

## **Advent Armies**

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Heaven buzzed with a flurry of activity. The resulting tumult was unmatched by anything the angelic hosts had ever experienced. Not even the creation of the universe had been this exciting. Sure, they had sung in united joy as, at the command of God, light split darkness, earth separated from water, and lifeforms popped into existence.<sup>1</sup> The sudden animation of the first human by God's own breath had taken theirs away momentarily, before they rose in one united round of deafening applause.<sup>2</sup> But this was different; it was somehow bigger, deeper, and even more fundamental. The angelic host were up to their wings in final preparations for the promised *recreation*—the restoration of all that had been stolen from the universe. Even the thunderous victory-shout they let loose when Jesus rose from the dead would prove to have been a dress rehearsal for what was about to go down. That thunderous roar of triumph had shaken the foundations of hell itself. What was afoot now would shatter them forever and bring it all down around the devil's ears.

The glimmer in every angel's eye was more glorious than ever. They were beside themselves in anticipation.

But there were final preparations to make. And they were in earnest to see them through. Everything had to be just right for Jesus' Second Advent.

They awaited a few ministering spirits sent out on final errands on earth, fitting out the details of history in preparation for the unveiling of Jesus in His glory. Each polished and prepped and made ready for their part in the grandest display of force the creation had ever seen.

Michael cleared his throat in a way that made myriads upon myriads of humanly-innumerable angels instantly lift their heads from their work and cast a responsive glance his way. He didn't have to raise his voice to command their wills. He said simply, "Alright fellas, let's bring it in. Circle up."

And that they did. In a perfect display of ordered precision the angels each found their place in what on earth would have seemed but half-a-second. In every direction and as far as a human eye would have been able to see there stood at attention the gleaming, shining warriors who had spent their entire existence either in the presence of their Commander and God or actively carrying out His will.

Michael paused to take in the sight. Never had heaven dispatched the entire angelic force on a single mission. But this would be unlike anything that had ever happened before; and it would be the defining point for everything that would follow after. The Archangel, as Michael's rank designates him, spotted not one flaw, not one item out of place as the armies of heaven stood for review.

He broke the hushed silence, "I don't need to tell you that we are on the cusp of everything

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<sup>1</sup> Job 38:6-7.

<sup>2</sup> Genesis 2:7.

we've ever desired. I know you have made ready. Thank you for your service and devotion to our Master. As we await His imminent command, allow me to have a few from our number share about their role in Jesus' first Advent."

A hush of anticipation swept through the ranks as heads turned and angels gazed into one another's eyes and nodded their heads in expectancy. They never tired of hearing this story.

Michael glanced toward one angel and nodded. "Gabriel, will you start us off by sharing what it was like as you served to prepare the way for Jesus' first coming?"

The powerful angel moved forward and as he did his luminescence grew until any non-heavenly being would have had to shield their eyes, lest they be blinded forever. "As you know our King's first arrival was no simple affair. It was a complex arrangement of a multitude of decisions, choices, thoughts, and actions by a vast array of players. Our Master's wisdom, as we all know, once again proved brilliant. My role was to prepare the way for the preparer-of-the-way for his arrival upon earth. Long before—in earth-years, at least—the Spirit had spoken of this forerunner through the prophets Isaiah and Malachi. It was my privilege to aid in putting the reality into motion. I was directed to a faithful priest by the name of Zechariah. Though blameless and righteous in their adherence to the Master's word and advanced in years, he and his wife were barren. By the Master's arrangement the lot fell to Zechariah to serve in the Temple. So when he entered alone into the inner chambers to appear in the Lord's presence I manifested myself at the right side of the altar of incense."

With a downward glance and a brief pause, Gabriel continued, "I'm sorry to say that I nearly did the old fellow in."

A low chuckle arose from a few in the front row.

