

Jesse Perkins
Friday, September 24, 2021
St. Michael and All Angels

Genesis 28:10-17
Revelation 12:7-12
John 1:47-51

“Entertaining Angels unaware”

- As many of you know, Katy and I unexpectedly found ourselves driving to Arkansas last weekend
 - I regret having to leave you in the lurch like that, but I appreciate Deacon Tim and Kay Lewis, and everyone who covered so well
 - We laid to rest her maternal grandmother, who had been a huge part of Katy’s childhood
 - And then later a huge part of our life as a newly married couple life
 - She will definitely be missed, and I know that the Great Cloud of witnesses mentioned in Acts is a little bigger today
 - While we were there, we stayed at Katy’s parents’ house, her childhood home
 - And I happened to notice again a print that has hung there since, I don't know, she was a kid? For as long as I remember anyway
 - But I noticed it again, and somehow it touched me in a new way, you know?
 - This print on the wall, maybe 8x10 or smaller, is of these two small children, one lower elementary age, and one maybe not even 5 yet
 - These two young and scared looking children are crossing over a chasm by walking on rope bridge
 - And it looks rickety, like it might fall, or one of the wooden planks might give way and send one or both falling to their doom
 - The looks on their faces is fear, and yet determination to cross
 - But what brings this story into our sermon today is that behind them, and occupying what is the most space on the print,
 - Is a beautiful, white angel with flowing robes great wings, and she is hovering right by them arms spread out as if to help them cross
 - Or even catch them should one fall.
 - As artwork goes, the print has dark and subdued colors all around,
 - But in the center there is that white, glowing angel, somehow shimmering on the page

- Their guardian angel.
- Today we celebrate St. Michael and All Angels, our parish's namesake, and my priesthood ordination anniversary
- So perhaps we can talk a little about these angels in Scripture and history
- And maybe even take a little nugget home for us today as believers gathering in St. Michael's Church
- Before coming to St. Michael's, I had never preached a sermon on Angels before
 - I avoided it, to be honest, and before I was at St. Mark's, so it's a lot easier to preach on a disciple and Gospel
 - And angels are hard. Because we have so much lore and apocryphal stories around them that it is hard for me to cut through the noise
 - They are however, a prominent feature in our scriptures, both old and new
 - Initially, angels were simply "holy ones"¹
 - They could even be human beings, that when they were on a divine mission, they were dubbed "angels"
 - Later they took on a different understanding as heavenly beings.
 - They predate Christianity by a long shot- in fact, Michael, the archangel:
 - He was already known by name and a part of Jewish popular belief by the time Jesus was born²
 - And we have Hebrew Scripture full of stories- fantastic lessons of hospitality with angelic characters
 - Abraham welcoming strangers and feeding them
 - And it turns out they are angels sent from God, and Abraham was blessed
 - We have Sodom and Gomorrah, and the inverse of hospitality, where they were not received and treated with respect
 - And Sodom and Gomorra was destroyed for it
 - In the book of Hebrews it says:
 - "Do not forget to show hospitality to strangers, for by so doing some people have shown hospitality to angels without knowing it."
 - We have angels appearing to Mary telling her she will bear a son
 - And angels singing with joy to shepherd when Jesus is born

¹ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Angel>

² <http://justus.anglican.org/resources/bio/254.html>

- And most applicable to you and me today, we have St. Michael the Angel, leader of God's army of angels, fighting the dragon in Revelation
- And once and for all defeating evil, completing God's redemption and the salvation of creation, saving it even from itself
- As time went on, the dogma and doctrine around angels became more intricate, and there were nine orders, each with three traits,³
- And becoming the source of many apocryphal stories, and is the fuel for a lot of Hollywood imagination today
- Now with all of that, why is it that I have never preached on angels?
 - Well to be honest, when I think of angels, the skeptical part of my brain- and I have healthy skepticism gland
 - And anything that feels like superstition gets it over-excited and makes me uncomfortable
 - You may also have a healthy skepticism gland like me, and it may get in the way at times, do you?
 - And you may not suffer from that, and may have a great angelic presence in your everyday world view, and that's fine!
 - But the one thing I love about this church, about the Episcopal Church, is that we don't shy away from those differences, that diversity
 - We mentioned at Kickoff- we have 21st century brains and they are welcome in the pew also
 - We bring all of our selves: our skepticism, our rationality, AND our faith to the Sunday morning service
 - In fact, we believe that all of these are gifts from God
- Perhaps it would be helpful to us to come at this from a different angle, to ask what it is that angels do
 - We have already heard a few places in scripture where angels show up
 - And we have one in our Old Testament reading today, the story of Jacob's ladder
 - Then in our Gospel, Jesus references the same story, promising Nathaniel that he will see things just as amazing
 - In both instances, these Angels are bearing witness to God's presence
 - They point to God and God's work in the world
 - And they give us some reassurance, that even though the world feels huge and spinning out of control

³ <http://justus.anglican.org/resources/bio/254.html>

- And that we are small in the grand scheme of things, we matter to God, and we are never alone.
- God is at work in our lives even during times we cannot see it clearly.
- Fast forward a few hundred years, and we find angels in both Matthew and Luke's birth narratives
 - And once in Matthew, and twice in Luke, we hear the angels say, "Fear Not."
 - God is coming, and instead of coming to punish, God is coming to save
 - Then in our New Testament, the reading from Revelation, as we have mentioned before
 - Michael and God's forces stop evil, personified by a dragon, for good.
 - Providing hope that no matter how bad it seems, now matter how much evil seems to be everywhere and in control
 - It is God's love for creation that will ultimately overcome it
- So Angels:
 - Carrying out God's plan
 - Bearing witness to God's presence in the world
 - Reassuring us by proclaiming "fear not", it is salvation that is coming, not judgment
 - And fighting the good fight, working to overcome the powers of evil.
 - Now we are getting somewhere
 - I still may not have this whole thing about angels worked out, but I sure am fond of their mission
 - It actually starts to sound a whole lot like the mission we signed up for, our baptismal covenant
 - So what does it mean to be a church named after an angel?
 - Or a priest ordained on St. Michael and All Angels day?
 - Perhaps a good answer to those questions would be found in looking to these mysterious angels as examples
 - Because what else should we all be doing, than bearing witness to God's work, proclaiming God's salvation and redemptive work
 - And fighting against the evils that plague our world
- I may never be completely at ease with angels,
 - Or feel that I understand with certainty how they fit in with today's contemporary understanding of the universe
 - But perhaps that is also among their gifts to us today
 - They insist on bringing with them a certain element of mystery, preventing us from deciding that we understand it all

- That we fully understand how it is that God acts and interacts the world and with us
- And that is probably their biggest gift- a reminder that at the end of the day we cannot fully understand God's work in us and in this world
- We do not know why some things happen, or we do not see the coincidences lining up until much later
- Yet it is our job to live in the mystery
- To keep proclaiming God's love for us in a big, crazy broken world
- Even when we feel so small and insignificant- because to God we are not insignificant
- Maybe the world needs an angelic presence, a divine presence
- One that reminds us of God's work just behind the scene and just beyond our ability to understand completely.
- And that when our time here is up, there is something more yet to come that we do not fully understand
- We can even honor those people in our lives who have been angels, or "holy ones," bringing God's grace into our lives when we needed it.⁴
- And I hope that St. Michael's can live into its name
- Proclaim God's love, even when it's tempting to judge
- Proclaim God's presence, even when it's hard to see
- Proclaim hope, that God is not finished with the world, God has not given up
- And in the end, our hope is that God will triumph over evil, and over death.

Amen.

⁴ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Angel>