

Sermon on Revelation 12:7-12, Daniel 12:1-3
Feast of St. Michael and All Angels, September 29, 2019
Lutheran Church of the Redeemer
By James Erlandson

Do you believe in angels? From guardian angels, better angels, dark angels, avenging angels, to angels in the outfield, all have played a part in scripture, literature, or popular culture! But do we all believe that angels exist, that they are real personalities or just characters of fiction, figments of human imagination? For some the question of angels' existence is something like that of aliens or UFO's. Some people believe passionately in aliens and UFO's, some just take a "wait and see" attitude, and others scoff at the possibility and regard true believers as nut jobs. It's the same with angels, I guess, because who among us has ever seen one face to face? It's only something for the movies, scripture, carols on Christmas Eve or hymns on Easter morning! But we really don't question their existence then. We are just curious!

But consider the example of Storm Area 51 – also known as "Alienstock". It started as a fake Facebook meme created in July, inviting anyone willing to come to the Nevada dessert on the weekend of September 20-22, between the near-empty towns of Rachel and Hiko, in the middle of nowhere, to see aliens. A young man from California put out this meme that went viral with two million RSVPs, enticed by the thought of attacking government facility Area 51 for hiding aliens in the desert. In response, the FBI showed up at his house, and the local authorities sent out warnings of scorpions and snakes hiding in the desert sand. In the end, only a few thousand showed up for the Alienstock festival, to drink Budlight and camp out in RVs. It was a way to say farewell to summer, as no aliens were really expected, and none appeared.

We have our own festivals in the church, not for aliens, but to praise what God has done through Jesus our Lord, an infinitely more worthy purpose. The good news of Jesus' birth and his rising from the dead comes from messengers of God, called angels. On the Feast of the Annunciation the angel Gabriel brings the surprising news to a young woman named Mary. "Fear not, you are pregnant!" and her son will be called the savior of the world. On Christmas eve night we hear of angels singing in the sky above Bethlehem, telling shepherds not to fear, that God's son has been born. Later, an angel appears to Joseph in a dream, warning him to take his wife and son Jesus to Egypt, to save them from King Herod's jealous wrath. After Jesus withstood the temptations of the devil in the wilderness, angels waited on him. And on Easter morning, an angel appeared at the empty tomb, telling the disciples that Jesus was not here, that he is risen. So the scriptures are full of references to angels, in the New Testament they were mostly

messengers who brought good news about Jesus. They had a real purpose, so whether we believe in angels or not, they served as God's messengers to human beings. They aren't the scary avenging angels of modern films, or cute little cherubs on Valentine's cards.

Today churches celebrate the Feast of St. Michael and all angels. Michael is one of the highest ranking angels, an archangel, whom we see today in the Old Testament book of Daniel, in Revelation and also in Jude. (The other archangels are Gabriel, Raphael and Uriel, who ruled the four corners of the earth.). Michael's name literally means "who is like God". He is often pictured in art as youthful, strong, and clad in armor, the helper of Christian armies and the protector of individual Christians against the devil, especially at the hour of death.

In the book of Daniel we read today the story of Daniel's strange vision, in which a heavenly messenger appeared to him to explain what would happen in future days, in a battle between the angels of Persia and those of God's people, Israel. For they would suffer much at the hands of powerful, foreign rulers, like Antiochus IV Epiphanes who would even sacrifice pork in the Temple and abolish the sabbath! Michael, the prince of angels, told Daniel not to fear, that he would arise as protector of his people, and in the last days would lead the celestial forces in the final battle against the forces of evil. In this apocalyptic story, with its fearsome description of warfare, suffering and anguish, a word of hope is given to Daniel. For the angel Michael would lead God's forces to victory and his people would be delivered, "everyone who is found written in the book". Many of the dead ("those who sleep in the dust of the earth") shall awake to everlasting life.

