

SERMON 884

Saint Michael and All Angels

September 28, 2014

16th Week after Pentecost

965th Week as Priest

792nd Week at St Dunstan's

57th Week at Epiphany-Tallassee

A FEARFUL THING

Grace to you, and peace, from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. AMEN.

I used to teach an intergenerational Sunday School class at my first cure of souls, St. Michael's in Fayette. On this, our patron saint's day, I asked the children to describe an angel—and I would draw it.

“She has a white nightgown!” said JoLee. I drew a nightgown.

“And long flowing golden hair!” shouted Emily. I made long golden hair.

“And wings!” said Margaret, delightfully. And delightfully, I drew wings.

“And a halo!” shouted Laurel. I drew the halo above the angel's head.

The little girls were quiet for a moment, and then Mary Catherine said, “A stick.”

“What?” I asked. “A stick?”

“To hold her halo up!” she said. And everybody laughed.

But I’m afraid that angels are no laughing matter. And they’re not collectibles, like frogs and thimbles and shot glasses and spoons. No, angels are quite a fearful thing.

The Old Testament

Angels appear many times in the Old Testament—in Genesis, an angel promised Hagar that her son Ishmael would become a great nation; two angels visiting Lot were threatened with rape by the men of Sodom and Gomorrah; and countless angels climbed Jacob’s ladder.

In Exodus, it was an angel who went before the pillar of cloud and the pillar of fire and guided the people of Israel to the Promised Land. An angel appeared often to Gideon in his quest to conquer the Canaanites.

Throughout the Hebrew Scriptures, angels would appear first as men, and only later make themselves known as angels of the Lord. And at key moments, they would be replaced by the Lord himself. It happened to Jacob wrestling at the River Jabbok. King David consulted angels, messengers of the Lord. Samuel and Elijah, the prophets, knew angels sent from God.

Angels are known as messengers, but they are also mighty warriors from time to time. An angel of the LORD struck down the Assyrian army, all 185,000 soldiers.

The Psalmist knew angels as the providers of manna: “Mortals ate of the bread of angels; he sent them food in abundance.” But angels could also be God’s agents of destruction, or God’s guides for his people: “For he will command his angels concerning you to guard you in all your ways.”

It was angels who protected Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego when they were thrown into the furnace of fire by King Nebuchadnezzar, and an angel who kept Daniel safe in the Lion’s Den.

The New Testament

Angels were active and essential in the Christian Testament from the very beginning. An angel appeared to Joseph in a dream and told him, “do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit.”

He returned twice—to warn Joseph to flee with his family to Egypt from Herod’s wrath, and to return to Galilee after the tyrant’s death.

Satan, himself a fallen angel, used scripture references to angels in his temptations of Christ in the wilderness: “If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down; for it is written, ‘He will command his angels concerning you,’ and ‘On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.’” And when the Evil One left our Lord, the angels came and waited on him.

Many of the warnings of Jesus include key references to the actions of angels in our natural world ...

The Son of Man will send his angels, and they will collect out of his kingdom all causes of sin and all evildoers.

So it will be at the end of the age. The angels will come out and separate the evil from the righteous.

The Son of Man is to come with his angels in the glory of his Father.

And the angels of God are there at the Resurrection ...

And suddenly there was a great earthquake; for an angel of the Lord, descending from heaven, came and rolled back the stone and sat on it.

But the angel said to the women, “Do not be afraid; I know that you are looking for Jesus who was crucified.”

Stories of angels continue into the Acts of the Apostles. An angel told Philip to baptize the Ethiopian eunuch. An angel spoke to Cornelius the Centurion. Another angel freed Peter and his companions from prison. On and on and on, angels appear and reappear, conveying messages from God on high, warning the people of danger, and delivering them out of trouble.

And now that I think about it, angels are always, *always*, telling people, “Do not be afraid.” The shepherds watching over their flocks by night. The father of John the Baptist. The Virgin Mary. The women at the empty tomb. The disciples in the Upper Room. The apostles on the Day of Pentecost.

Why would this be? Well, I think that the answer lies in part in the confusion surrounding appearances of angels. Time after time, they appear suddenly and scare the dickens out of people. They are like shape-shifters—first men, then angels, then God himself. They are carrying messages directly from God. And oftentimes, the messages are difficult and demanding. You never know when and where an angel is going to appear; and when they do, you’re never ready.

In the Letter to the Hebrews, the writer says, “It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.” This, I think, is a key to unlocking the mystery of angels.

Angels are not little cherubs floating on clouds and strumming tiny harps. Angels are not Victoria’s Secret models wearing white wings and little more. No, angels are God’s warriors, God’s messengers, God’s representatives. They are powerful and other-worldly. They’re not like you and me, and no, we are not going to become angels when we get to heaven. We would do well to remember that it is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of angels, much less the living God.

But angels are never the object of our worship. They demand our attention and command our fear. They compel us to act and step in to protect us. But they are not gods. We must always remember that the Evil One is a fallen angel, not an evil god. He is not all-powerful, and as Luther said, “One little word will fell him.” That word, above all in heaven and on earth and under the earth is the Name of Jesus. And on him, we depend for our very lives. **AMEN.**

1,136 words