"I quickly said, 'Do not be afraid. Your prayer has been heard and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son. You shall call his name John. You will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth.' He looked a bit stunned and I wasn't sure how much was getting through, but I continued, 'Your son will go before the Lord in the spirit and power of Elijah, to make ready for the Lord a people prepared.'"<sup>3</sup>

Gabriel paused again. He wrung at the white raiment of his robes for a moment and then with a pained expression added, "I wish he hadn't done it, but he questioned how he would know this would happen." A disapproving murmur arose from those nearest the reporting angel. He continued, "So I had to give him a sign. I said, 'you will be silent and unable to speak until the day that these things take place, because you did not believe my words, which will be fulfilled in their time.'"<sup>4</sup> After that I withdrew and he exited the inner chambers of the Temple. When the people saw him, they realized that though his lips moved no sound came out, and they observed the color drained from his face. They rightly concluded that something supernatural had happened within the Temple chambers."

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<sup>3</sup> Luke 1:5-18.

<sup>4</sup> Luke 1:18-20.

Gabriel lifted his head and with a steady voice reported, “Everything unfolded, by the Master’s doing, just as I had been instructed to announce. Zechariah’s wife, Elizabeth, was with child.”

A murmur again swept over the angelic hosts, this time a reverent one. Michael lifted his hand and the sound died away. He then turned back to the reporting angel, saying, “Please continue, for we all know this was not the full extent of your role.”

The shining one nodded his head in agreement and said, “Yes, this is true. The honor bestowed me is beyond words. When Elizabeth was two-thirds of the way through her pregnancy I was sent again, this time not to an aged, barren woman, but to faithful young woman—almost a child, really. And this time I went not to the Temple in Jerusalem, but to the backwater village of Nazareth where she lived with her family.”

Michael interrupted, asking, “This assignment was similar to your first, but was profoundly different in a number of ways, yes?”

Gabriel nodded his agreement, “Yes, absolutely. It was the same in that I was announcing a conception, gestation and birth. But the players were profoundly different and the earthly implications far more complicated.”

With a reflective look upon his face he continued, “The asset was actually a young relative of Elizabeth, but she was as yet a virgin. She had been betrothed to a fine man named Joseph, but they had not yet come together as husband and wife. How does one tell such an innocent one that she will be pregnant, blamelessly so in the eyes of God? And of course the child she would carry, birth and raise would be infinitely more glorious.”

“Tell us about it,” Michael invited with a nod.

“Well, having seen what my presence and words did to old Zechariah I was nervous about my approach to the young woman, Mary. So I started out as positively as I thought possible: ‘Greetings, O favored one, the Lord is with you!’ He paused with a slightly pained expression and then continued, “But I’m afraid there’s only so much finessing one of us can do in such circumstances. I scared her pretty badly. So I said, ‘Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God.’ And then I figured I might as well forge ahead. So I continued, ‘Behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus.’ On a roll, I just went with it, “He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. And the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.”

Gabriel winced just a bit at the memory. He recalled how he’d felt he had perhaps over spoken in the moment.

“And her reponse?” asked Michael.

“You can imagine her confusion. She of course asked about how this would be since she had never been with a man.”

“And your answer?” Michael asked again.

Gabriel chuckled a bit under his breath. “Well,” he said and then paused, “How do you explain the unexplainable? I told her the Holy Spirit would take care of it.”

At that every angel in creation whispered in unison “Amen!” All of heaven fell silent for a moment at the very thought.

Michael, wanting to move the report along, nudged, “And?”

“*And* I told her about her relative Elizabeth. And I finished by reminding her, ‘Nothing will be impossible with God.’”

Another “Amen!” arose from the gathered host, this one a bit more emphatic and militaristic.

“And her response?” Michael asked.

Gabriel put his hand to his mouth as if to gather his composure. If angels weep, it certainly looked like he might. Finally, in a voice filled with emotion, he announced, “She said, ‘Behold, I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word.’”<sup>5</sup>

This time there was an excited flutter of the wings from every ministering spirit who understood innately the sentiments of the chosen woman, though they marveled at its rarity among the human race.

“Thank you, Gabe,” Michael said with a hand laid appreciatively upon the angel’s back. Gabriel nodded and receded again into the ranks of the assembled armies of God.

Michael then stated the obvious. “As you could well guess and already know, this created some loose ends on earth that the Master asked us to tend to.” With that he signaled with his eye for another angel to step to the fore.

As he did, his countenance, much like Gabriel’s, grew brighter and seemed to emit something of the glory of the One He serves.

