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St. Michael and All Angels

September 29, 2013



“He Will Command His Angels Concerning You”

(Psalm 91:11-12)

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“You will not fear the terror of night, nor the arrow that flies by day, nor the pestilence that stalks in the darkness, nor the plague that destroys at midday. A thousand may fall at your side, ten thousand at your right hand, but it will not come near you. You will only observe with your eyes . . . For he will command his angels concerning you to guard you in all your ways; they will lift you up on their hands, so that you will not strike your foot against a stone” (Psalm 91:5-12).

Collect of the Day

Everlasting God, You have ordained and constituted the service of angels and men in a wonderful order. Mercifully grant that, as Your holy angels always serve and worship You in heaven, so by Your appointment they may also help and defend us here on earth; through Your Son, Jesus Christ, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. **Amen**

Do you remember the first time you were truly frightened at a movie, the one that made your neck hairs stand on end? I remember begging my parents to let me go with “AndyPaul” (older brothers) to see my first PG movie. I was relentless; Mom and Dad caved. AndyPaul were not amused. Nor were they gracious hosts . . . but I got in. It was an early 70’s version of “The Titanic” and there was this guy in the engine room. He met his doom when the flooding waters hit the boilers. He got steamed, but somehow remained standing there in death. How that can be I’ll never know; I spent the night trying to figure it out . . . in mom and dad’s bed.

I read somewhere that horror movies are a good measure of our collective fears. That is horror movies exploit what we are already worried about. For example, most of us worry about science going awry, or evil people using science to do evil things. And so, shortly after Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the Japanese film industry came out with a number of early horror movies about science gone bad . . . experiments giving birth to uncontrollable monsters.

Some horror finds its origins in the headlines, with films about serial killers and stalkers. There are films about those who are possessed by demons, “The Exorcist”, “The Omen”, even films about animals that seem possessed. “Jaws” comes to mind, and Hitchcock’s “Birds”.

Many Americans don’t believe in God anymore

but they do believe in ghosts, haunted houses, even Bigfoot. (Rule of thumb: when you believe nothing, you're more likely to believe anything.) Hollywood knows how to pluck those strings. Apparently many of us have a latent fear of zombies, because one film after another has us nearly overrun by the darn things.

But what most horror films have in common is the idea that there is evil in the world, not just basically good people who sometimes accidentally miss the mark. No: real evil; hard core wickedness and an Evil One who is so powerful and wants to destroy us, and before whom we are weak and vulnerable. I suppose Hollywood does us a favor by showing us, in truth, just how vulnerable we are to sin, death and the devil. As Christians we know that before the devil and his demons we of ourselves have no strength, not any worth talking about at least. So we're going to need someone in our corner, someone watching over us, someone on our side who is strong and powerful and good, beings who do the Lord's bidding, not the Devil's.

On the church's calendar, today is the day of St. Michael and All Angels. It's a day that celebrates and gives thanks to God for his holy angels. They keep showing up in Scripture . . . hundreds of times. One can only deny the reality of angels if he also denies Scripture.

So what do we know about the angels? The first thing you have to do is expel from your head all things Hallmark, and all those masonry angels in church gardens across the land. Exorcize them from your memory . . . also those chubby, infantile nudes that Raphael liked to paint, as well as those voluptuous feminine angels from 19th century art. Expel them all.

The prophet Daniel describes an angel "whose face was like the appearance of lightning, his eyes like flaming torches, his arms and legs like the gleam of burnished bronze, and the sound of his voice like the sound of a multitude" (Dan. 10:6). The prophet Isaiah describes seraphim each with six wings, and their

voices were so loud that they shook the foundations of the temple. (Yet the angels in a lot of art look like they might scream because their loin cloth is wet!) In Scripture when people see angels the first thing they do is fall on their faces terrified, and the first thing the angels have to say is “fear not.” Why we insist on defanging those tigers and making them safe I have no idea. I want something more than a chubby infant looking after and defending me and mine. I *need* something more.

So what does the Bible say about angels? First, they are creatures. They possess certain knowledge and power, but they are not omniscient or almighty. They are not gods. They are not to be worshiped or prayed to. They were created good and holy, but like us, were also given the freedom to rebel. Some did. In Revelation we read how there arose war in heaven. Some of the angels rebelled. Michael and his angels fought back and defeated them, and threw them out of heaven. Notice, God is only secondarily involved. God himself is not on the battlefield. He doesn't need to be. The Evil One is no threat to God. God sends a lieutenant to lead the fight, and he, Michael, is victorious. Those evil ones have been forever rejected by God. There is no redemption for them like there is for us . . . no promise of grace applies to them, no Gospel is preached to them. They will never return to communion with God. To the contrary, Jesus spoke of “everlasting fire” prepared for the devil and his angels.

