

Sermon for the Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost (St. Michael & All Angels)

September 27, 2009

Delivered by the Rev. Margaret Bullitt-Jonas

Grace Church, Amherst, MA

Genesis 28:10-17

Revelation 12:7-12

Psalms 103

John 1:47-51

A Place for the Singing of Angels

The Lord has set his throne in heaven, and his kingship has dominion over all. Bless the Lord, you angels of his, you mighty ones who do his bidding, and hearken to the voice of his word. Psalm 103:19-20

It may be raining, but today is a day for celebration. In a few hours we will join with throngs of people to commemorate the 250th anniversary of the Town of Amherst, and take part in the largest parade that has ever marched these streets. Today we also celebrate the founding of Grace Church, and turn our attention to another sort of throng -- the throngs of angels, led by Archangel Michael, who, as today's Collect says, "serve and worship [God] in heaven," and "help and defend us here on earth." Today's feast day reminds us that we live under the protection of the archangel Michael, the spiritual warrior who does combat with the powers of evil and who stands beside us and within us in the battle for love to prevail.

I don't know the exact history of how Grace Church came to celebrate its anniversary on the feast day of St. Michael and All Angels. Rob tells me that our building is patterned roughly after that of the Parish Church of St. Michael at the North Gate in Oxford, England, whose tower, dating back to the 11th century, is the oldest building in Oxford. The installation of our striking St. Michael's window must have clinched the deal, and for years now, generations of the faithful have stood and knelt and prayed in this space, setting aside one special Sunday at the end of September to honor St. Michael and all God's angels.

Today is a good day to ask ourselves: What do I believe about angels? Are angels real? How important are angels to the Christian faith? I was intrigued to learn this week that Mortimer Adler, the well-known philosopher, educator, and author who was a long-time editor of *Encyclopedia Britannica* and who helped to create that enormous, 54-volume series, *Great Books of the Western World*, once set himself the task of identifying the 102 "great ideas" of Western civilization. It turns out that the concept of angels is -- at least in his view -- one of those great ideas. His so-called "Synopticon," a gargantuan index and analysis of the Western world's great ideas, is arranged alphabetically, and its first entry is "angels."

Now I have to tell you that this quite surprised me. I confess it -- I feel a struggle within myself when it comes to belief in angels. From speaking with some of you, I know that members of this congregation hold a range of attitudes about angels -- and that is fine, for the Episcopal Church has no rules about what we are "supposed" to believe about them. But the contrasting viewpoints that I hear from you also struggle inside of me.

On the one hand, there is a voice in me, a very rational, modern, sophisticated voice, which says that belief in angels is actually *not* a great idea. Angels are archaic. Angels are a throwback to a more superstitious time when religious people felt a need to populate the world with imaginary beings. Just think of the elaborate speculations by medieval theologians as they classified and ranked the celestial hierarchy of heavenly beings, from seraphim, cherubim, and thrones at the top, down to dominions, virtues, powers, principalities, archangels, and finally angels at the bottom. Our Protestant sensibility may want to chuck all that as a profound distraction. Let's keep our focus on the mystery of God -- this voice within me says. Let's keep our eyes on Jesus Christ, and not clutter our minds by piling up beliefs in a host of extra beings that add nothing to the faith. Turn the angels over to New Age folks. It would be embarrassing to admit to a childish belief in angels. We don't need them. We have outgrown them. They are irrelevant to a mature Christian faith.

On the other hand, a voice within me argues something else. *Not so fast*, this voice wants to say. The idea of angels shows up across Western cultures, time periods, and religions. Angels are part of Jewish, Christian, and Muslim thought. However skeptical we may be about the clear-cut hierarchies of angels in medieval thought, and however trivialized and sentimental angels may seem as portrayed in today's culture, angels still have a central part to play in our lives as Christians.

