

St. Michael and All Angels 2024

(The opening facts about angels are from *For All the Saints* p.294)

Today we hear about and celebrate those mysterious beings which Scripture calls “angels,” a name which comes from the Greek word for “messengers.” Angels are no ordinary messengers of course. These messengers are from God. Messengers from God can take a variety of forms – human or non-human, visible or invisible.

We often find angels depicted in Christian art in human form, with wings to show that time and space do not constrain them, with swords to signify their power, and with dazzling clothing to represent their ability to enlighten faithful humans.

Although we do not know for sure what the angels we encounter in the Bible look like, we do know they were not cute little things with rosy cheeks. Almost every time a messenger of God speaks in Scripture, his first words are, “Fear not.” Angels are terrifyingly awe-inspiring otherworldly beings.

Of the many angels mentioned in the Bible, only four are called by name: Michael, Gabriel, U’riel, and Ra’pha-el. In the Book of Revelation, the Archangel Michael is presented as the powerful agent of God who wards off evil from God’s people and delivers peace to them at the end of this life’s mortal struggle. Many good and faithful Christians find it difficult to accept the existence of angels; for them, angels have no more reality in fact than unicorns. It may be true that the existence of angels is not one of the things in which Christians must believe if they want to be saved. Yet whenever Christians say the Nicene Creed, they confess that God has created “all that is, seen and unseen.” Christians have always felt themselves to be attended by healthful spirits — swift, powerful, and enlightening. Entertaining the

possibility of angels may be one way of acknowledging the sheer diversity of life, visible and invisible, that God has ordained in creation.

This invisible life is sometimes glimpsed by us. In the Genesis story, we hear of “Jacob’s Ladder” – in a dream Jacob saw angels ascending and descending, entering the visible world we see, appearing from out of the invisible world we do not see yet we know is present. Jacob is an interesting character. Barbara Brown Taylor describes him as “a two-time double crosser, who has robbed his brother of his birthright and his blessing. He is an accomplished deceiver, who has pulled the wool over his own smooth hands and his father’s blind eyes in order to steal what he wants. He is a con man on the run, who owes his compromised life to his conniving mother’s love” (p.101 of *Bread of Angels*). He has high-tailed it out of town before his brother, Esau, has the chance to kill him. We know he’s trying not to attract attention because he’s on his own. The son of the local patriarch does not normally travel without servants. And he dreams a dream, angels descending and ascending – joining heaven and earth. In the midst of this, Jacob is visited by God who gives him promise after promise of God’s steadfast love and care. As Taylor says, “God holds nothing back, tucking everything but money into the pocket of this thief” (p.102). One thing we know for certain, is that this conniving con man does not deserve these promises, does not deserve God’s gifts of love and abundance, does not deserve this dream of angels, this vision of heaven and earth joined together. But it is given to him and that is very reassuring for us since we, too, will never “deserve” God’s gifts and God’s messages sent to us. Amazingly, we imperfect humans will be given the same astoundingly joyful experience that Jacob had. We, too, will exclaim with amazement, “Surely the Lord is in this place...How awesome

is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven.” How do we know that this will be our experience too?

Jesus mentions this “ladder” in the Gospel of John when he tells Nathaniel that he will see the angels ascending and descending on him – the Son of God. Jesus is the “ladder”, the connection between heaven and earth, the invisible and the visible. We will see heaven, he assures us. The fullness of God’s kingdom which, currently, only is realized in heaven, is slowly becoming a reality on earth. These places, when the fullness of God’s kingdom is revealed to us, are often called “thin” places – when we see what is thought to be invisible, when we see God’s perfect kingdom, when we see God’s angels, when we see God.

We often think of heaven as a physical place somewhere else, not on earth. Heaven is described quite often in Scripture as “above”. This causes issues – and disbelief – for many people because we know heaven is not “above” us. Extensive space travel, telescopes that give us images from millions upon millions of miles away in space lead us to say that heaven is not a physical place above us. That raises questions: Where is heaven? What is heaven? In his book, *Surprised by Hope*, N.T. Wright addresses these questions and the discussion would be too lengthy to cover here but I will share an important point: Wright tells us heaven is not a faraway place in our own space-time world. “God’s space and our space – heaven and earth, in other words – are, though very different, not far away from one another. Nor is talk about heaven simply a metaphorical way of talking about our own spiritual lives. God’s space and ours interlock and intersect in a whole variety of ways even while they retain, for the moment at least, their separate and distinct identities and roles. One day,...they will be joined in a quite new way, open and visible to one another, married together forever” (p.116 of *Surprised By Hope*).

I know a man, sitting reading in his chair one day, who quietly asked his wife – who was also sitting reading in another chair not far from his – he said, “Do you see that cloud?” “Cloud? What cloud?” was the wife’s very confused and very understandable response. The curtains were closed. It was evening and they were reading before bed. “There’s a cloud here in the room. Do you see it? His voice was quiet and full of awe. The woman did not see it but she knew her husband, Sam, had seen something and she knew that “something” was spiritual. The presence of God is often depicted in Scripture as being contained within a cloud – like the cloud that led the Israelites by day through the wilderness. Sam sensed that he was experiencing the presence of God. That cloud was, for him, a thin place.

There are many stories of thin places – many people have had an experience when they have seen or felt something they could not explain...the presence of a dead loved one, a stranger who helps then disappears, the feeling of certainty that God is at hand. Thin places are real because the fullness of God’s kingdom is real. God disrupts our lives in these encounters. God speaks to us, leads us, changes us.

The thinnest place of all is the place we, the church, gather together for the victory celebration of Christ’s resurrection, to eat together at God’s dinner party in God’s kingdom. It is here in the presence of God, in the presence of Christ in the bread of wine, and as the presence of Christ his body in the world, that heaven and earth are joined together. Tom Long tells us that, at this very moment, the victory celebration is roaring in heaven with all of the angels and archangels and all the company of heaven. They are singing harmony along with us as we sing the “Holy, holy, holy Lord, God of heaven and earth.” And, Tom Long writes, every once in a while, that party in heaven breaks through into our time and space and we call that ‘Sunday worship.’ It is here, in the union of heaven and earth, in the classroom of the

kingdom, that we are formed and transformed. We learn God's ways and how to live God's ways so that we can bring that with us into the world. As we transform slowly but surely more and more into the image of Christ, we transform the world along with us into the kingdom of God on earth as in heaven. We, as Peter writes in his first letter, we hasten the coming fullness of the kingdom with the way in which we live our lives. The thin place we experience here together, becomes the thin place we carry with us into the world. N.T. Wright assures and encourages us saying, "The kingdom will come as the church, energized by the Spirit, goes out into the world vulnerable, suffering, praising, praying, misunderstood, misjudged, vindicated, celebrating: always – as Paul puts it in one of his letters – bearing in the body the dying of Jesus so that the life of Jesus may also be displayed" (p.112 of *Surprised By Hope*). We bring God the disrupter, God the transformer into a world that so very much needs God through us.

With open hearts and minds, let us embrace these encounters with thin places, our brushes up against the full glory of God's kingdom. Dwell in them and think on them. God constantly seeks to be with us, among us, to communicate with us. The time is coming when these momentary glimpses will no longer be momentary – they will be our reality. The invisible will be the visible. The time is coming when, like Jacob, we will all say, "How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God; this is the gate of heaven."