

If you happen to visit the Spanish city of Alicante during Advent, you may spot what city officials there have boasted is the largest nativity scene on the planet. The figure of Joseph alone is almost 60 feet high, and mother Mary and the baby Jesus are beside him in appropriate proportions. And there has been good reason to boast about its size. Officials at the Guinness Book of World Records certified the results. Encompassing an area of 602 square feet, the Alicante Nativity is the world's tallest static nativity scene ever recorded, as well as the largest by area.

Apparently, Alicante is famous for its interest in nativity scenes, and in fact, there is an association of artists who devote their skills to the creation of a wide variety of creches. The city boasts a nativity scene museum as well. And in many of the portrayals of this most holy, sacred, and sometimes silent night, the usual participants are noted: The Holy Family, of course, but also the shepherds and sheep, perhaps a camel or two, a few cows (“the cattle are lowing ...”) and some chickens and geese.

But in the Alicante scene, and many others, there's one significant omission. The “angel of the Lord” is missing. A “multitude of the heavenly host” is likewise nowhere to be found. And with that being the case, perhaps we should take a closer look at what one could argue is a very important participant in the story of the birth of Christ!

In exploring St. Luke's brief and skillfully narrated story of Jesus' birth there are two, possibly three, principal characters: Mary, Joseph, and their newborn, although we can only assume that the babe lying in the manger doesn't do anything except lie there and do what babies do.

But the secondary or supporting cast of characters should also pique our interest. That cast list includes the shepherds, of course, but also the angel and later the supporting chorus of angels. In fact, take a brief moment and think about how

much people these days appreciate angels. We're fascinated — even obsessed — with them, especially since the Bible suggests we have our own angelic bodyguards that watch over us.

- Psalms 91:11 declares: For he will command his angels concerning you to guard you in all your ways.
- Hebrews 1:14 says: Are not all angels ministering spirits sent to serve those who will inherit salvation?
- Psalm 34:7 states that: The angel of the LORD encamps around those who fear him, and he delivers them.

These and other verses have led many to believe, right or wrong, that we all have a celestial being — with wings — who hovers above us like a Coast Guard rescue helicopter, only without the noise. The claim may be on the shakiest of biblical grounds, but the belief persists.

It's a theme that is even covered in fiction. Consider *George Bailey*. What would have happened to that poor banker had not an angel earned his wings by saving his life? Clarence Odbody is a guardian angel character in Frank Capra's 1946 film, *It's a Wonderful Life*. On Christmas Eve 1945, Bailey, facing financial ruin and disgrace, is thinking about suicide. He plans to jump off a bridge into an icy river because the payout on his \$15,000 life insurance policy would solve the problems confronting his business and family. Two celestial beings observe George's intent to kill himself and decide to send an angel to save him.

For this task, the only available angel is Clarence Odbody, AS2 (Angel Second Class), who, after 200 years, has yet to win his wings. To prepare for this assignment, Clarence is shown several scenes from George's life that show some of his selfless acts.

Sent to Earth, Clarence finds George standing on a bridge about to leap into the river. Before George can jump off, Clarence jumps in the water, prompting

George to dive in to rescue him. Both are rescued by the bridge keeper, who allows them to dry off in his shack. As Clarence dries off, he reveals he is an angel (causing the tollkeeper to flee in fear).

Now, the idea that the heavens might be full of angel investors watching us mortals on Earth is an intriguing idea. But how would that work? Do you suppose God has a Department of Guardians, and it's divided into continents, nations, regions, districts, cities, and neighborhoods? Are there angel conventions, where seminars are held on how to weatherize one's wings, how to approach a human without inducing a cardiac event, or how to spot a life worth saving? In fact, if there were such celestial discussions, would those angel investors consider your life worth saving, as they did George Bailey's?