The more I think about it and the more I listen to this inner struggle, the more that the second voice makes sense to me. Angels are messengers of God, and the idea of angels is necessary within a religious school of thought that starts with God as divine Mystery, as transcendent Source or Wellspring that can never be fathomed. The Mystery that we name "God" is hidden, forever beyond the grasp of ideas, images, or words -- indeed, Jewish people do not utter the name of God aloud. It is the very transcendence of God that makes the idea of angels necessary -- these spiritual beings who serve as intermediaries between God and humankind, who speak for God and are sent by God to communicate and connect with the human race. We don't have to limit our images of angels to sweet women with long skirts and large wings, much less to those little cherubic heads with wings sticking out on either side. In Western art, the earliest depictions of angels did not even *have* any wings. As one of the Church Fathers, John Chrysostom, explained years ago, angels are depicted with wings not because they actually *have* wings,

but in order to express their sublime nature, to show us “that they leave the heights and the most elevated dwelling to approach human” beings.¹

Jacob’s dream of a ladder between earth and heaven on which angels descend and ascend gives us a powerful image of this ongoing interchange or circulation between the earthly and the heavenly realms, between the ordinary world of solid matter, reason, and logic, and the divine world that is beyond human perception and thought. Angels symbolize the way that the divine Mystery we call “God” is constantly interacting with us, constantly inviting and challenging us, protecting and accompanying us. When our eyes are opened and we glimpse the interpenetration of worlds, the interweaving of the human and the divine, then, like Jacob, we, too, awaken from sleep and we say, “Surely the Lord is in this place -- and I did not know it!... How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven” [Genesis 28:16-17].

Today’s Gospel reading goes even further. Jesus Christ is what we Christians might call *our* “ladder” to heaven, our bridge between heaven and earth. As he says to Nathaniel, “Very truly, I tell you, you will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man” [John 1:51]. In other words, through his incarnation, Jesus has caught up in his very body the fullness of God and the fullness of humanity. He himself is the meeting-place, the point of intersection, the place where earth and heaven, the human and the divine, are woven into one. Through his crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension, Christ Jesus now fills all things on heaven and earth, which means that everything we touch, everything we see and smell and taste and hear, can become for us a manifestation of God, a revelation of divine presence. Welcoming angels into our imagination is a way of welcoming Christ himself, a way of opening ourselves to the infinite ways that we receive messages from God. If angels be among us, they are completely integrated into the being of Christ.

How do *you* tend to notice messages from God? Maybe you tend to sense the message internally, from an intuition or vision, from a dream or sudden insight that catches your attention and speaks to you a word from God. Or maybe a friend shows up at your doorstep at just the right moment, or calls you on the phone when you were thinking about that person just moments before. Or maybe you keep noticing the same word showing up on a billboard or license plate, on a book cover or a random scrap of paper. Or maybe you are hunkered down over your steering wheel one day, agitated and impatient, lost in worry and restless thought, when suddenly a red-tailed hawk soars silently overhead with outstretched wings. Suddenly your mind grows quiet, your heart fills with wonder, and you know that a

¹ <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Angel>, visited 9/26/09, with footnote citation: Proverbio (2007), p. 34

wider, deeper Reality -- capital R -- is touching you, and that you belong to it and are immersed within it.

You might call such moments, experiences of angels. Why not? To the logical, analytic mind, such moments may have no particular value, meaning, or usefulness, but to the soul they give a glimpse of what it means to live life in a larger way, to be awake and responsive to the holy mystery all around us, and to live with a spirit of love rather than fear.

Despite the sophisticated voice of “reason” that speaks sometimes within me, I realize that I do, in fact, cherish angels. Why? Because welcoming angels keeps us attentive to the mysterious ways in which God meets us in the daily moments of our lives. Because they keep our intuition and imagination alive in a world that tends to flatten our sensibility and to make everything drab, as if the material world is all there is. Because, as Howard Thurman once said, “There must always be remaining in [everyone’s] life some place for the singing of angels, some place for that which in itself is breathlessly beautiful... Despite all the crassness of life,” he writes, “despite all the hardness of life, despite all the harsh discords of life, life is saved by the singing of angels.”