

St. Michael and All Angels

Rev. Doug Floyd

September 30, 2018

Genesis 28:10–17, Psalm 103, Revelation 12:7-12, John 1:47-51

Today we observe the Feast of St. Michael and All Angels. Known in England as Michaelmas, this day is one of their four quarter days including,

Lady Day on March 25

Midsummer Day on June 24

Michaelmas on September 29

Christmas on December 25

Historically, these quarter days were public liturgical days as well as legal days in England, marking the days to pay rent, settle lawsuits, and start school terms.

Lady Day on March 25, commemorated the Annunciation of the Lord to the Blessed Virgin Mary, but it also marked the new year until 1752. Then January 1 marked the new year. This was the day when tenant farmers entered into year long contracts with landowners.

Midsummer Day on June 24 coincided with the Birth of St John the Baptist. This feast is counter to the midwinter feast of Christmas, celebrating the birth of Jesus. On this day, many parents brought their newborns for baptism. In the city, craftsman bought out their wares and had something of a craft fair. People dressed in costumes of saints and angels. The monks at Winchcomb suggest that fires were light the eve before St. John's Day to drive away dragons.

Michaelmas on September 29 celebrated Michael the Archangel and All Angels. People used to make the last blackberry pie of the season on this day because they believed that when Michael kicked Lucifer out of heaven, he fell from the skies and landed in a prickly blackberry bush. The people believed that Satan cursed the bush, so berries eaten after September 29 would be poison. Michaelmas also marked the harvest season, so people offered thanksgiving to God for provision while also paying rents and taxes. School terms started on Michaelmas and it is the first of four legal terms in Ireland, England, and Wales. Thus, it becomes a day to bless lawyers and judges.

Finally, Christmas marked the final quarter day. And this of course, became part of larger observance that included Advent, Christmas and Epiphany.

When I saw that our Sunday service would be close the Michaelmas, I thought we should observe this feast though I don't usually think of a service commemorating angels. This morning I hope to offer a short historical overview and then offer a reflection on the day in light of our Scriptures readings.

First, why refer to an angel as a saint as in Saint Michael? The word saint means holy or holy one. In Scripture, it can refer to a state of being thus God and his people are called holy. It is also used to refer to angels. For example in Jude 14 we read, "Behold, the Lord comes with ten thousands of his holy ones" referring to angels. In the King James, this same passage uses the word saints instead of holy ones to refer to the angels.

In Wim Wenders' masterpiece, *Wings of Desire*, angels are watchers of humanity, recording our actions and puzzling at times over the human experience. One of the more famous angels in film is Clarence Obody, Angel Second Class from *It's a Wonderful Life*. This bumbling angel is trying to help a suicidal George Bailey by giving him the chance to experience the world as if he had never been born. While there have been all sorts of interesting and far out versions of angels in film and literature, the Scripture gives a picture of angels as servants of the Lord. A brief survey is a bit overwhelming because there are far more angel stories that we typically realize. I can only reference a few this morning:

Angels serve in all sorts of capacities, and while they are spirits, they can take bodily form for certain missions. An angel appears to help Hagar in wilderness. Two angels go down to Sodom to determine if the city will be destroyed or spared. After observing the wickedness and absolute perversion of the city, the angels begin to destroy the place while rescuing Lot and his daughters. An angel calls out to Abraham and stops him from sacrificing Isaac. Abraham sends an angel to protect his servant on the journey to find Isaac a wife. Jacob beholds angels going up and down on a ladder to heaven. The Children of Israel follows an angel through the wilderness. Joshua sees an angel before attacking Jericho. Angels appear so glorious that many people fall down in fear, and sometimes it is difficult for us to discern if some of these angelic appearance are in fact, pre-incarnate appearances of the son of God.

Angels appear sometimes with swords drawn and ready for judgment and other time appear with messages from God. After David disobeys God by taking a census, an angel brings pestilence and stretches out his hand to destroy Jerusalem but the Lord restrains him. An angel feeds a weary Elijah in the midst of a drought. Angels encamp around those who fear God. Angels do God's bidding and proclaim his praise. Angels appear to deliver, to proclaim, to bring judgment, to witness and watch, to war with evil spirits. An angel even instructs Joseph in how to name and care for Jesus. Angels will call and gather God's people to himself. Angels appear to serve God in all aspects of creation and particularly serve the people of God as we also serve God in this world.¹

Our collect today speaks of how angels and mortals both minister before the Lord. The angels help and defend us and we join the angels in proclaiming God's praises.

The Scriptures and the Church Father warn us not to worship angels. In Colossians 2:18, Paul warns us about people who try to elevate themselves while putting down others by speaking of their intense asceticism, worship of angels and detailed visions. Hebrews 1 distinguishes between Jesus and the angels. Jesus is the Son of God, but angels are ministering servants, flames of fire.

Hebrews might help us to understand why the church sets aside a feast to commemorate the role of angels. This book is written to a people who are suffering intensely and are in danger of growing weary or becoming bitter. The writer reminds them that they are not suffering alone, but have been preceded by a great cloud of witnesses who often suffered for the call of God. Even Jesus went to the cross for the joy before Him. As we look back to the heroes of faith who have gone before and to Jesus the author and finisher of our faith, we look forward to our joy, our high calling, to our inheritance.

“You have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering, ²³ and to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God, the judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, ²⁴ and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel.” Heb 12:22–24.

We are not alone but we live and serve as part of a great communion that stretches across the ages. This great communion includes human servants and angelic servants: all working together in obedience to the Lord and in worship of His glory.