The evil angels are many and powerful (Eph. 6:12), they are cunning and deceitful. They quote Scripture (Gen. 3:1; Mt. 4:6; 2 Cor. 11:14) but are liars and murderers (Jn. 8:44), utterly depraved and wicked (Mk. 1:23). And they have been defeated. But like a mortally wounded animal, the evil one is still dangerous. But his wounds are mortal, his days numbered.

What do the holy angels do? They are powerful, but they don't use their power for themselves. They serve God and are obedient to him. Psalm 103, “Praise the Lord, you mighty ones who do **His** bidding . . . you His

servants who do **His** will.”

What else? Their delight is in the Lord. They experience joy over a sinner’s repentance. There are various ranks and orders among the angels: Cherubim, Seraphim, angels and archangels. A few are mentioned by name: Gabriel and Michael. The good angels are confirmed in their holiness, no longer able to sin. That sounds odd, but remember one day in heaven we will also be confirmed in holiness, no longer able to sin.

In heaven the angels certainly enjoy the bliss of heaven and communion with God (Mt. 18:10), but their joy does not consist of leisure and idleness, rather in willing and joyful service. They praise and worship God (Luke 2:13-14). They do his will (Ps. 103:20-21; 2 Kings 19:35). Often they are messengers, announcing the major events of salvation history (for example the birth of Jesus and his resurrection). They will also announce his return. In Acts 5 the angels of the Lord freed the apostles from prison. And they serve us, for the sake of Christ.

Psalms 91 says, “God will command His angels concerning you to guard you in all your ways.” That promise doesn’t give us the license to tempt God. Yet it is a great comfort in this dangerous world where dull hell fires burn to hear God’s promise that He sends His angels to guard and keep us. So Luther concludes his morning and evening prayer with these words, “Let your holy angels be with me, that the evil foe may have no power over me.”

There is a world that we see, and there’s a whole other world out there invisible to our eyes, quiet to our ears. The prophet Elisha was once given the gift of seeing this other world. In 2 Kings 6, the king of Syria sent a great army to arrest Elisha. When Elisha’s servant woke and saw the army, he nearly despaired. But Elisha didn’t. Instead he prayed that the young man’s eyes would be opened to see all the protective angels around them, and sure enough, when the Lord opened the young man’s eyes he saw the whole

mountain was full of horses and chariots of fire, and angels, quietly waiting, keeping watch, ready to do the Lord's bidding.

No where do the Scriptures say that each of us is assigned a guardian angel. But the angels do guard us; there may a whole mountain full of angels and chariots of fire quietly keeping watch over you.

The angels are especially tuned in it seems, to the dangers faced by little children. In our Gospel lesson, Jesus says, "See that you do not despise one of these little ones. For I tell you that their angels in heaven always see the face of my Father in heaven" (v. 10). That is, angels have direct access to our Father in heaven, who loves and cares greatly for each of His little ones. Every one of them matters to God, and therefore should matter also to us.

Every single one is to be respected and welcomed. On earth, they are easy enough to overlook, the little ones, sometimes even disdain as bothersome. But in heaven they are represented before the throne of God by the angels. That truth becomes a white hot threat in Luke 17: "Whoever causes one of these little ones to sin . . . it would be better for him if a millstone were hung around his neck and he were cast into the sea."

"For he will command his angels concerning you" the psalm says. I've seen it happen a number of times, right out there in the narthex. People milling about, toddlers circling their parents' legs. Once in a while, a little one will make a mad dash for the stairwell. That's when it takes a village. In the nick of time hands come down from no where and lifts the child and returns it to the parents. Sometimes the child is angry for having been thwarted. Often he is strangely oblivious to the help he just received and carries on without missing a beat or even looking back to see whose hands they were.

So it is with us. God has commanded his angels concerning us. Most of the time we have no idea we

were within a whisker of disaster! The horses and chariots and angels on the mountain are invisible to us; we are deaf and blind to their work. We carry on without missing a beat or looking back. Some of you have stories to tell of a near miss. Is it the luck of the draw? Or might you have reason to thank God for his holy ones who do his bidding?

While I have never seen the angels at work I do know there is a great big list of illnesses I've never had, and accidents that didn't put me in the hospital or grave. I've never been mugged, or accosted, or beaten up by Zombies . . . though AndyPaul tried! Of course, you might not feel so protected. Maybe you've had more than your fair share of illnesses, accidents and injuries. Maybe so much has gone wrong that you want to know just where those angels have been. If that's you, I can only say the Lord loves you enough to sacrifice his Son to save you. He's not going to reverse his love and treat you like an old sock. His love is real; it is ongoing, and it is working right now. Though unseen and unfelt, it is there. And his Holy Ones, they are there too, ready to do his bidding. Thanks be to God!

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