Of course, they would! Any other answer is unthinkable. The essence of the gospel is that "God so loved the world that he gave his only Son ..." We're celebrating this event today or tonight as the case may be. The whole Christmas thing, this unbelievable and incredible idea that God was born in a cow barn as a baby, is only comprehensible because God thought that humans in general, and we in particular, are worth saving!

And yet, one might argue that it is a very human thing for us to sometimes have doubts. The ancient patriarch Joseph was betrayed by his brothers, thrown in prison on trumped-up charges and had every reason to wonder if his life was basically over. King David — a man after God's own heart — battled depression his entire life. Many of his calamities he brought on himself. But although he frequently gave up on himself, God never did. He was worth saving!

Job had everything going for him; in fact, he had everything. And then he didn't. His wife and friends told him to curse God and die. Instead, he said, "I know that my redeemer lives." Job was worth saving! And there are many other such stories in the Bible: the apostle Paul in a Philippian jail; Moses, a fugitive

from the law while in the wilderness, for example. And we see it on movie screens: Private Ryan. A life worth saving.

You. Your life is a life worth investing in. Your life is a life worth saving. And that is the miraculous good news that we all need to hear, understand, and contemplate in our hearts.

Getting back to George Bailey. He was shown what life would have been like for others if he were never in it. After seeing his wife as a spinster and watching his brother Harry drown because he wasn't there to save him, George begs the angel Clarence for his life back. The original reality is restored, and a grateful George rushes home, where he thinks he will be arrested. But the townspeople have rallied and come into the Bailey home and donated more than enough to cover the money that was missing.

His brother Harry arrives and toasts George as “the richest man in town.” Among the donations George finds a copy of *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, a gift from Clarence and inscribed, “Remember, no man is a failure who has friends. Thanks for the wings!” When a bell on the Christmas tree rings, George's youngest daughter, Zuzu, explains that “every time a bell rings, an angel gets his wings.” George looks upward smiling and says, “Atta boy, Clarence!”

On this special night we celebrate that our incredible God has given us the gift of his very self. We also find joy in the reality that through Jesus our amazing God has given us a **Wonder-Filled** Life! In fact, as we contemplate the precious gift of Immanuel, the child laying in the manger, whose birth was announced by an Angel, we may wonder if we too have a guardian angel protecting us, or angel investors watching out for our interests. And the surprising answer is “yes,” but it's not who you think.

It's not a heavenly being like Clarence Odbody, the biblical Gabriel, or the archangel Michael. The truth is even more amazing. For we need only turn our

gaze to the nativity scene, whether in Alicante, Spain, or in Anytown, in the good US of A. The “angel” we long for is the babe lying in a manger bed of straw. Our angel investor is the child who will one day grow up and give us what we need to see the light of the Lord. In other words, the guardian angel we should want, the one we need, is the Son of God, who said, “Remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”

So along with George Bailey, we have learned a lesson on Christmas Eve that is helpful for us to remember: God loves us. We are worth saving and investing in. If we have friends, we are rich indeed. We should be grateful for God’s interest in us and for our family and friends who love us. We should stand in awe before the manger and wonder what kind of love would send God down into our world. And when we begin to give this some thought, when we contemplate this idea in our hearts as Mary did after hearing about the Shepherd’s angelic visitation, we begin to understand that we live a **wonder-filled life** in a **wonder-filled world**.

Louis Armstrong expressed this famously in his song, “What a Wonderful World.” One of the verses mentions babies, appropriate for this Christmas Eve: “I hear babies crying, I watch them grow, They’ll learn much more than I’ll never know, And I think to myself what a wonderful world, Yes, I think to myself what a wonderful world.”

A wonder-filled life in a wonder-filled world made possible, ultimately, because of a baby born in a cattle stall. We hear the Baby cry, we’ll watch him die, Jesus our Lord, and then we will sigh, As we think to ourselves what a wonder-filled life! Yes, we’ll think to ourselves, what a wonder-filled world! And Thanks be to God for that. Amen.