As we survey church history, we find that churches started being named after Michael the Archangel as early as the sixth century. Churches began celebrating the feast of St. Michael and All Angels in the sixth century as well. It appears to me that this festival may be related to the role of the church in resisting idolatry in cultures where paganism was still a threat. Idolatry always threatens to dehumanize, oppress, and pervert the God-ordained culture. Idolatry turned the ancient city of Sodom into a place of oppression, destruction, and perversion. The image of God in the human was being destroyed, so the angels show up to bring judgment.

When the church proclaims the Gospel of Jesus Christ, it is participating in a spiritual battle that drives back evil forces, seeking to corrupt a society and lead us into idolatry and oppression. In the light of the animosity that so pervades our culture in this moment, I think it is appropriate that we take a day to talk about angels and their role. For we see that the true alien force seeking to divide our culture is spiritual. Ideologies can easily become idolatries, and people are ready to demonize and attack those who disagree with their group. It feels as though the love of many has grown cold. While we may engage politically and socially and culturally, we do not wrestle against flesh and blood but against but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places. (Eph 6:12).

Thus our primary role is in bearing witness to the glory of God, interceding for the nations, serving the needy, and worshipping the Lord. Even as the church worships and evangelizes, the angels war with the evil powers and worship the Holy Lord.

In light of this picture, the feast of St. Michael and All Angels becomes a feast celebrating God's protection of his people as they endure fiery trials and their love is tested. God sends his angels to defend and uphold us even as we join them in praise to the most High God.

In today's first lesson, we see that Jacob dreams about a ladder stretching between heaven and earth. Angels are ascending and descending on this ladder. Then the Lord reiterates the promise he gave to Abraham right after Jacob sees the vision.

The vision and the promised blessing for Abraham's offspring and all peoples seem bound together. In our Gospel reading today, Jesus references Jacob's vision in relation to himself, "Truly, truly, I say to you, you will see heaven opened, and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man." Jn 1:51. I would suggest to you that this vision of the ladder stretching between heaven and earth where angels ascend and descend is a fulfillment of the prayer, "thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven."

The free communion between heaven and earth was rent in the Garden of Eden. Humanity lived with the repercussions of sin and death. The Old Testament reveals that humans cannot repair this breach between heaven and earth. Even the tower of Babel might be seen as a human attempt to build the ladder that restores free communion between heaven and earth. In our sinfulness, we cannot solve the problem of sin.

God makes a way for humans to draw near to him through the sacrificial system, but this points to a greater fulfillment to come. The promise given to Abraham speaks of blessing to all families of the earth. The vision given to Jacob speaks of a ladder that unites heaven and earth with free communion back and forth. All these speak of Jesus the Christ.

Only Jesus can restore this communion. Only Jesus in his physical body, in his life, death and resurrection can heal the division between heaven and earth and make a way for the blessing of the Holy Spirit. Paul writes in Galatians 3:14 that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles, so that we might receive the promised Spirit through faith. (Ga 3:14).

Only in Christ, can we see the fulfillment of the prayer "on earth as is in heaven." The breach is healed in Christ alone. We see a glimpse of it now for we have been sealed with the spirit. His Spirit is guiding us and keeping. Yet we also see a world still enslaved to sin. We behold division and hate and oppression in the world: not just in the world and the culture but in ourselves. C.S. Lewis reminds us in *Screwtape Letters* that the evil one never wants us to think the following thought:

'If I, being what I am, can consider that I am in some sense a Christian, why should the different vices of those people in the next pew prove that their religion is mere hypocrisy and convention?'

We are in a battle against the evil forces that would seek to turn us away from love, away from grace and away from the Gospel of Christ and the way of the cross. When we feel fearful like Jacob did on his way to meet Esau, or weary from the challenges in our lives and culture, or even bitter from the suffering we have endured, we cry out to God for help. For “thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.” He does not leave us alone but comforts by His Spirit and his ministering angels who defend us and protect us as we live out the reality of this good news in Jesus Christ.

We also look forward to the full and complete realization of this vision of the angels ascending and descending on the Son of Man. To the completion of the prayer “thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.”

Bishop JC Ryle believed that we continue to look forward to the full revealing of the angels ascending and descending on Christ in worship. He writes that “the words before us will probably receive a far more real and literal accomplishment than many of us are expecting.”³

Even now we rehearse that great day by worshiping Jesus Christ in all his glory and with his great heavenly host. And we join this host of heaven and *the four living creatures, each of them with six wings, full of eyes all around and within, and day and night and together with them we will say,*

“Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord God Almighty,
who was and is and is to come!”

And we bow before the throne saying,

11 “Worthy are you, our Lord and God,
to receive glory and honor and power,
for you created all things,
and by your will they existed and were created.” Re 4:8–11.

¹ Gen. 16:7, Gen 19:5, Gen 22:11, Gen 24:40, Gen 28:12, Ex 23:20, Num 22:22, Jud 6:21, 2 Sam 24:16, 1 Kings 19:5, 2 Kings, 19L35, 1 Chron 21;16, Ps 34:7, Ps 91:11, Ps 103:20, Ps 148:2

² C. S. Lewis, *A Year with C. S. Lewis: Daily Readings from His Classic Works*, ed. Patricia S. Klein, 1st ed. (New York: HarperOne, 2003), 288.

³ J. C. Ryle, *Expository Thoughts on John*, vol. 1 (New York: Robert Carter & Brothers, 1879), 86.