

St. Michael and All Angels, 2024

We're taking a break (perhaps needed) from Jesus's journey from his transfiguration to Jerusalem, from his teaching about self-denial, the cross, and the narrow way of being a disciple. Today, we're reflecting on those created intelligences whom God has arrayed in a wonderful order, as we prayed today, those beings who are higher than us, but are still creatures. We're going to talk about angels.

An Empty Universe

C.S. Lewis has famously written the following about fallen angels: "There are two equal and opposite errors into which our race can fall about the devils. One is to disbelieve in their existence. The other is to believe, and to feel an excessive and unhealthy interest in them." I'm not sure the same thing can be said about the good angels. I think that, apart from the six-inch section in the New Age bookstore, are not thought of at all. Believers, unbelievers, devout, secular, whatever it doesn't seem to make much difference. Angels are not part of our everyday thought-lives. They are not part of the world we imagine while we're busy doing other things.

It was not always so. Martin Luther, for example lived in a very crowded spiritual universe—remember the stanza from his hymn, "And though this world, with devils filled, should threaten to undo us, we will not fear, for God has willed his truth to triumph through us." His world was packed full of devils and angels, tempting and inspiring, inflicting and rescuing, confusing and clarifying. Angels, good and bad, were simply the means through which God governed Luther's world. Add to that all the saints, it's a wonder he wasn't forever bumping into some spiritual reality or another.

Our world, on the other hand, well, it's pretty empty. Let's just talk about ourselves—believers. Disciples of Jesus. We don't routinely think of ourselves as part of a community that crosses time and space and, crucially, death. Heaven, if it means anything, means at least a separation from us. Our beloved dead are no longer part of our lives. How much more the angels! We trot Gabriel out at Christmas, but really, how often do we think about him outside that? Or St. Michael? Or the Commander of the Armies of the Lord who spoke to Joshua? We (hopefully) think about God, pray to God, love God. We pray to the persons of the Blessed Trinity. Do we, when we run into a crisis, ever give even the slightest thought to those spiritual beings through whom God has promised to answer our prayers? If Luther's besetting question was "where can I go without bumping into an angel (whether good or bad)?" Ours seems to be "where did everybody go?"

Angels in the Bible

If it is the case (and I think it is) that in Luther's day, people were too preoccupied with the angelic realm, it is also true that in our own day, we suffer from the opposite problem. We don't think about angels at all. And yet, when we turn to the Scriptures, they are major supporting characters. No less a source that God tells us that the angels sang in praise and shouted for joy when God created the material universe (Job 38:7) They were there in the beginning. Likewise, Jesus tells us that on the last day, God will send his angels to gather his saints (Mark 13:27). They will be there at the end. And, according to the Gospel of Luke, they were right there at the climax of the story. Gabriel steps off the pages of the book of Daniel to bring an announcement to a priest: you will bear a son. And six months later, there he is again bringing a similar message to a virgin: you will

bear a Son. And nine months after that, an entire army of angels sings Glory to God in the highest and peace to his people on earth! A song in which we participate every Sunday. Angels may not be the main characters of the Gospel story, but they are there, and they are important.

What Do Angels Do?

Ok. So angels are in the Bible. What do they do in the Bible? Well, as we've already seen, their main task is to praise God. But in addition to that they occupy the space (that's a metaphor) between us and God. They serve if you want as God's go-betweens. That's what their name means—angels are *messengers*. They are inbetweeners, if you want.

As inbetweeners, they watch over children and adults. They bring messages from God to people. At the end of our lives, they carry us into God's presence. They are spiritual midwives if you want. Angels fight for us! That's one worth camping on for a little while. This is a reality that is taken for granted from the earliest days of Christian faith up to today, at least outside the late modern secular West: human beings are engaged in a battle on which hangs our eternal destiny. We glimpse that battle in the Bible especially in Jesus's miracles of exorcism. Here comes our Champion, rescuing us from our enslavement to his enemy. Likewise, St Paul says that our fight is not against flesh and blood but against principalities and powers and spiritual wickedness in high places. In both the Old Testament book of Daniel and in the book of Revelation, we get to see the veil pulled back on that reality. And we find good angels militantly opposing the work of evil ones. They fight for us.