Another strange story read today in the second lesson is from John's vision in the book of Revelation. Here the ancient story is told of that great war breaking out in heaven; Michael and his angels fought against the dragon and his angels, and threw the ancient serpent called the Devil – the deceiver of the whole world – down to earth, along with all his angels. This story assures us that God is already victorious over death and the Devil, for Christ has risen and the victory over Satan has already been won. But it also explains the Devil's continued presence on earth to deceive and bring mischief and death to humans – but his time is short, and the day of Christ's return is surely coming.

In Luke's gospel, when Jesus sent out seventy disciples two by two into the towns and villages to proclaim the good news of God's kingdom, they were able to do wondrous things, healings and exorcisms. They returned overjoyed, because "Lord, in your name, even the demons submit to us!" So Jesus shared his own vision with them, that "I see Satan fall from heaven like a flash of lightning. See, I have given you authority to tread on snakes and scorpions, and over the power of the enemy; and nothing will hurt you. Nevertheless, do not rejoice only at this, that the spirits submit to you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven."

So on this day that we commemorate Michael and all of God's angels, we rejoice in the assured victory of God over sin, evil and death. We know that evil exists; we see the evidence every day. But the power of Satan has no ultimate power over us, when we are strong in faith in the Lord, and clothed in the armor of God, as Paul wrote in Ephesians: with the belt of truth, the breastplate of righteousness, the shoes of peace, the shield of faith, the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God. With God's power and this armor, we have nothing to fear from the Devil's power.

The story of Michael and the presence of God's angels in our world are meant to reassure us that God does not abandon us. They are the sign of God's continuing care for God's people against all evil. In the scriptures the angels model for us their worship and praise of God, and have served God faithfully as God's messengers to us. From Jesus' assurance that children are watched over by the angels came the Church's teaching that there is a guardian angel for every child – which has been a comfort for many a human being.

In our own troubled and anxious days today, when humans are hounded by evil, beset by violence and bombarded by natural disasters, with populations uprooted by civil war and the storms of climate change, with refugees on the move and migrants seeking asylum, we are tempted to call upon God to send angels to save us. But when we don't see God or angels comes to our aid, we wonder whether angels really exist. Where are the guardian angels to watch over immigrant children on the border, separated from their parents? Where are the guardian angels to watch over children in our nation's schools and keep them safe? Maybe we just don't recognize them, looking for celestial beings with halos, wearing robes and sprouting wings. Have we thought to look for the human angels who unexpectedly come to the aid of people in trouble? Have we considered the scripture admonition in Hebrews 13, "Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it."

It seems to me that the angels of scripture serve as an example to us, in how to serve and praise God faithfully, as messengers of hope and goodness in this fallen world. If we deplore the absence of angels watching over children on the southern border or in our communities, consider how you and I have the call from God to watch over and protect children ourselves! Do not ask God to do for you what you and I can do for ourselves! For God uses people to do God's work (with Our Hands!). God uses people to deliver the message of hope and good news. God also uses us to do the work of angels. This is why the ELCA has given the name "guardian angels" to those faithful Lutherans who commit to serve as guardians for unaccompanied minors who have been detained and go to immigration court without their parents. Our children need guardian angels also in schools, in shopping malls, in our communities, at the state capitol and in the halls

of Congress! It's a call anyone one of us can respond to. For you and I have the calling to follow Jesus, and to imitate the disciples and angels in service to God, as messengers of faith, hope and love to others.

So may we, like the angels and disciples of scripture, follow our Lord in faith, and say and do everything in Jesus' name. May we watch over children and protect them, as guardian angels do. May our choirs sing like angels, and may we as the Church united, join in the angelic chorus on the last day to sing praises at the throne of God. And when we pray to God for protection and help, perhaps we shouldn't be surprised if we are in the presence of the angels, for to such God has entrusted God's work for the saints who have gone before us. So we thank God for such care, and for the angels and their work. May they strengthen us in faith and empower us for service, to do God's work – with our hands and voices, in Jesus' name. Amen.