

“St. Michael and All Angels”
(Matthew 18:1-11 & Topical)
Pastor Espinosa

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen. I love our liturgical structure and the Church Year. Speaking from the standpoint of our tradition, Lutheran pastors are not encouraged to be *creative* in choosing their own texts or creating their own sermon series' topics. Rather, we have a church year and liturgical structure which inherently serves the goal to preach the full-counsel of God. This full-counsel of God's Word includes the lesser and special feasts like today's special day St. Michael and All Angels. This is not an incidental thing. God chose to fill His Holy Word with the revelation of angels...they're important and they serve what is most important: knowing Christ and His salvation (more on this in just a minute).

In Lockyer's book *All the Angels in the Bible* he helps us to avoid two extremes when it comes to the study of angels or angelology: one grave danger is on the side of our giving the holy angels *too much* attention, esp. when it comes in the form of the terrible sin of the worship of and prayers to angels. Saint Paul in Colossians warns against false teachers who insist on the worship of angels (2:18). When St. John in the book of Revelation received the amazing vision and heard the Lord speak of His imminent coming, John fell down to worship at the feet of the angel showing him the vision. The holy angel immediately objected: ***“You must not do that! I am a fellow servant with you and your brothers the prophets, and with those who keep the words of this book. Worship God (Revelation 22:8-9).”***

On the other hand and the second grave danger is when we do not give *enough* attention to angels. Listen to this depressing and faithless attitude which Lockyer presents as a warning to us: *“We owe [the angels], it is said [by some], no duty or homage of worship; and as they are invisible things...we can never describe [them] with any certainty...We have, therefore, no interest in this matter (Lockyer, x).”* But simply put: to neglect the teaching of the angels is to neglect the Word of God itself. The Lord willed that we know about the angels and that we glorify the Lord and give Him thanks and praise for them! Their importance is inestimable.

In our Gospel text this morning from Matthew 18, the main focus is on the “little ones.” And while the Lord brings forth an actual child (v 2), he is teaching us that the little ones are God's children who emulate the way of a real child who is dependent on and who trusts in a superior; that is they live in humility (*The Lutheran Study Bible*, 1621). You are the little ones Christians. God is your Father and He loves you as His child. You humble yourselves as you trust in God and depend on Him through Christ! Now what does this have to do with angels?

Towards the end of this same Gospel today we hear these words: *“See that you do not despise one of these little ones. For I tell you that in heaven their angels always see the face of my Father who is in heaven (v 10).”* Complementary to this is Luke 15:7 on the great joy in heaven over the sinner who is constantly living in repentance. The angels are associated with the relationship between humble servants and being in the very presence of God, because to truly worship God and to know God is to know His grace for sinners. The angels witness the God of grace who receives you as His child! As a result, the angels are supreme examples of how to live: to seek God’s presence, to behold His salvation, and to live humbly as servants of the Lord.

Yes, even the mighty angels – just one of them being more powerful than a human army (2 Kings 19:35) – (these angels) humble themselves before the Almighty God from whom they derive all of their power and glory. They know that they too like you and me are totally dependent on the Lord and it is their delight and purpose to serve God. And in their surging power, they know and practice humility (it is the right way to live). In Isaiah 6:2 the mighty seraphim (whose titles mean “burning ones” or “fiery ones”), these great angels have six wings. In Isaiah 6, however, when they come before the Lord to cry out, ***“Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory (6:3),”*** **two of their wings are used to cover their feet, and two of their wings are used to cover their faces (v 2).** The picture is stunning and magnificent. These powerful, powerful servants of God that would send any of one of us to the ground trembling with fear yet cover themselves in deepest reverence and humility before the Lord! Oh, to be like the angels!



Again, oh, to be like the angels! And yet in our sin – we who are lower (Psalm 8:5) in stature and power – are so proud. Instead of covering ourselves in humility, our sin leads us not

to be considerate of standing before the Lord in proper covering. Our sin, however, leads us to be reckless and to use even the meager powers the Lord has permitted us not in service to the Lord and not in His worship (as the angels do), but to serve ourselves; not to reverence the Lord, but to seek honor for ourselves; not to cover ourselves in humility, but to clothe ourselves in pride. And while angels cover their feet and their faces, our feet rush to sin and our faces – in accord with our sinful flesh – are covered with shame. But thanks be to God, the angels bring glad tidings to us just as the poor shepherds received on Christmas Eve: ***“For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord (Luke 2:11).”***

The word “angel” – whether presented in the Hebrew *mal’akh* or the Greek *angelos* – means “messenger.” This word is about their office and tells us about they *do* (Lockyer, 3). And even in their vast and exciting ranks and hierarchy which includes the Seraphim, Cherubim, Thrones, Dominations, Principalities, Powers, Virtues, Archangels, and Angels, what they “message” more than anything is Jesus.

