Angel songs

Luke seems to know that some stories need to be told with music.

by [Lee Hull Moses](#)

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Henry Ossawa Tanner, *Angels Appearing Before the Shepherds,* c. 1910

The way Luke tells the story makes me think he knew something about music. Maybe he was a singer himself. Maybe he'd been in the choir, maybe played the lute or the drum. He knew how a song can say something mere words cannot. Known for his extraordinary storytelling, Luke knows that some stories can only be told in song.

So Luke tells us about that angel choir, those angel songs that cut through the darkness of night. The one angel calling first, one voice piercing the deep blue star-studded sky. "Do not be afraid," she tells the frightened shepherds, who are afraid anyway, for who wouldn't be, when all they were doing was watching their sheep on a regular night with not much happening. Who wouldn't be frightened when the sky

lights up and the voice of the first angel pierces the sky? Do not be afraid, she says, but they are afraid anyway, because the night is dark and danger lingers in the shadows.

I've been re-watching *Gilmore Girls* these past few weeks, as a light-hearted reprieve from the news of the day. In one scene early in the series, 16-year-old Rory has broken up with her boyfriend Dean, because he said "I love you" and she couldn't say it back. She wanted to, we find out later, but her tongue gets tied, her voice stuck in her throat, and she can't find the words to tell him how she feels, so she doesn't say anything. Later, in a town meeting where some conflict arises about the town troubadour, Rory stands up to defend him. "Sometimes you need a song," she says. "Sometimes you can't find the words to say exactly how you feel, and that's when you need a song."

The shepherds need a song on this night, when the shadows surround them, and they are startled by the light of the angels. They need a song to understand the first angel's words. "Do not be afraid," she says, but that's not all she says. Do not be afraid *for I bring you good news; a baby has been born. A baby has been born for you.*

Then the whole sky is bright and filled with angel wings as mighty and as gentle as the strings of a violin, and a whole choir of angel songs captures the good news of the love that is born in the darkness of night.

In Aleppo this week—in the same part of the world where Mary and Joseph once wandered, looking for a place to stay, where they would soon take their baby boy and flee the terror of the king and become refugees running for their lives because their government would no longer protect them—in that same part of the world this week, the children of Aleppo fled. Those were the lucky ones; there were others who were trapped with no rescue in sight when the ceasefire would not hold and their government would not protect them.

And when I tucked my children in at night this week, in their safe, warm beds, I couldn't help but think of the mamas in Aleppo holding their children, and Mary wrapping her baby in swaddling cloth, listening for the sound of angel song.

If not for the angel song, this would be a story about any other baby, any other mama wrapping her baby up against the cold night air. *Do not be afraid,* the angel says, but we are afraid anyway, because the night is dark and danger lingers in the

shadows, and we pray urgently for the light to come.

But the angels do sing, and the whole sky lights up with their song that captures the good news of the love born in the darkness of night. And then, by the light of the angel songs, we can see the glimpses of hope that were hidden in the darkness before: the hands of the rescue workers reaching into the bombed-out rubble, refusing to go home, even as the bombs continue to go off around them. The voices of the protesters who will not remain silent while the government stops protecting its people. The acts of ordinary kindness and generosity that mark most of our days if only we look for them.

Do not be afraid, the angel sings to the shepherds, and they go to Bethlehem to see.