

St. Michael and All Angels, Sept. 2024

5 years ago, around this time, Phil and I traveled to Paris on vacation, where our very first significant sighting was angelic. We had just flown in, so it felt like the middle of the night to us, but it was morning in Paris. We began a historic walking tour of the old part of Paris, as directed by Rick Steve's travel guide. We were stunned and exhausted, but Paris still worked its magic. All was charming, quaint, historic, and elegant; bright flowers hung over iron trellis in full bloom; and then in a little public square we came almost immediately upon some grand monument involving marble pillars, water spouting gargoyles and a magnificent figure of a bronze statue high within a stone arch-- and that figure was the arch angel St. Michael. The statuary grouping depicted St. Michael, magnificent, winged, and fierce, standing upon and subduing the dragon Lucifer---the very scene portrayed in our lesson today from Revelation. (That scene in greatly simplified form is on our bulletin cover this morning and was) This was a popular religious theme in art throughout much of European church history. In fact, in general, angels were everywhere in Europe, in statues, paintings, frescoes, in cathedrals and public squares, and so on. It was a powerful experience of the angelic for me. It reminds me of an experience I had in Leif Erikson Park along the Duluth Lakewalk a few years ago. While walking on a spring day, I happened to glance over towards the roadside of the garden, and there was an angel---the statue of the angel of hope, which I had never seen previously. Flowers surround the statue, and people often put flowers in the angel's outstretched hands as a sign of prayer or devotion to God. To suddenly be surprised by the sight of this angelic statue, which has a gravitas and empathy about it, was profoundly touching to me. People talking and laughing, cars driving by on the road above, and there, unexpectedly, the grace of God made visible in the angelic.

Providing a little more context for our worship and our understanding of the angelic today, St. Michael and All Angels is one of the lesser festivals or feast days of the Christian church year. The date for these feast days or lesser festivals is a set date on the calendar; when that date happens to fall on a Sunday, the festival is often observed, as we are doing this morning. This particular date was chosen to parallel another significant date already popularly observed, that of the autumnal equinox, which happened this past week. In Europe, this

day is called Michaelmas, meaning the mass said in honor of St. Michael---much as Christmas, is originally the mass said in honor of Christ. Michaelmas meant the beginning of autumn in ancient Christianity and was associated with harvest themes and feasting. If you were to properly observe Michaelmas, you might have planned a British themed harvest meal for today: roast goose with apples; a fried scone like bread with barley, oat and rye flour called St. Michael's bannock; and you would gather bouquets of purple asters, an autumn flower, to put on the table. Sounds fun, doesn't it?

But, we American Lutherans in the 21<sup>st</sup> century do not have such traditions associated with this day; in fact, we may not even be sure what to make of a day dedicated to angels or how we feel about the very existence of angels, perhaps. Some of our skepticism may be due to the way our culture has taken over the angelic realm, so that the average person pictures angels as cute little blond cherubs, dressed in white, with halos over their heads, a harp in their hands, and a sweet smile on their chubby faces. Further, many people reckon that when they die, they too will ascend to a place in the clouds, put on a pair of wings, and start strumming the harp strings. There's perhaps nothing wrong with any of this, but it's not *at all* reflective of the Biblical witness regarding angels. And the very sugary cuteness of the pop culture version of angels may cause some, who aren't that fond of sweets, to find the whole angelic realm just a bit too saccharine for their liking. Rest assured, however, that this is *not* the angelic realm which the Bible describes. This morning, in honor of this lesser festival, I'd like us to think a bit about angels in general, and then about St. Michael, the archangel honored on this day, in particular. So, let's proceed.

To begin with, angels are found throughout the Scriptures, both Old and New Testament. They aren't *only in* the New Testament--Christians did not discover angels, so to speak. Judaism in fact had a well-established body of traditions regarding angels, but the ancient Hebrews of the Old Testament didn't discover angels *either*. Angels are found in any number of religions and philosophies, including, but not limited to: Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Zoroastrianism, and numerous new age religions. Within the partially shared traditions of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam are sometimes grouped together as "People of the Book",

meaning that all three faiths share the Old Testament as part of their sacred scriptures. For People of the Book, the Scriptures suggest that angels were created prior to the creation of the world and that they are their own order of beings. They are spiritual in nature, sometimes invisible, sometimes embodied, powerful and wise. Scriptures describe them as beings which are intermediate between God and humanity. An actual somewhat elaborate angelic hierarchy is delineated in books of the Apocrypha and pseudepigrapha, which are books used by some Jews, some Catholics and some Orthodox Christians, though *not* by most Protestants like us. Jewish and pagan tradition from 200 BC-100 AD focused on this angelic hierarchy, as did some Medieval Christian tradition centuries later. It was believed that there were three hierarchies of angels which consisted of three choirs each. These hierarchies are a blend of *mostly* tradition outside of Scripture and *a little* Scriptural tradition; they are not accepted by all Christians. But, Scripturally, two angels *are* named within the standard Christian canon: They are Gabriel, who announces Christ's birth to Mary and Joseph; and Michael, the archangel and leader of the heavenly host. Furthermore, numerous references are made to both vast *choirs* and *hosts* of angels who are not named, in both the Old and New Testament, and by the way---choirs and hosts are two different things—*choirs* of angels being singers, and *hosts* of angels being armies. And while choirs of singing angels may fit neatly in our angelic preconceptions, the angelic armies may seem a little out of place. How do these little pink-cheeked cherubs we imagine make up an army?