So, the interesting question for Christians ought not to be "where did everybody go?" but "Why did God order his world in such a way that he administers his Providence through these created intelligences we call angels?" If God could govern the world directly (and God can) why does he do it in this mediated way? And the answer, if I understand the Scriptures correctly, is simply, God likes to share. He shares his administration through the angels and—wait for this, this is really cool!—he shares his reign with US!

Angels Serve Us

And that means God intends for angels to serve us! We'll sing about that later today when we sing these words: "O higher than the cherubim, more glorious than the seraphim, lead their praises, Alleluia! Thou bearer of th' eternal Word, most gracious, magnify the Lord." So, someone in heaven is already ahead of the angels. Do you know who it is? The hymn tells you: the bearer of the eternal word, she who is most gracious, who in the scriptures starts her song with "my soul doth magnify the Lord!" Mary already ranks ahead of the angels. And her Son does not will that she be alone. She rather already shares in what will one day be ours: God's reign over all creation including the angelic hosts. God's word, wrote Luther, will triumph through us. Believers will, says St. Paul, one day judge the angels. And even now, their work of service as already started. "Are they," asks the writer to the Hebrews, "not all ministering spirits sent out to serve for the sake of those who are to inherit salvation"?

St. Michael

Well, so much for "all angels." Now, how about the one after whom this day is named specifically. One St. Michael. St. Michael's name is a question. Were we to translate it directly from

Hebrew, it would be this: “Who is like God?” And that, it seems, is his job. His job is to keep that question front and center: Who is like God?

In a judgment on a human king, God’s prophet Isaiah seems to recall words uttered at the beginning of creation: “You said in your heart, ‘I will ascend to heaven; above the stars of God I will set my throne on high; I will sit on the mount of assembly in the far reaches of the north; 14 I will ascend above the heights of the clouds; I will make myself like the Most High.’” And right there is St. Michael asking, “Who is like God?” Do you remember the words of the tempter? “When you eat of the fruit of the tree, your eyes will be opened and You. Will. Be. Like. God?” And right there is St. Michael asking the sadly ignored question, “Who is like God?” How about in the wilderness when the tempter came to our Lord and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and said, “To you I will give all this authority and their glory, for it has been delivered to me, and I give it to whom I will. 7 If you, then, will worship me, it will all be yours.” Doubtless one of the angels who attended the Lord Jesus was St. Michael, again in his being asking the question, “Who is like God?”

There is an implied answer. “You, Satan, are not.” And so we remember St. Michael as the archfoe of that other angel, the author of our misfortune, who masquerades as an angel of light, but is in reality a lion prowling in search of souls to bring to ruin. St. Michael fights for the people of God (Daniel 10 and Revelation 12). And he does so not with a sword and shield or an AR 15. He does so simply by being St. Michael. By being a living spiritual reminder that there is no one like God.

Could God defeat the devil directly? Certainly. Indeed, the Lord Jesus has done so fully and finally on the cross. But until the day that that victory is finally revealed for all to see and celebrate, God has ordained in his wonderful angelic order, that St. Michael should fight to restrain the Evil One, simply by reminding him that he cannot and will never be God.

Rejoice!

So, what are we to do with all this? In short, reflecting on angels is not really about angels. It is about God and God’s world and the means by and through which God lovingly cares for his world. Reflecting on angels, in other words, when it is done properly, when it is done biblically, should lead us to the glory of God.

And it should lead us to rejoice. So, on this Feast of St. Michael and all Angels, let us rejoice that God has filled his world with angels who praise him continually, who behold his face, and who serve him by serving us. Let us rejoice at their behind the scenes work in our lives, as they watch over us, as they speak God’s word to our hearts and consciences. Let us rejoice that one day, they will carry all who repent and believe into God’s gracious presence. Let us rejoice that the angels join with us in the fight against the powers of darkness until the day of their final defeat. Let us rejoice that, after all this reflection, we led by our angelic friends to ask with St. Michael, “Who is like God?” and so be armed against the tricks of the Evil One.

Let us rejoice when the veil between the seen and the unseen thins, and we catch a glimpse of some of this work on our behalf with our own material eyes. I have a story about that! You should ask me some time.

And more than any of those parts of the wonderful angelic order God has made and oversees, rejoice that your names are written in heaven and that as a result you can join in the

unending hymn sung by angels and archangels: “Holy Holy Holy Lord, God of power and might, heaven and earth are full of your glory! Hosanna in the highest.” And not only that hymn, but also in a hymn that no angel will ever be able to sing: “Amazing grace. How sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me.”