“Brother, will you share with us your part in this unfolding drama of our King’s first advent?”

“Certainly,” the angel said with a deferential bow of his head to the archangel.

He cleared his throat and said, “We can all imagine the complications that Gabriel’s announcement to young Mary created. Of first priority was the man to whom she was betrothed. So I too visited Nazareth. He had been weighing every option available to him. He, being a righteous man and still very much in love with Mary, with a broken heart had decided to simply divorce her quietly and go his way. The family angst, the social pressure, the spiritual confusion

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<sup>5</sup> Luke 1:26-38.

were real. He was doing the best he knew to do, humanly. But it was my responsibility to convince him to choose the way of faith. No easy task with news like he had received.”

“So how’d you pull it off?” Michael asked on behalf of every other listening angel.

“I just quietly slipped myself into one of his dreams,” the angel reported. “I decided to be direct, telling him, ‘Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary as your wife, for that which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit.’”

Now it was Michael who seemed bemused, with the corners of his lips turning slightly upward at the thought. “And then?” he asked.

“And then I just kept rolling with it. I said, ‘She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.’”<sup>6</sup>

At the very thought of it the angels gasped, as if they’d never heard the news before. The thought of the Master dying still overburdened their mental circuits. But the thought of such love for such as the human race was even more stunning to the angelic host.

“Did it work?” Michael asked, though they all knew the answer.

“Yes,” the angel reported. “I dropped a memory into his mind—a recollection of what Isaiah the prophet had said about the virgin conceiving and the resulting child being Immanuel – God with them” (Matt. 1:23).

“Ah,” Michael said, nodding his head in agreement with the rest of the gathered angels, “Nothing like God’s own word to ignite faith!”

Then, as the reporting angel slipped back into line, the archangel took up the narrative on his own. “We all know that the pregnancy of Elizabeth continued, despite her advanced age, in a healthy way and culminated in the birth of a vigorous man-child. Though there was confusion at her instance of naming the child John, Zechariah was given his voice in the nick of time and, faithful to our brother’s instructions, affirmed this was to be his son’s name.”

“We know too that Joseph faithfully stayed with Mary. Her pregnancy also was healthy, though the Master’s providence again worked to make a dizzying array of details come together so the child would be born, as previously announced through the prophets, in Bethlehem.”

“And who can forget *that* night! As difficult as it had been for us to see our Master so humbled to take up residence as a gestating child in a human mother’s womb, none of us was ready for the sight of His actual birth and to behold Him not only in human form, but as fully *human*, and what’s more, a fully human *infant*.”

Again angels covered their mouths to stifle the mummer over the amazing grace they struggled

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<sup>6</sup> Matthew 1:20-22.

to understand.<sup>7</sup>

“Difficult as it is for us to comprehend such love we knew that despite its humblest of earthly circumstances, it deserved a heavenly round of applause. So that’s where this good comrade of ours came in.” As he said it Michael motioned to the front the leader of the angelic military chorus.

As the angel strode forward he commanded the attention of the hosts assembled. Without a nudge from the archangel he boldly declared, “We all know that our Master deserves all praise!”

The sound of amens again shot through the ranks before him.

“But just how to offer it Him under such peculiar circumstances? He is and was the King, yet He had cast off His royal robes for the mission. He came as a prophet, but He could not yet utter a word. He came to be the High Priest of His people forever, yet He had not yet made the necessary passage to take up that role. So how to welcome Him?”

The other angles could feel the conundrum that had been set upon him.

“That is when we recalled that among all the other roles our Master came to fulfill, He promised to be the Good Shepherd. He had come in this way to seek and to save the lost sheep who had wandered from Him. So we concluded that there were none better to receive the news of His arrival and to join with us in uniting heaven and earth in worshipping Him than earthly shepherds.”

“They’re not considered much by their own people. This, perhaps, is why our Master delights to take the role. It was the perfect disguise for His mission.”

“And how did this go?” Michael prodded the angel along.

