgot to mention my parents named me Matthew Job. They thought it was cool to use Old and New Testament names for their kids.

Here's what happened, my girlfriend and I faced a pregnancy scare. She wasn't. The job I was promised when I graduated college was given to my best friend who'd lied about me to the prospective employer. The

next year my brother died of an accidental overdose. Then my sister disappeared from her college dorm room and wasn't found. Police expected foul play. It was too much for my mom who decided it wasn't worth living anymore. At age 23, I was an orphan without immediate family, alone in the world.

Where was God? I didn't care because it was obvious he didn't. I didn't want anything to do with him. I hated him. I wondered if there was a shred of truth in the things I'd been taught, how he could be who the preacher and people said he was and allow all these terrible things to happen to me. My spiritual drifting jumped aboard a full throttle speedboat.

When Christmas came around that year there were no decorations. There were no Christmas carols playing in my house, what had been my family's house. I didn't go to Christmas parties though I was invited. I declined offers of Christmas cookies from neighbors. And I certainly didn't go to church. And if somebody dared to say Merry Christmas or was singing/humming "Joy to the World," I might not have said, "Bah humbug," or sent them a death glare, but those would have expressed my sentiments for the season.

It got to the point that I wondered if there was any reason for me to go on living. Somehow, I managed to put one foot in front of the other and kept going. I say, "Somehow," but I know as I look back, it was by the grace of God. You're probably wondering, "What made the change?"

It was the third Christmas after the deaths of my mom, brother and probably my sister. I was wandering around the mall a few weeks after Thanksgiving. I wasn't there to shop. I had no one to shop for. I went because I was totally bored, tired of being in my house. I had to get out. Didn't want to go to a restaurant or see a movie. That left the mall. I knew there'd be a crowd, but figured I could melt into the unwashed mass of giggly teens and frustrated shoppers looking for the perfect gift…yet be alone with my thoughts. I just hoped I didn't bump into anybody I knew and they'd ask how my Thanksgiving went and my plans for the holidays.

After aimlessly browsing in several stores, the distinctive nature of the music coming from the crackly speakers, barely audible above moms telling kids to stop running, tweens giggling (what else do they do?) and Santa's elves ringing sleigh bells, finally dawned on me. I cynically thought, "Go ahead and try to get the mob to buy more stuff by putting them in a good mood with catchy tunes about Santa Claus coming to town, Frosty and even Snoopy versus the Red Baron." Always did like that song.

Then it seemed like a hush fell over the mall and I heard, not the bells on Christmas day, but the mellow voice of Nat King Cole singing "Silent Night." It caught me off guard and froze me in my tracks. I just stood there as people walked past. Some bumped into me as they weren't paying attention to where they were walking or the stiff who came to a sudden halt in the middle of the aisle, except for some of those giggly girls who looked back and pointed their fingers at me and giggled some more.

As that familiar song faded away, I left the mall in a daze, managed to find my car and started it. However, I couldn't muster the strength to put it into gear. I rested my head on the steering wheel as memories of Christmases past flooded my mind - the most recent ones without my family, ones where I decided to stay at college and not go home because it was too painful, ones in the aftermath of my dad losing his job and life

and what our family went through. But also there were memories of Christmases long ago and church pageants. And the director's encouragement to us angels, numbers 1 to 5, to speak our line clearly and loudly because it was the message of hope. "Glory to God in the highest, and peace on earth to men on whom his favor rests."

Not sure how I got home or when. What I did know was God was tugging at my heart. The truth was...He had never let go.

For the first time in a long time I sought out a church. It was the Sunday before Christmas. I respectfully listened to the preacher, but I wasn't there to hear him. I went for the songs and the verses from the Bible. My ears perked up when they announced they were reenacting the Christmas story on Christmas Eve.

I arrived early to get a good seat where I could watch the actors and hear what they said. Some were so shy, it was hard to hear. Sure enough, there was an angel choir. I counted - 1, 2, 3, 4, 5. Angel #5 looked like he was in 6th grade and wasn't all that interested in being there. Maybe he'd been Angel #5 for a long time. No matter. My gaze was fixed on him. When it came time for the angels to speak, I found myself mouthing the words with them: "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men on whom his favor rests."

