

# A Season for ANGELS



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**A**t the beginning of each Christmas season, our thoughts turn to the birth of the Savior. For believers, Christ's birth and death are the two greatest events in the history of the earth or, for that matter, eternity. It is almost an anomaly that in the untold years the universe has existed, its two greatest events occurred within a 33-year span in a vassal nation on a small planet the Lord calls His "footstool" (see Isaiah 66:1).

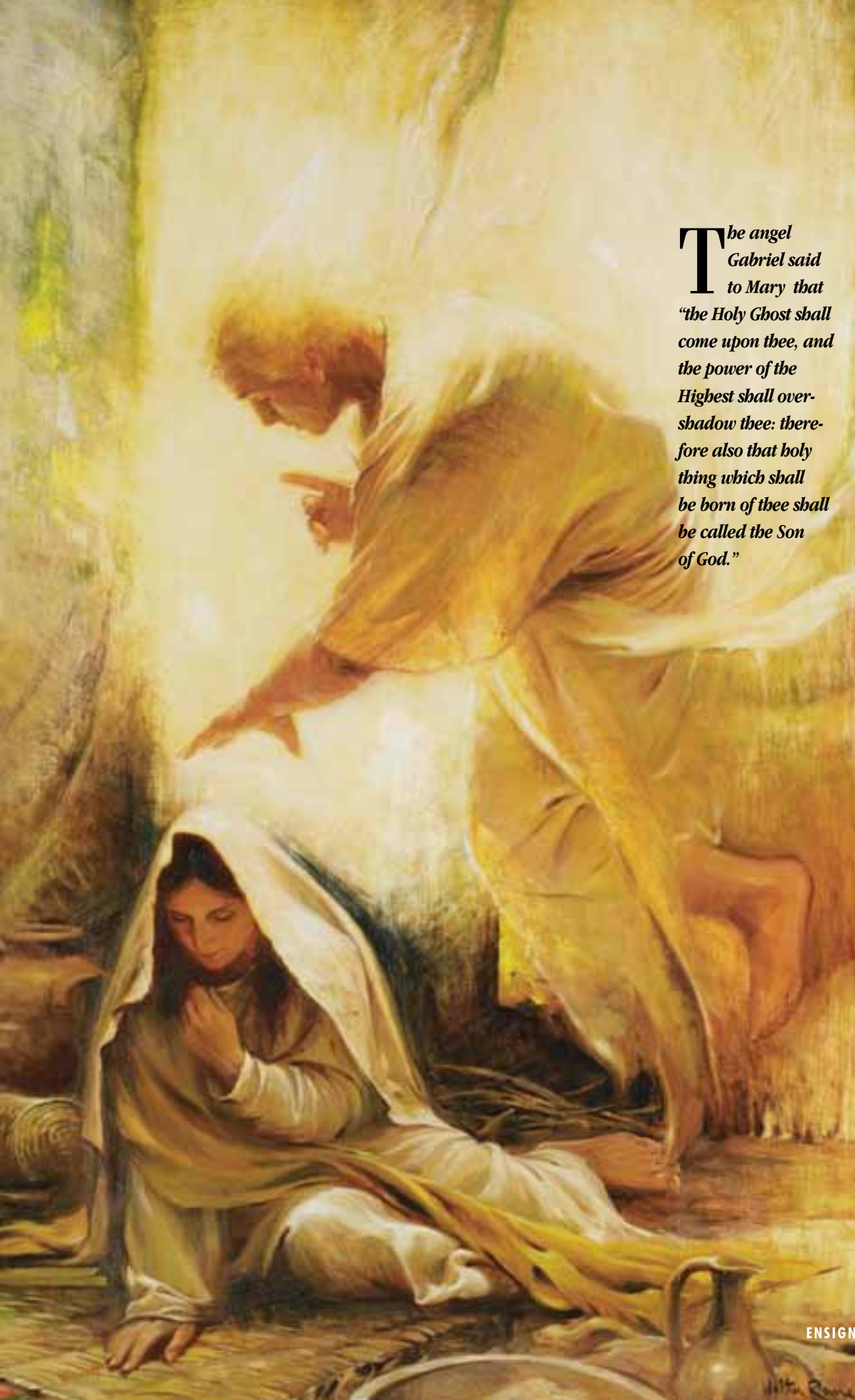
Christmas carols are a special feature of the season. They bring feelings of joy to our hearts as they describe the events and significance of the birth of Jesus Christ. It is interesting to note that many Christmas hymns speak of angels. This is because the biblical record contains numerous accounts of heavenly beings speaking to mortals before and at the time of His birth. An angel announced His pending birth to the young woman Mary and to Joseph, her espoused husband (see Luke 1:26–33; Matthew 1:20–21). An angel accompanied by a heavenly choir heralded the birth to the shepherds in the fields (see Luke 2:8–14), and angels kept watch over the family during the early

