

September 29, 2019 (St Michael and All Angels Day) –
Daniel 12:1-3, Revelation 12:7-12, Matthew 18:1-11

Today happens to be one of my favorite events. No, I'm not talking about the children singing, although that's certainly a lot of fun. And no, I'm not talking about the church picnic, although that too should be a really great time.

No, I'm talking about something far more uncommon: it is the one day every 5-10 years that St Michael and All Angels Day happens to fall on a Sunday. You see, this minor festival of the church is always on September 29th. Which means that most of the time it falls somewhere in the middle of the week. But every once in a while, it lands on a Sunday. And I love preaching about God's gift of angels.

Because our society needs to know more about angels. Christians need to know more about angels. Angels are everywhere in Scripture. The Bible is full of them. Frankly, we have huge amounts of information at our disposal about angels, revealed to us by God himself.

And yet the average Christian has an understanding of angels that is driven more by pagan superstition, Renaissance art, science fiction, and pop culture than it is by God's Word. And that's pathetic. We call ourselves the children of God. So let's put aside this worldly mythology and spend a day thanking God for these very real, very important spiritual servants that stand all around us.

Because angels are not the fat little babies that you see in paintings and greeting cards. Nor are they the pretty young women dressed in white with flowing blonde hair and glowing skin that we see all over our Christmas cards every year. Nor are they good people who have died and been mysteriously transformed into an entirely different sort of creature. No, angels are angels. People are people. One does not become the other. Ever.

In fact, if I were to describe the typical angel in the Bible, he would be the exact opposite of all those descriptions. And yes, I did say "he." There are no female angels in the Bible. Now, I'm not saying that I know for sure they don't exist. There could be some. But as far as scripture records, female angels have never appeared on earth. So if we're going to talk about angels. If we're going to depict them in artwork. We're probably better off going with a guy than a girl.

And when I say a "guy," I mean a "guy." Not some effeminate, genderless, pretty-boy. The angels of the Bible are soldiers. They're warriors. When God put an angel outside the Garden of Eden, he carried a flaming sword. When Elisha brought God's wrath down upon the King of Aram, what appeared were angels riding war horses and chariots, whose weapons struck the enemy blind.

When the shepherds outside of Bethlehem saw the angelic host, it wasn't a choir they saw. The Greek word used there actually means "army." They saw an army of angels singing a victory march. For the war between mankind and God was coming to an end. There would finally be peace on earth.

It's no wonder that people react like they do when they see angels. Not once in the Bible do we see someone see an angel and say, "Oh, how pretty! You should be a model. Can I touch your wings?" No, there is one and only one reaction to angels that we ever find. And that is abject terror. The kind of fear that makes people drop to their knees because they can't even make their legs move.

And I can just see God, up in heaven, giving a training course to angels before they come to earth and appear to someone: "Rule #1: Before you say anything else, tell them, 'Don't be afraid.' Because they're gonna pee their pants when they see you. And they're not gonna listen to anything you have to say until you calm them down."

No, if you're going to create a picture of an angel in your mind, your best bet is probably to envision a very strong, very dangerous looking soldier. Or police officer. Or, maybe... maybe even a bodyguard. That's really what angels are.

They are God's Secret Service for mankind. They blend into the crowd. You never see them. You never hear them. But when someone or something threatens God's children, they snap into action, remove the threat, and are gone before you even knew they were there.

Except, of course, when they want to be seen. Which is the other role of angels. Angels are messengers. In fact, the word "angel" literally means "messenger." Angels are messengers of God's Word. When, for whatever reason, God himself chooses not to communicate directly with someone, he sends an angel, who delivers the message. Sometimes, that's a word of wrath and judgment. Sometimes, that's a word of hope and promise. But always, it is God's Word.

Which means that an angel that delivers something other than God's Word, like the ones that supposedly came to men like Muhammed and Joseph Smith and countless other false prophets... well, that's not an angel. At best, it's a hallucination. At worst, it's something far more evil.

Which brings us to our final misconception about angels. The misconceptions we have about fallen angels. About demons. About the devil himself. Because you really can't talk about angels without talking about demons. They're the same creature. Demons are just angels fighting on the wrong side.

But you'd be surprised how many Christians don't actually believe this. Surveys say that 77% of Americans and 88% of Christians believe in angels. It's a pretty widespread belief, whether you're a Christian or not. Yet, when it comes to fallen angels, 68% of all Americans in general believe in demons, while only 35% of Christians do. In other words, you're more likely to have a Biblical belief in angels and demons if you're not a Christian than if you are.

Now do you understand why we need St Michael's Day? We need to talk about angels. We also need to talk about demons. And about Satan. And about the war that was fought in heaven. When the former-archangel of God, Lucifer, the angel of light, waged war against God, against Michael, and against the army of heaven. And rather than be a guardian of mankind. A ministering servant to God's people, as the book of Hebrews describes angels, Lucifer decided to become mankind's adversary.

That's what the name Satan means: "adversary." Rather than be a servant, he became an enemy. And rather than be a messenger, he became an accuser. Our lesson from Revelation tells us, *"For the accuser of our brothers has been thrown down, who accuses them day and night before our God."*

Lucifer could have been a messenger to God's people. He could have turned many to righteousness. But instead, he decided to tempt us and to judge us and to accuse us before God of breaking God's Law and drag us into the prison created for him and his demons: into hell itself. He couldn't hurt God. He couldn't win the war. So instead, he attacks God's creation and God's people.

And the funny thing is that the way he attacks us is often the way that he himself works. Because we also are servants of God's children and messengers to God's people. That's what Jesus tells us in our Gospel lesson. We are each responsible for our words and actions. For the temptations we inflict upon others.

And we can be servants and have our name written in the book of life. We can turn many to righteousness and shine like stars. Or we can become adversaries who tempt the weakest among us to sin and are worthy of death and shame and contempt. We can become accusers, who judge and judge and judge and never once notice the millstone God has hung around our neck for our sinfulness.

Satan attacks us and he turns us into duplicates of himself. And he convinces us that if he's going down, we're going down with him. But that's a lie. He's going down, but we're not going with him.

No, the message that the angels declared on that hillside outside of Bethlehem was true. There is peace between mankind and God. Though Satan tries to turn us into his soldiers. Into little carbon copies of himself. God has already had mercy upon us.

He sent His Son to die for us. And he took away the one weapon that the adversary held. Satan can accuse and accuse and accuse. He can pile on God's Law until we're utterly crushed by it. Until we're buried in guilt and shame and regret. And God wipes it all away with three simple words: "I forgive you."

The devil is on the run. He knows his time is short. He knows that he's already been conquered by the blood of the Lamb. He knows a day is coming soon, when Michael, God's new archangel, the one who already threw Satan out of heaven, will come with the blast of trumpets. And he will throw Satan out of earth too. Throw him into the depths of hell.

Satan knows this is coming. He dreads the day. He does his best to do all the damage he can. And frankly, there's not much we can do to stop him. Which is why God has sent us his angels. So that we might pray, as Luther does in his morning and evening prayers, "Let your holy angel be with me, that the evil foe may have no power over me."

God gives his angels to defend us against the evil foe. God gives us His Spirit, that we may look upon the work of His Son and know that it is finished. The war is over. Satan has lost. Because we are and forever shall be set free from his slavery. Set free from his torment. Set free from his accusations. By the one who died and rose again. By the Son who sets us free, so that we might be free indeed. Amen.