It was more than I could handle. I began silently sobbing and shaking. I'm not sure what it looked like to those around me to see a grown man so emotional at a Christmas play. If I thought about it, I'm sure I didn't care what they thought. God was telling me there was hope.

I don't remember any of the rest of the program. When it was over, as people introduced themselves and asked if I was okay or wanted to talk, I could only mumble, "I'm fine."

However, I vividly recollect making a profound impression on the pastor. When I was introduced to him, I became a blubbering mess and gave him a bear hug he's never forgotten. I know... because he brings it up almost every time I go to his home with my wife - his daughter. But that's another story.

After the pageant I went home and looked for my Bible. It took a little while because I hadn't read it in a long time. It was on a bookshelf, the highest one. I had to blow off the dust, not just the proverbial kind. I began searching for verses on hope. It turned into a consuming deep dive into God's Word to discover all I could about hope. Over the following months I read about people in the Old and New Testaments on the hope they had, the reasons they had hope, what hope could do for people, anything and everything I could find about hope, and most importantly - who Jesus Christ is and how he gives hope. I became quite the hope junkie. Hope you don't mind me phrasing it that way. I was hooked on hope.

I found lots of verses. I read and reread the Bible but I kept coming back to certain verses. I created a list that I carry with me. The verse that made it to the top was spoken by a man I considered my close friend - Job. I had thought I was like him when bad things were piling up but I hadn't been because he turned toward God while I turned away. Job had said, "Though he slay me, yet I will hope in him" (Job 13:15). He chose to trust, put his confidence, his hope in the Lord because there is nowhere else and no one else to turn to.

Here's the rest of my list. I promise to not make comments after each. No one whose hope is in you will ever be put to shame (Ps 25:3). The eyes of the Lord are on those who fear him, on those whose hope is

in his unfailing love (Ps 33:18). Why are you downcast, O my soul? Why are you so disturbed within me? Put your hope in God, for I will yet praise him, my Savior and my God (Ps 42:5). Find rest, O my soul, in God alone; my hope comes from him (Ps 62:5). Blessed is he whose help is the God of Jacob, whose hope is in the Lord his God, the maker of heaven and earth, the sea and everything in them - the Lord, who remains faithful forever (Ps 146:5). Even youths grow tired and weary and young men stumble and fall; but those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength (Is 40:30, 31). This I call to mind and therefore I have hope: because of the Lord's great love we are not consumed for his compassions never fail (Lam 3:21-22). Therefore since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand. And we rejoice in the hope of the glory of God. Not only so, but we also rejoice in sufferings because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope. And hope does not disappoint us, because God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit whom he has given us (Rom 5:1-5). For everything that was written in the past was written to teach us, so that through endurance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope (Rom 15:4). May the God of hope fill you with all peace and joy as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit (Rom 15:13). This is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance (and for this we labor and strive), that we have put our hope in the living God, who is the Savior of all men, and especially those who believe (1 Tim 4:10). We wait for the blessed hope - the glorious appearing of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ (Titus 2:13). We who have fled to take hold of the hope offered to us may be greatly encouraged. We have this hope as an anchor for the soul, firm and secure (Heb 6:18, 19). Let us hold unswerving to the hope we profess for he who promised is faithful (Heb 10:23).

Can't say I didn't warn you. Told you I was a hope junkie. I "hope" I didn't overwhelm you, but it's okay if I did. God provides hope for the hopeless, no matter what a person is going through, or in spite of what the person is going through, or if they're having a pretty good life right now. Let me paraphrase what Joshua said just before the Israelites entered the promised land: "As for me and my family, our hope is in the Lord."

And now, here I am 25 years after my last performance as Angel #5 and the memories of those Christmases come flooding back. You see, my son is in his first Christmas pageant where he has a speaking part. He's in third grade. He's about to make his entrance. Guess what part he got. He's... the...angel…known... as... Gabriel! Gotcha! Bet you thought I was going to say he was Angel #5.

Some might think he's a little young for the part, but he delivers his lines flawlessly, at least according to his proud dad, as he talks with Mary and Joseph to deliver the news about Mary having a baby whom they were to give the name Jesus because he will save people from their sins.

But to me, the best part was when my son, as the Angel Gabriel, led the other angels in saying the enduring words from the angels to the shepherds and to all people, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men on whom his favor rests."

"My hope is built on nothing less than Jesus' blood and righteousness."