years when Herod tried to destroy the young Jesus (see Matthew 2:13, 19–20). Not only is the story of the Savior's birth replete with heavenly messengers, but heavenly beings were also present at significant events throughout His life.

One might ask, "Why were angels so prominent at the Savior's birth? And why were they such an important part of His life and ministry?" The answers are twofold. The first pertains to the nature and mission of the personage whom they were heralding—a divine Being, the Son of God, the Only Begotten in the flesh who came to earth to save all of God's children. The second concerns the ushering in of a new dispensation, a period of time when the gospel would be restored in its fulness. The ministry of angels is to assist in the ushering in of dispensations (see Moroni 7:29–31). Let us discuss each of these reasons to provide a clearer understanding of the wonderful moment represented by the "meridian of time."

## **Heralding the Savior's Mission**

For thousands of years, ancient prophets had looked forward to the time when the Son of God would come to earth and atone for the



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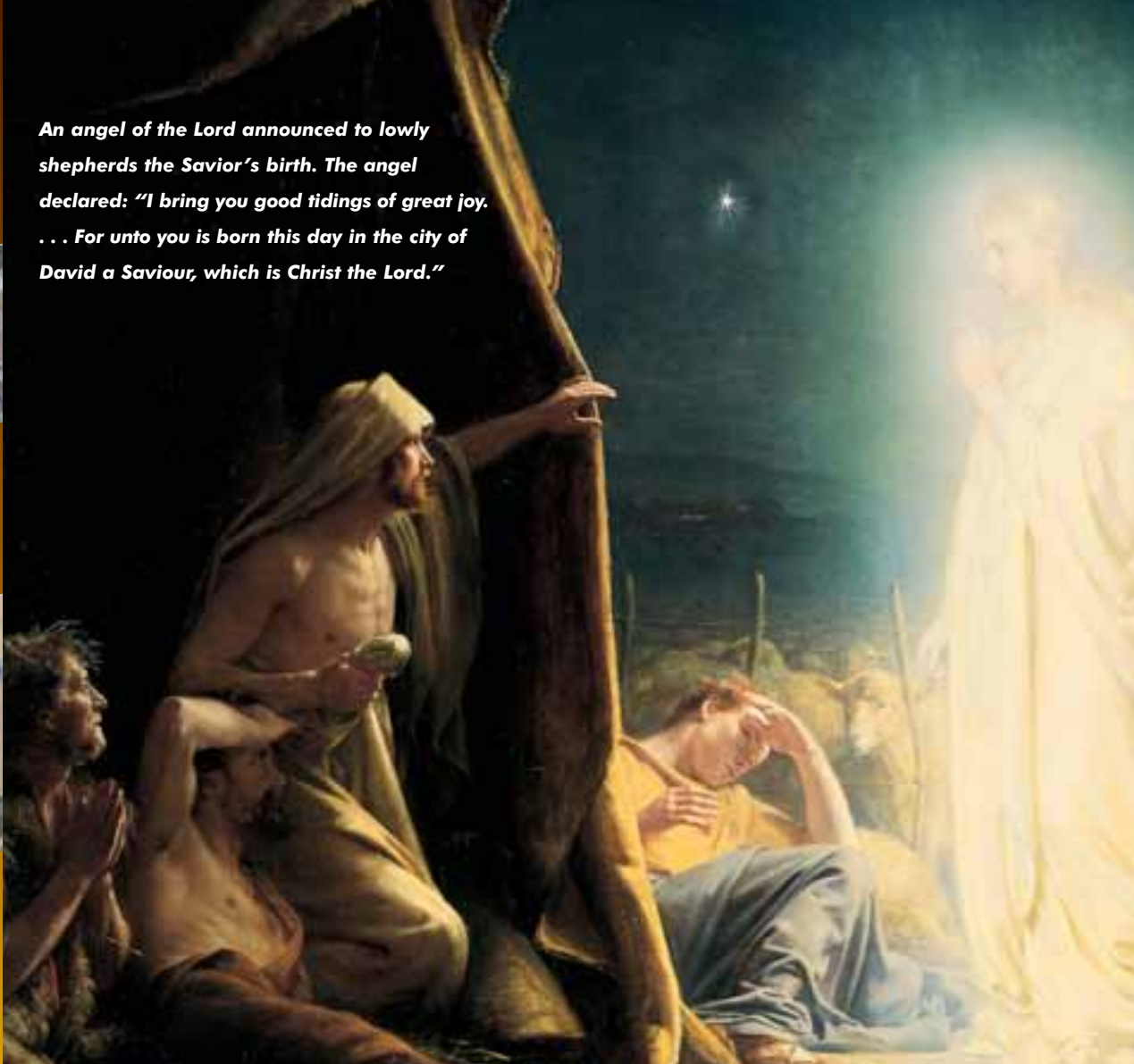
*An angel of the Lord announced to lowly shepherds the Savior's birth. The angel declared: "I bring you good tidings of great joy. . . . For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord."*



