

Sermon for the Festival of St. Michael and All Angels

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We've got angels. Boy, do we. There are angels of the month, birthstone angels, dashboard charms that say, "Never drive faster than your guardian angel can fly." Bumper stickers that proclaim, "Angels on board." There are gardening angels, Mother's Day angels, Hallmark angels holding everything from Thanksgiving turkeys to St. Patrick's Day shamrocks.

Fat blonde babies with wings cavort on every possible item. Chubby cherubs, swathed in Victorian chintz drapery, halos charmingly askew, look more like spun-sugar dumplings than anything that would cry, "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God, the Almighty!" Greeting cards, wallpaper, candy bars, movies like "Angels in America"—feathered wings joined with human fallibilities are just everywhere these days!

But then there's this:

*Rank on rank the host of heaven spreads its vanguard on the way
As the Lord of light descending from the realms of endless day
Comes, the pow'rs of hell to vanquish
As the darkness clears away.*

Set them side by side, the post-modern depiction of angels as a pleasant remnant of myth, made in our image, bent to our will, filling desire for spirituality and a crass marketing niche all at once — and then the Scriptural image of the vanguard of the army of heaven, the praises of God in their throats and a two-edged sword in their hands, a choir in battle formation, with captains and princes, standards and banners arrayed around the throne of the Lord of Light.

Singers with shields, messengers, bringers of the divine Word, some appointed to ceaseless praise, some appointed to help us on earth: these are the angels of the Lord.

The cosmology of the ancient world is not ours—or so we think. We no longer see angels behind every physical force of nature, every unexplained scientific phenomenon. Except for the Left Behind crowd and the devotees of Frank Peretti and those who tend to see the world in terms of Star Wars, anyway—most Christians, and certainly most Lutherans, don't describe our reality with reference to a cosmic battleground between the evenly-matched forces of good and evil. We already know what battle standard the Host of heaven carries, what device is blazoned on every shield and breastplate, in what sign they conquer.

Whether our modern sensibilities accept it or not, the holy angels are not incidental to, or independent from, the salvation and the power and the kingdom of our God and the authority of his Christ. In the might of the Messiah and under the banner of the cross, the host of heaven continues

to do God's will and bring his Word despite the death throes of the dragon. The war is over, Satan is finished. Cast down. But still he fights on, mortally wounded, utterly defeated. His time is short.

And that's where we live. In the now and the not yet. Satan defeated but not yet destroyed. In the time where Paul can claim that our struggle is not against blood and flesh but against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places. Where the reality is that Satan accuses our brothers—and us—day and night, and assails the church of Christ at every opportunity. We can smell the dragon's scaly stink in our denominations and parishes, in our seminaries and colleges—and in the kitchens of our parsonages. The devil dogs us through the holy work God has set our hands to, sin deadens our testimony and witness, unbelief is rampant, apostasy common.

*Though with a scornful wonder / the world sees her oppressed;
By schisms rent asunder / by heresies distressed,
Yet saints their watch are keeping / Their cry goes up, "How long?"
And soon the night of weeping / Shall be the morn of song.*

How long, O Lord? How long will our cry mingle with that of the saints and angels? Many of you come here year after year, wounded and angry and sick in body and spirit, dried up like a potsherd, shrunken like a leather flask hung in the smoke, weary of putting your hand to the plowshare, desperate to look back. Some of you are tired of taking up the cross, sick to death of the command to *follow*, exhausted by always being last with no glimmer of first in sight, suspicious that "servant of all" entails a lot more dying than you first thought. Other of you come to weep over the Church and our Lutheran communions, and to rejoice for a brief time with brothers and sisters with whom you do not have to measure your words so carefully. For all of you there is this word: in the middle of the scornful wonder of the world and the laments of saints and angels joined with our night of weeping, a single loud voice sounds forth. Michael, the great prince, whose name is all we need to know: WHO IS LIKE GOD.

Who is like God? Not you. Not me. Not even the Holy Angels, whose archangel names have the murmur of distant, ceaseless prayer: *God is my strength. God is my healer. Who is like God?* It is the Lamb alone who conquers, gives strength, brings healing. Sustains the weary with a word. Jesus only.

And who will bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. Who is to condemn? It is Christ Jesus who died, yes, who was raised who is at the right hand of God who intercedes for us. He did not count equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself and was obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. Christ Jesus did not cling to life even in the face of death, giving his back to those who struck him, his cheeks to those who pulled out the beard, and his life as the high priestly sacrifice for sin. Your names are found written in his blood in the book of life.

And that is your starting point. Your only foundation. That you have been bought with a price, redeemed from hell, and the one who has begun a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ. It is God's vineyard to tend, God's responsibility. Any authority you have been given, just like that of the angels, is only given by the Lord God. Any triumph over the power of the enemy is through the blood of the Lamb alone.

You are promised that nothing will hurt you. This could also be translated "in nothing will he hurt you." Clearly, you and I can be wounded, downtrodden, despairing. Clearly we bear in our own bodies the effects of sin. Our whole ministry is marked by dying and failing. But God through the cross has defeated the eternal power of the unholy trinity: sin, death and the power of the devil. God continues to guard and protect you, not through the sentimentalized and demythologized angelic spirits, reduced to inane caregivers cast in ceramic—but through the muscular and vivifying power of the cross—the incongruity of life come from death, the slain Lamb victorious, God's power given form in the heavenly host of angels. He shall give his angels charge over you, to keep you in all your ways. All *his* ways. He forgives all your sins and heals all your infirmities, and causes you to stand, upheld by his righteous, omnipotent hand.

With such strength, even though you are weak, with the knowledge that your angels are always before the face of the Father in heaven, and are given to you for help on earth, you go out of here and back to the tasks at hand, back to the feeding of the flock entrusted to you, back to the struggle against the short-timer Satan, secure, if not settled, in the trust that Jesus is Lord.

And at the last, one more angel there will be for you. Not with sword or shield or choir book—but with the simple white robe of resurrection and the trumpet and the archangel's voice that will call you out of sleep in the dust of the earth for God to redeem your life from the grave, crowning you with mercy and lovingkindness and making you to shine like the brightness of the stars forever. And then, what was proclaimed from the beginning will be at last completely fulfilled: "Now have come the salvation and the power and the kingdom of our God and the authority of his Messiah." And then, we will sing. What else is there left for us but singing?

*Weeping, be gone, sorrow be silent,
Death put asunder and Easter is bright.
Cherubim sing, "O grave, be open!"
Clothe us in wonder, adorn us in light.
Jesus is risen and we shall arise, give God the glory! Alleluia!*

*City of God, Easter forever
Golden Jerusalem, Jesus the Lamb.
River of Life, saints and archangels
Sing with creation to God the I AM.
Jesus is risen and we shall arise, give God the glory! Alleluia!*

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