“Well, shepherds are mostly used to working alone. And these guys were the night shift, so they aren’t used to many disturbances. So I decided I’d go solo at first. I determined to show myself before I spoke. So I just materialized before their eyes and as the glory of the Lord shown around me I realized I had their full attention. At that point I cried out, “Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. And this will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger.”<sup>8</sup>

“And?” Michael prodded further.

“Well, before they had much chance to do or say anything I brought in the whole crew.”

With a sweep of the arm he signaled his corps and a multitude of the assembled heavenly host fluttered their wings and rose slightly at the acknowledgement.

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<sup>7</sup> 1 Peter 1:12.

<sup>8</sup> Luke 2:10-12.

“We chose this as our song: “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!”<sup>9</sup>

The mere sound of worship being offered to the Lord shot pulses of praise through the entire angelic throng and they joined in intoning the words in unison with the commanding angel.

Michael let the praise linger in the air for a sweet moment. To honor their Creator was the joy of their hearts and he didn't want to rob them of the pleasure in this moment before their greatest service to Him.

Unbeknownst to any of them the commanding angel had slipped back among the host and left Michael at the fore. He recalled their theme and said, “There were other key angelic assignments in Jesus' first arrival. Not the least of which fell to this brother.” With that Michael motioned a reluctant angel forward.

“Your assignment, my brother, was a particularly grievous one, was it not?”

All the angels knew the story and in anticipation of hearing it again cast their eyes downward.

The hesitant angel paused before beginning. “It was well after these events. The Magi had come from the east and had been redirected by the Master to find their way home by some route other than Jerusalem and the wicked Herod that it housed. But it didn't take Herod long to figure out what had happened. My orders came abruptly in the middle of the night. I was told that his murderous armies were doing double time to reach Bethlehem.”

Michael, aware of the sensitive nature of the events, asked, “Please continue, brother. What is it you were asked to do?”

“I was charged with getting Joseph, Mary and the baby out of Bethlehem before Herod and his armies arrived. My orders were, above all else, do not let the evil one get a victory. A victory that would have, well ...” His voice fell off.

“What strategy did you employ?”

“It was night. They were all asleep. So I worked my way into Joseph's dream. I knew I had to make it terrifying enough to impress upon him the urgency of the situation and yet not so much as to paralyze him. I commanded him, ‘Rise, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you, for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him.’”<sup>10</sup>

“His response?” Michael prodded.

“Oh he got up alright! It was a mad scramble, but they gathered their things and got just outside of town as the thundering hoofs of Herod's troops entered on the other side.”

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<sup>9</sup> Luke 2:14.

<sup>10</sup> Matthew 2:13

But then the angel's voice trailed off as he said, "And then ..."

The angel looked downward in pain at the thought. Michael let the silence hang in the air as a testament to the tragedy that had then unfolded in Bethlehem.

"And then ..." he tried again. Falling silent he just shook his head in a pained remembrance.

Michael put a consoling arm upon the angel's shoulders and thanked him for his service and his report. The angel slipped back into the ranks from which he had come.

After a reflective moment or two, Michael carried the remaining narrative.

"And so our Master grew, in wisdom and stature and in favor with God and man. Through the years of obscurity He, in reliance upon the Holy Spirit, trained Himself in the Father's Word. He nurtured His soul in the Father's presence through prayer. He labored alongside Joseph, crafting furniture and making it a sacred art form. But eventually the time came when He would stand to the fore. John began his preaching, calling the people to make ready the way for the Lord. Jesus, for His part, withdrew to the wilderness where He neither ate nor drank for forty days. You know the epic battle that ensued as the evil one himself tried every tactic to cause our Master to fail. But He stood true. Then these, our brothers" – and with that he motioned to a small band of angels to his left – "went to Him in the wilderness and in His weakened physical state, nurtured Him back to strength."<sup>11</sup>

Angels in every direction locked eyes with the small band of ministering spirits and nodded their affirmation.

Michael continued, "You know the hatred that stalked our Master at every turn. You know how it finally chased Him up upon the cross. You know how He suffered."

At the thought soft sounds of mourning rose from the angels' ranks.

"You know how He loved."

They lifted their eyes upward in wondering amazement.

"You know how He died."

And with that all heaven fell silent. No one and nothing moved. No one spoke. It was their involuntary ritual of honor every time their Master's passion was openly mentioned.