*The angel Gabriel was sent to Zacharias to "shew [him] . . . glad tidings."*



*Zacharias learned that he and his wife, Elisabeth, would have a son and that his name would be John.*



sins of mankind. From Genesis to Malachi and from 1 Nephi to 3 Nephi, the Lord's messengers prophesied that the God of ancient Israel, the Son of the Father, would come to earth and ransom His people. The Lord told Adam that Satan would bruise the heel of their offspring, but that the seed of the woman (Christ) would overcome Satan's power as He bruised Satan's head (see Genesis 3:15).

Moses wrote of "a Star out of Jacob" (Numbers 24:17); the Psalmist spoke of the special relationship between the Father and the Son, of the Father's withdrawal during the Crucifixion, and of Christ's death (see Psalms 2:7; 22:1, 16; 34:20; 69:21); and Isaiah spoke of His miraculous birth, mission, and death (see Isaiah 7:14; 9:6; 42:7; 53:5). The Book of Mormon contains even more detail concerning Christ's birth, mission, death, and resurrection (see Topical Guide, "Jesus Christ, Prophecies about," 252).

Prophets spoke often of Jesus's birth together with His death because these two events are inextricably linked—

the nature of His birth as God's Only Begotten Son created an infinite life that could only be extinguished voluntarily. Jesus said: "Therefore doth my Father love me, because I lay down my life, that I might take it again. No man taketh it from me, but I lay it down of myself. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it again. This commandment have I received of my Father" (John 10:17–18).

The Savior's Godly status was preserved through His birth. His infinite and eternal nature gave Him the capacity to atone for the sins of all mankind and the power to rise from the grave and make possible a resurrection for every person who had or would live on the earth (see Alma 34:10, 14; John 1:1–3, 14; 11:25; Romans 8:11). As the "lamb without blemish and without spot," He maintained the inheritance of "divine power" to bless us with "life and godliness" during His earthly sojourn (1 Peter 1:19; 2 Peter 1:3).