I had the good fortune of traveling to Greece in 2007. I was introduced to the fantastic orthodox Christian tradition and their love for iconography. One of the most powerful depictions of angels are the icons of Michael and Gabriel. Here is an example of such icons (again of Michael whose name means “who is like unto God” and Gabriel whose name means “the strength of God”):



The icons, however, are not truly Christian icons if they do not *emphasize* Christ our Lord Himself, so here is an example of one of the most celebrated themes in orthodox iconography: the resurrection of the Lord and here the Risen Lord is raising up Adam and Eve from the grave! My icon of this image has Michael and Gabriel flanking the Risen Christ; their

presence glorifies the Savior and reminds us that they are servants of Jesus...just like you and me.



But let me take a moment to share with you how the angels depict God's grace to you:

1. First of all, these powerful servants are sent to serve *you*!

Hebrews 1:13: ***“Are they not all ministering spirits sent out to serve for the sake of those who are to inherit salvation?”***

Between this Scripture and the Matthew 18:10 Scripture on the angels of “little ones” (Christians like you), the concept of “guardian angel” is actually legitimized. God sends them to serve and protect you. Imagine that: a servant of God more powerful than a human army is sent from God to serve you. I don't know – maybe I was just extremely lucky; maybe the ground that day at Fort Monmouth, New Jersey was just extra soft – but when during my obstacle training course at the U.S. Army chaplain school I fell from a 30 foot wall after my boot got stuck in a cargo net...I thought (and the eyes of the drill sergeant watching me fall “said”) that I was in deep, deep trouble. I thought I was going to die. What happened next is to this day inexplicable to my mind. I felt as though I had landed on a bed and to this day I can't explain how I didn't even suffer a bruise. What happened to me? I have no idea. But I'll tell you this: if the Lord informs me one day that He sent an angel to help me at the bottom of that wall...I won't be surprised. I just won't.

2. But Scripture says even more than the fact that they are sent to serve us. They are sent to *strengthen* us:

Take the example of Daniel:

Daniel 10:10 & 18-19: ***“And behold, a hand touched me and set me trembling on my hands and knees...[and] one having the appearance of a man touched me and strengthened me. And he said, ‘O man greatly loved, fear not, peace be with you; be strong and of good courage.’”***

Take the example of our Lord in the humility of human flesh after His temptation in the wilderness:

Matthew 4:11: ***“Then the devil left him, and behold, angels came and were ministering to him.”***

The ancient church father Chromatius wrote, *“Great is the grace of the angels toward all who believe in Christ...the angels carry their prayers to heaven...Around [Christians] there is also the strong guard of the angels; they help each of us to be free from the traps of the enemy. For a human in his weakness could not be safe amid so many forceful attacks of that enemy if he were not strengthened by the help of the angels (Simonetti, ed., Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture, New Testament 1b, Matthew 14-28, 74).”*

And yet their help to us is simply the gift of Christ who is our salvation...and as Jesus saved you through His cross and resurrection, He has angels directly involved. So I conclude with my favorite biblical scene of Christ working through His angels. Our Lord is so mighty and all-sufficient to save you and to help you that when it was time to bind Satan after our Lord defeated Him on the cross where the blood of God was poured out to cover your sins, Jesus also worked through His angels:

3. Michael, the Lord’s archangel, also served us as part of Christ’s victory for your eternal life:

Revelation 12:7-8a: ***“Now war arose in heaven, Michael and his angels fighting against the dragon. And the dragon and his angels fought back, but he was defeated...”***

Revelation 20:1-2: ***“Then I saw an angel coming down from heaven, holding in his hand the key to the bottomless pit and a great chain. And he seized the dragon, that ancient serpent, who is the devil and Satan, and bound him...”***



It is possible that this particular “angel” in this text is Jesus Himself, or an angel acting on the Lord’s behalf (which would be consistent with the text from Revelation 12). But all of this simply points us back to the victory of Jesus for you: sin, and death, and the devil no longer have mastery over you...the Word of God and the Holy Angels say so...they too testify to our salvation in Jesus Christ! This victory is your victory and we thank God for the angels! Now come to the feast and receive the body and blood of Jesus for the forgiveness of sins. As you do, the angels will do their appointed work from the Lord to serve you, to strengthen you, and to “put in place (Galatians 3:19)” the clear proclamation of the promise of the Gospel for you (a great mystery)...so again, thank God for the angels, but let us also imitate them: worship *Christ!*