Finally Michael broke their contemplations, saying, "And you know the outcome."

The heels on angelic boots slapped in unison as myriads of myriads of angels came to attention at the mere thought of it!

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<sup>11</sup> Matthew 4:11; Mark 1:13.



“Jesus rose from the dead!” Michael shouted, his voice sounding the one note that always brought the angels to full, glorious, frenzy. Cries, adulations, psalms, victory shouts arose in wave after wave of praise!

With outstretched arm, Michael’s voice rose even further: “This chosen angel was honored to roll the stone away from His tomb to show the world the triumph of our King!”<sup>12</sup>

The frenzy grew.

With a sweep of his other hand he said, “These, our brothers, remained at the tomb to inform His followers of His triumph!”<sup>13</sup>

The ringing report of swords slipping from sheathes filled the air. The entire heavenly host shone in a blinding recognition of the task that lay immediately before them, the brilliance of their reflected glory increasing by the moment.

Michael put the finishing touches upon these preparatory speeches by calling forward two especially large angels. Raising his voice above the den he said, “You were there when the resurrected Jesus left the earth, were you not?”

“We were,” they reported with military snap.

“You lingered to instruct His disciples, did you not?”

“We did,” they clipped their words again.

“And what is it you told them?”

We asked, “Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into heaven?” Then we announced, “This Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven.”<sup>14</sup>

Then he cried to the entire assembled host: “And today is that day, my brothers in arms!”

They did not cry, they did not move, they did not shuffle nor clamor. Every angel in heaven simply locked eyes with their commanding archangel, having readied themselves for the battle of the ages. This was their Master’s moment—anticipated from before time began. They were about to put an end to all hostilities. Theirs was the assignment to join at their Master’s side as He unveiled Himself in all His glory for every eye to see and for all the earth to marvel at Him. But before the peace that will never end can come, there is a battle to be waged.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Matthew 28:2.

<sup>13</sup> Luke 24:4-7.

<sup>14</sup> Acts 1:11.

<sup>15</sup> Jude 14-15.

Michael reviewed his troops, then shouted: “Final checks!”

He looked to his left and caught the attention of a division of angels. “Are you read to gather all causes of sin and all lawbreakers?”<sup>16</sup>

“Yes sir!” they shouted in unison.

He looked to his right and gathered in with his eyes another division. “Are you ready to gather from the four winds all the elect of God?”

“Yes sir!” came their reply.<sup>17</sup>

With a sweep of his eyes he took in the sight of heaven’s armies ordered and prepared. The sight of them all arrayed in fine linen, white and pure, and mounted upon their white horses would have stopped any but an angel’s heart.<sup>18</sup>

With that Michael lifted his powerful right arm toward the throne, his sword triumphantly now overhead. He cried out a single command with a voice that reverberated through every atom of the created order: “*Ready!*” At that the sound of countless angels snapping to attention rang with crystal clarity through an otherwise silent heaven. Even the horses upon which they sat ceased their clawing at the clouds and fell still. All of heaven’s sentient beings set their eyes upon Michael and anticipated his next word of command. They had been waiting for this order for what seemed an eternity. Now it was just a word away. They watched as Michael inhaled deeply and opened his mouth. Angel hosts leaned forward in anticipation of the next sound they would hear.

And with that the archangel let loose a cry of command that shot like a trumpet blast through the whole of creation.<sup>19</sup>

And then in the next moment ...

Ah, but we’re getting ahead of ourselves, aren’t we?

But, my friend, He *is* coming. Of this we have Jesus’ own promise. The events of His first Advent guarantee His Second Advent. Even now the heavens buzz with their preparations and God’s hand of providence arranges events upon earth, including your being present here this evening. Our preparations ought also to be well underway. As we come now to the conclusion of this remembrance of Jesus’ first Advent, I urge you to remember: *the archangel’s cry, signaling Jesus’ appearance, may come at any time.*

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<sup>16</sup> Matthew 13:41.

<sup>17</sup> Matthew 24:31.

<sup>18</sup> Revelation 19:14.

<sup>19</sup> 1 Thessalonians 4:16.