The birth of Jesus Christ was extraordinary in that it involved the condescension of both the Father and the

Son—two eternal beings. When the prophet Nephi was seeking to understand the meaning of the tree of life, an angel showed him in vision a beautiful virgin in the city of Nazareth and asked the question “Knowest thou the condescension of God?” Nephi indicated that he knew God “loveth his children” but did not “know the meaning of all things.” The angel then showed Nephi a woman “carried away in the Spirit for the space of a time.” Nephi then saw her “bearing a child in her arms.” The angel said to Nephi, “Behold the Lamb of God, yea, even the Son of the Eternal Father! Knowest thou the meaning of the tree which thy father saw?” (See 1 Nephi 11:13–21.) Nephi exclaimed that he now understood God’s great love for His children, a love so great that He would give His Only Begotten Son for the salvation of men and women (see 1 Nephi 11:22; John 3:16). The Father condescended in sending His Son; the Savior condescended in taking upon Himself a mortal body and offering Himself as a sacrifice for sin. Is it any wonder that angels were assigned to declare the Savior’s birth?

The first such angelic declaration was to the priest Zacharias. As he entered the Holy of Holies in the temple, he saw an angel of the Lord standing on the right side of the altar. The angel said, “I am Gabriel, that stand in the presence of God; and am sent to speak unto thee, and to shew thee . . . glad tidings” (Luke 1:19). Gabriel explained to Zacharias that he and his wife, Elisabeth, would have a child and that he was to be named John. Gabriel also explained John’s mission as an Elias, or forerunner for Christ (see Luke 1:11–17).

A short time later, this same angel, Gabriel, appeared to Mary and announced that she would be the mother of the Son of God. She exclaimed, “How shall this be, seeing I know not a man?” (Luke 1:34). Gabriel then stated that “the Holy Ghost shall come upon thee, and the power of the Highest shall overshadow thee: therefore also that

holy thing which shall be born of thee shall be called the Son of God” (Luke 1:35).

Although the name of the angel who appeared to Joseph is not given, it may well have been Gabriel who had the assignment. When Joseph learned that Mary, his espoused wife, was with child, he contemplated a private disengagement. But then an angel appeared in a dream, telling him not to fear to take Mary as his wife, “for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Ghost” (Matthew 1:20). The angel also told Joseph that the child was to be named Jesus (see Matthew 1:21).

The next angelic appearance occurred in the fields near Bethlehem when an angel of the Lord announced to lowly shepherds the Savior’s birth. The angel declared: “I bring you good tidings of great joy. . . . For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord” (Luke 2:10–11). Other angelic hosts appeared, praising God and saying, “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth

peace, good will toward men” (Luke 2:14). The shepherds then hurried to Bethlehem, where they “found Mary, and Joseph, and the babe lying in a manger” (Luke 2:16). Since it was springtime (see D&C 20:1), it is quite likely that the shepherds were recently engaged in the lambing process. Thus, the shepherds who delivered and cared for the lambs became witnesses of the birth of the Lamb of God to those in the surrounding area (see Luke 2:15–17).

Following the appearance of the Wise Men and Herod’s decision to kill all the male children under the age of two, Joseph was warned by

“the angel of the Lord” to take Mary and Jesus into Egypt and “be thou there until I bring thee word: for Herod will seek the young child to destroy him” (Matthew 2:13). When Herod died, Joseph was once more instructed by the Lord’s messenger to “take the young child and his mother, and go into the land of Israel” (Matthew 2:20).



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### Ushering In a New Dispensation

The last prophet of the Old Testament was Malachi, who lived 400 years before the birth of Christ. At that time Israel in large part had turned away from the covenants made with Jehovah. Consequently, they were in apostasy. Although the Aaronic Priesthood was on earth when Jesus was born, the Melchizedek Priesthood had been taken from the earth. Therefore, there was a need for the priesthood and the gospel to be restored in their fulness.

Moroni taught that angels play a special role in the early stages of a new dispensation. He indicated that “the office of their ministry is . . . to prepare the way among the children of men, by declaring the word of Christ unto the chosen vessels [prophets] of the Lord, that they may bear testimony of him. And by so doing, the Lord God prepareth the way that the residue of men may have faith in Christ, that the Holy Ghost may have place in their hearts” (Moroni 7:31–32).