Of course, in Scripture, angels don't look like little pink-cheeked cherubs, do they? And the wings and haloes and harps may vary, too. In Scripture, angels are sometimes described as dazzling white or shining with light, but no robes or haloes are specified. Sometimes wings are described, yet never just two wings per angel, but as many as six per angel. Multiple eyes are also mentioned. In fact, in the writings of the prophet Isaiah, a man living in Judah in the 8<sup>th</sup> C. BC, this vision of angels is recorded: "I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lofty; and the hem of his robe filled the temple. Seraphs were in attendance above him; each had *six* wings; with two they covered their faces, and with two they covered their feet, and with two they flew." That's not quite the picture of angels we have in our minds from Christmas card pictures, is it?

The other thing is, even if we understood what angels look like, they often appear in differing forms. In some biblical accounts, angels appear incognito as humans. They are sometimes described as strangers passing by, or as young men. Sometimes those who have dealings with these strangers, don't realize until later that these surprise unknown visitors were angels. We might have thought their harps would be a give away, but while there are two references to angels with harps in Scripture, there are plenty of other references of angels *without* harps. In fact, what *is* it angels are portrayed as doing, if they're *not* always playing harps?

Our Scriptural tradition teaches that angels have work to do, tasks on behalf of God. Primarily they work in four ways:

1. Messengers from God—angels are described as bringing news from God to humanity. We could most easily think of the angels bringing the news of Christ's birth to the shepherds.
2. Helpers—angels are sometimes seen bringing comfort, aid, or strength to a person in need. We might think of the angels who provide food for the prophet Elijah in the Old Testament or wait on Christ after the 40 days of temptation in the wilderness.
3. Warriors-angels are portrayed as warriors in a cosmic battle between good and evil. Our text from Revelation features this portrayal, as did the monument in Paris I mentioned, and we'll delve a little more deeply into that in a moment, when we specifically consider St. Michael.
4. Worshippers-angels are said to be worshipping and praising God in heaven. Many of the psalms, including today's Psalm 103, as well as texts out of Revelation describe a worshipping throng of angels.

Angels, then, have more to do than simply play the harp, it would seem. And certainly Michael, the archangel we remember this morning, is never pictured with a harp. I did a google images search on Michael, and I can assure you that in none of the images---and there are images out of the Jewish, Christian, and Islamic traditions for Michael, because all three faiths commemorate Him; in none of these images does Michael hold a harp. He doesn't even look particularly musical in any of them. Because Michael is a warrior. He is almost

invariably shown with a shield in one hand and a sword in the other. In Christian art, the shield is decorated with the cross. In all the images, the sword is substantial and sharp, and Michael is ready to do battle. He is referenced by name four times in the Bible: twice in the book of Daniel, once in the letter of Jude; and here in Revelation 12. Sometimes the very scene described in our lesson from Revelation is pictured: Michael's sword is held victoriously over Satan and those angels that rebelled with Satan against God, as in the Parisian statue I described. Michael is associated with two qualities within our tradition: that of healing and that of protection and defense. In particular, Michael is pictured as the protector of the church.

Michael, then, like the rest of the angelic realm, asks us to think outside the box when it comes to how we view the world, particularly the larger cosmos. Typically, we are caught up in our usual daily activities and affairs...we are not generally aware of a universe alive with the wonder and energy of heavenly beings or of a battle between good and evil being waged in yet some other realm than the one we see. Rarely do we think of angels-- swift, fierce, beautiful-- as yet another way that God's love and grace are made real in the universe and our world. It may be difficult for us to stretch our minds around this cosmic realm, and yet think about it for a moment....isn't a universe *without* angels a sadder, lonelier, and duller universe than with angels? Angels are not only attested to in Scripture in general; *Jesus* specifically both has angelic experiences and speaks of angels. He even suggests that guardian angels watch over little ones in this world. Angels are perhaps part of the mysterious and hidden soul of the universe, a part of God's created order that protect and defend us, help us, and deliver messages to us, even as we are mostly unaware of their existence. In a world that can seem perplexing and perilous, I am grateful to know of angelic orders that work, behind the scenes, to protect, defend, help, and guide us. They become yet one more way that the powerful love of God is poured out upon our world and us. And to the extent that we are aware of them, we recognize that we have fierce and powerful allies in the battle that is waged between good and evil in this world; we are not alone.

As we stretch our thinking and our understandings of the cosmos this morning, I like to think of these words written by theologian Frederich Beuchner about angels. He writes: "Angels are powerful spirits whom

God sends into the world to wish us well. Since we don't expect to see them, we don't. An angel spreads his glittering wings over us, and we say things like, "It was one of those days that made you feel good just to be alive" or "I had a hunch everything was going to turn out all right" or "I don't know where I ever found the courage."

So, perhaps in ways we don't always understand or fathom, angels are present in our lives. Those times when we were helped by a surprise stranger or found strength we didn't know we possessed, may in fact have been times when angels entered our lives in some ways, but we were not aware. Those moments when the sheer goodness of living resonates deep within us may reflect the brush of an angel's wing, but we are not aware. But, maybe today at least, we *are* aware, and maybe that awareness makes us more sensitive to this cosmic dimension of reality beyond that which we usually see. . It's mind-stretching, but sometimes it's *good* for us to have our minds stretched. God has a way of doing that. Maybe that awareness of this cosmic realm makes us grateful, too---grateful that God looks to protect, guide, defend, and bless us through so *many* ways and means, including the angelic orders. Grateful that we recognize yet another way that the love and protective might of God are expressed in our world. Amen.