

## **Angels Ascending and Descending on Jesus**

St. Mary's and Holy Trinity

September 29<sup>th</sup>, 2024

Saint Michael and All Angels

*Lord, surround us with your angels, that they might help and protect our connection with you. Amen.*

Angels. You know, one of the signs that we're all pretty secular now, even though we're Christians, is that not many of us think angels have much to do about anything. Israel bombs Lebanon and destroys Gaza. Do you wonder what the angels are up to? Russia carries out a full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Do you wonder what the angels are up to? NATO urges Canada to scale up its military. I'm guessing you probably don't wonder what the angels are up to.

But earlier Christians would have. Because in the Bible – did ya know - angels, gods, and demons are all the same type of entity. They're creatures. But they're made of spirit rather than flesh – a far as we know.

So, what are angels and what do they do?

Here's a quote from a scholar. "In Israel's early traditions, God was perceived as administering the cosmos with a retinue of divine assistants" (Samuel A. Meier, "Angels," *Bible*, 28). Israel believed that "the gods" of their surrounding nations were creatures, just other worldly creatures, deathless and spiritual, who had rejected the Creator's rule of heaven and earth. So, it's not that the Bible denies the existence of gods, it suggests that they are actually angels who have stopped doing the Creator's work and are tricking the nations into resisting God's rule of the cosmos.

But the angels we celebrate today are those that remain faithful. You have Gabriel, the messenger who tells Mary that she will conceive a child by the Holy Spirit. But some angels are

a lot more than messengers. They appear to be protectors or warriors. There is a stunning scene in 2 Kings when Elisha's servants' eyes are opened and he sees the hills around their city covered in flaming chariots, ready to fight off invasion. Michael is named as one of these warrior angels. He fights with the gods of the nations, who are actually traitor angels.

My favourite thing about Michael is that his name in Hebrew is a rhetorical question. "Michael" means "Who is like God?" And this is key. We don't believe that the God of Israel, the God who incarnates as our Lord Jesus, is just the best god, or the most powerful angel. God isn't a being in the universe. The universe is in God. Even heavenly creatures come from God's creative work.

The problem in Bible times and our time, is people are more attached to their nation and the god it supposedly serves than the Creator of the whole universe. The only difference between the ancient world and the modern world is that ancients believed that their nation existed to please a particular set of gods. You serve your nation, because your nation glorifies your gods, and in return your gods supposedly give prosperity, stability, and victory. Fast forward to the secular era: we've thrown out the gods (or so we think) but believe more than ever that prosperity, stability, and victory come from our great nations. Where Christian nationalists are going so wrong is treating the Holy One, the creator of the universe, like some kind of lower-case-g god, who exists just to make a nation great. This happened in ancient Israel too. When Isaiah accuses Israel of idolatry, he speaks to the leaders who claim to rule in the name of the One God of Israel. But they weren't truly worshipping the Creator of the universe. They were worshipping their great nation, and treating God the same way Spartans treated Apollo.

On the feast of St. Michael and all Angels, we celebrate the faithful angels, who help and defend our relationship with our Creator, unlike those other angles. In the reading from Genesis we see an image of angels doing what they are supposed to do. Jacob has a vision. He dreams of a ladder from earth to heaven, with angels ascending and descending it. Why ascending and descending? It's not clear. But what matters is the effect this vision has on Jacob. While seeing the ladder of angels, he hears God saying "know that I am with you and will keep you wherever you go." When he awakes, Jacob is overwhelmed with the sense of God's presence. "How awesome is this place!" he says. "This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven." Jacob, notice, doesn't worship the angels. What the angels represent in this picture is the connection between Jacob's presence and God's presence. Between where God is and Jacob is, the angels ascend and descend.

How amazing it is then when Jesus describes himself to Nathaniel as the very ladder angels ascend and descend! Jesus just is the connection between our presence and God's presence. He is God the Son, who becomes a ladder to God the Father, by becoming the son of Mary: Jesus. John describes Jesus as God the Son tabernacling among us, which is interesting because Jacob's descendants built a tabernacle where he saw the ladder of angels. But Jesus is God's way of being present in a way that our man-made tabernacles and temples and churches can never bottle up. Instead of a man-made building, Jesus is God made man. Anywhere Jesus is is just as much a place where Jacob could say, "This is none other than the house of God." That is a place where God's word to Jacob is true for anybody: "Know that I am with you and will keep you wherever you go."

Where is Jesus then? How are we to be near him? Well, I'd love to get really theological about the nature of Jesus' body after his resurrection, and how it is changed to be present anywhere that his divine being is present. But that's too complex at this point. The simple things Christians say are enough for now. He is where two or three are gathered in his name. He is in the sacrament of Eucharist. He is in the scriptures spoken and heard. Perhaps most strangely, those who have been baptized into his death and resurrection, those who have taken his body and blood, those who hear the word of God and keep it, are joined to Jesus by God the Spirit. Where our bodies are, there he is too. We don't need a nation, with prosperity and victory and stability, to connect us to him and be blessed. He has joined himself to us, and he and his faithful angels teach us how to hold fast to him, and to be free from the lie that we need a great and mighty nation to be blessed.

Amen.