At the beginning of a new dispensation following a period of apostasy, there is no one with priesthood authority to administer the covenants in their fulness. Consequently, the Lord sends messengers from the other side of the veil to return priesthood keys and the gospel plan to the earth.

It is not surprising then that an angel visited Zacharias and instructed him with regard to the mission of his son. Angels appeared to Jesus in the wilderness following the temptations of Satan and administered to Him in preparation for His ministry (see Matthew 4:11). The Apostle Paul indicates that “Christ glorified not himself to be made an high priest; but he that said unto him, Thou art my Son, to day have I begotten thee.” Paul continues, indicating that Christ was “called of God an high priest after the order of Melchisedec” (Hebrews 5:5, 10). In other words, the higher priesthood came to Jesus from the other side of the veil.

After Jesus promised Peter “the keys of the kingdom”

(Matthew 16:19), He took the three chief Apostles, Peter, James, and John, up into a high mountain where He, together with Moses and Elijah, bestowed upon them these keys (see Matthew 17:1–2, 18:18; Bible Dictionary, “Transfiguration, Mount of,” 786). Why did Moses and Elijah appear? Moses returned the “keys of the gathering of Israel” while Elijah brought the sealing keys (see D&C 110:11, 14–15).

In three other key events, angels appear to prepare Jesus for the Atonement and the Resurrection. The first occurs in the Garden of Gethsemane when “there appeared an angel unto him from heaven, strengthening him” (Luke 22:43). Although the Savior was to complete the Atonement on His own, instructions and support were given in the early stages.

The second event occurs at the tomb on the Sunday morning following the Resurrection. The women came early to the tomb with spices and ointments to care for the



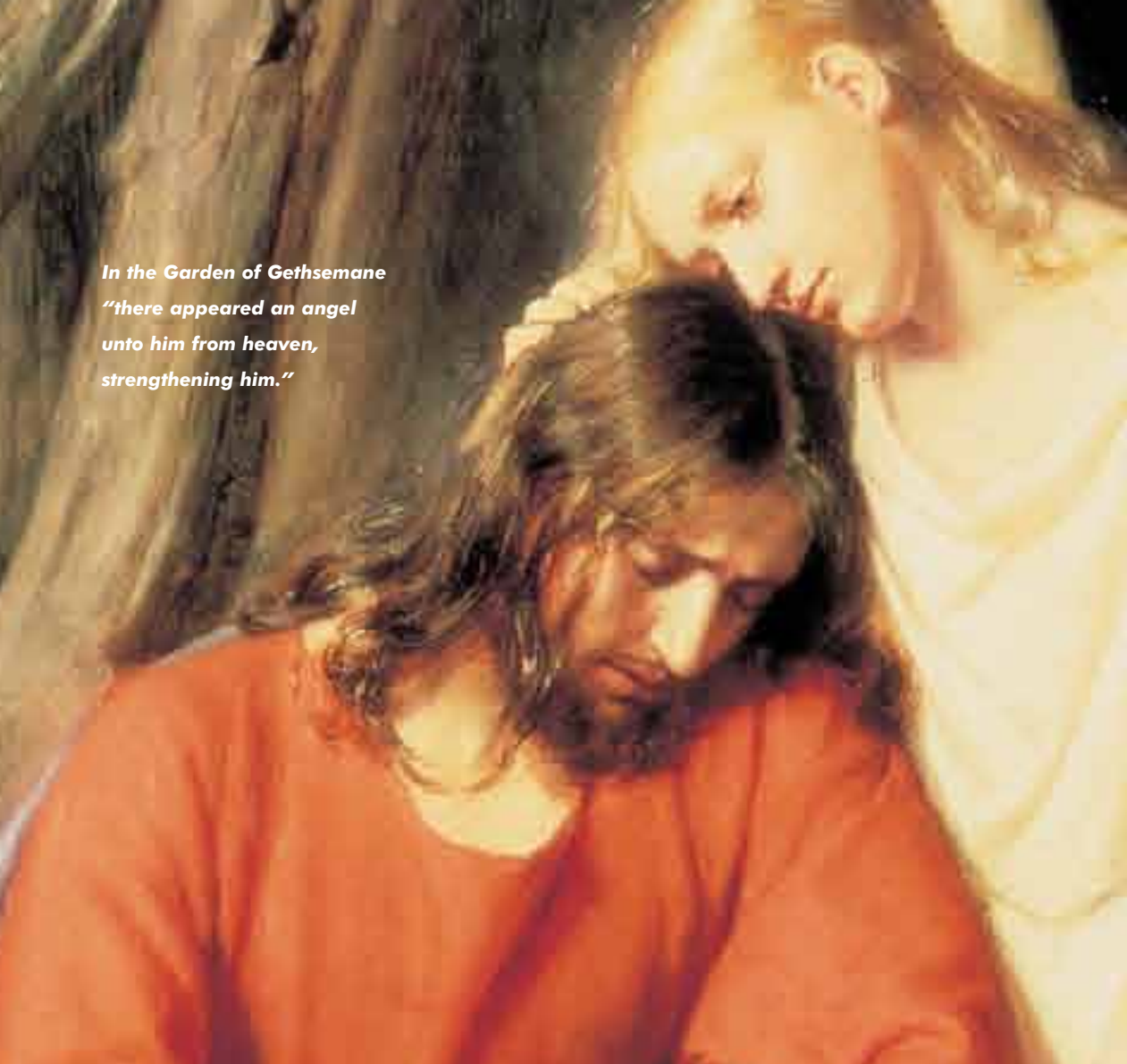
**On the Mount of Transfiguration, Jesus, with Moses and Elijah, bestowed upon Peter, James, and John “the keys of the kingdom.”**

body, which had been hastily encased as the Sabbath approached. To their surprise, they found the stone had been rolled away from the sepulcher. Two men in “shining garments” stood before them and said: “Why seek ye the living among the dead? He is not here, but is risen: remember how he spake unto you when he was yet in Galilee, Saying, The Son of man must be delivered into the hands of sinful men, and be crucified, and the third day rise again” (Luke 24:4–7).

Why heavenly messengers at the tomb? Prior to the Savior’s resurrection, a few mortals had been raised from the dead, but no one had experienced the change from mortality to immortality, from corruption to incorruption. No one prior to the Savior had been raised in glory (see 1 Corinthians 15:42–43). Two witnesses from the other side of the veil provided the assurance that Jesus had been resurrected.

The final event occurs at Jesus’s ascension. Again, two men in white apparel assured the Galileans that “this same Jesus,





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*At the ascension of Jesus,  
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that Jesus would return.*

which is taken up from you into heaven, shall so come in like manner as ye have seen him go into heaven” (Acts 1:11).

These marvelous events associated with the Savior’s ministry and ascension required heavenly witnesses who left their testimonies written indelibly in the hearts of Church leaders who remained behind to carry on the work.

What is the lesson for us today as we enter a new Christmas season? Who will minister to those in need? Who are the angels that will prepare the way for His return? I have noticed that during the early stages of a dispensation, angelic ministers come from the other side of the veil, but as time elapses and the number of faithful members increases, more is expected of those in mortality. For example, when a new country is opened to the gospel, missionaries learn that many have been prepared in miraculous ways to receive the gospel, and miracles occur with some frequency to advance the work. Once a core of members is established, however, the Lord’s assistance

changes as He provides opportunities for the members to become the miracle workers.

Consequently, miracles during this Christmas season require our faith and works. As we sing the hymns of Christmas and speak of angels sent to earth to witness the Savior’s birth in the meridian of time, may we rise to the occasion and minister to those in need in our day. May we be reminded of our promises to “bear one another’s burdens, . . . to mourn with those that mourn; yea, and comfort those that stand in need of comfort, and to stand as witnesses of God at all times and in all things, and in all places . . . and be numbered with those of the first resurrection, that [we] may have eternal life” (Mosiah 18:8–9).

I bear witness that Christmas is a season for angels. As they ministered to the Savior and others in the “meridian of time,” may we, as angels of mercy, minister to other families and to those in need in the “fulness of times” so that the Lord’s work may move forward. ■