

*'A wonderful order'*

Michaelmas, September 29, 2019  
Church of the Ascension, Chicago  
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*Everlasting God, you have ordained and constituted in a wonderful order the ministries of angels and mortals: Mercifully grant that, as your holy angels always serve and worship you in heaven, so by your appointment they may help and defend us here on earth; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.*

*Jacob left Beer-sheba and went toward Haran. He came to a certain place and stayed there for the night, because the sun had set. Taking one of the stones of the place, he put it under his head and lay down in that place. And he dreamed that there was a ladder set up on the earth, the top of it reaching to heaven; and the angels of God were ascending and descending on it. And the LORD stood beside him and said, "I am the LORD, the God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac; the land on which you lie I will give to you and to your offspring; and your offspring shall be like the dust of the earth, and you shall spread abroad to the west and to the east and to the north and to the south; and all the families of the earth shall be blessed in you and in your offspring. Know that I am with you and will keep you wherever you go, and will bring you back to this land; for I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you." Then Jacob woke from his sleep and said, "Surely the LORD is in this place—and I did not know it!" And he was afraid, and said, "How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven." Genesis 28:10-17*

*War broke out in heaven; Michael and his angels fought against the dragon. The dragon and his angels fought back, but they were defeated, and there was no longer any place for them in heaven. The great dragon was thrown down, that ancient serpent, who is called the Devil and Satan, the deceiver of the whole world—he was thrown down to the earth, and his angels were thrown down with him. Then I heard a loud voice in heaven, proclaiming, "Now have come the salvation and the power and the kingdom of our God and the authority of his Messiah, for the accuser of our comrades has been thrown down, who accuses them day and night before our God. But they have conquered him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony, for they did not cling to life even in the face of death. Rejoice then, you heavens and those who dwell in them! But woe to the earth and the sea, for for the devil has come down to you with great wrath, because he knows that his time is short!" Revelation 12:7-12*

*Everlasting God, you have ordained and constituted in a wonderful order the ministries of angels and mortals ...*

So begins the Collect for our Michaelmas worship today. The language is magisterial and inspiring and all the more so if we know that a Latin form of this prayer was included in the Gregorian sacramentary of the 10<sup>th</sup> century and has thus been prayed by Christians for over a millennium.

In the praying of this Collect today, I feel particularly compelled and comforted by the language and notion of "a wonderful order." It brings to my mind our Ascension sacristies: everything in its place, and a place for everything, nothing in excess, all lovingly cared for, ironed, polished and labeled. A 'wonderful order.' Would that the same wonderful order permeated more of our lives and more of God's world.

I admit that 'a wonderful order' is not necessarily how I think of angels and archangels or how they are portrayed in Scripture or how they may touch our own lives. Some angels do in fact seem to be sent to us to preserve or restore or manifest divine order. Just in the past few days, anticipating this feast, a few parishioners have shared with me some credible stories of the timely arrival of an angel to save from danger or, where there had been grief, to reassure, to give light, to impart that *all will be well* in God's time and plan. The first words of many angels in Scripture is, "*Do not be afraid.*"

Even so, 'a wonderful order' is rarely the first impression left by the angels whose stories permeate the Holy Scriptures. Angels typically disrupt the known or assumed order of things, including human expectations about what is or what should be or what will be.

In the case of this morning's first lesson, Jacob apparently receives a vision of the wonderful angelic order of which the Collect speaks. Angels of God ascend and descend from earth to heaven. A promise of a great and enduring legacy.

But the promise is not so quickly realized. The angels appear to Jacob as he travels to find a bride in his family's homeland. Jacob soon lays eyes on Rachael and is smitten. But an ordeal of fourteen years ensues before Rachael becomes Jacob's wife. And his troubles are far from over. Before Genesis concludes Jacob will be visited by another angel in the night, this one not as benevolent. He wrestles with the angel until daybreak and is injured but perseveres in the divine struggle until he receives a blessing.

Other angel visitations in Scripture are similarly vague, troubled or confrontational. An angel speaks to Moses out of the burning bush and issues a call to deliver God's people. But Moses responds, "*Not so quick; I'm sure you have the wrong guy! I'm clearly ill equipped.*" Exodus 3:1-15

Mary, mother of our Lord, similarly challenges the archangel Gabriel. She was *greatly troubled* by the angel's message and she asked, "*How can this be? It seems impossible.*" Luke 1:26-38

Angels often give a glimpse to mortals of heavenly order and plans, but the same angels then disappear and leave the mortals without a reliable blueprint.

Moses left the burning bush for on a forty-year journey through the wilderness that often left him isolated, frustrated, angry or confused.

The angel departed from Mary but left her pregnant with the Son of God whom she would see betrayed, mocked, tortured and crucified.

A certain pattern may be noticed here. The angel may reveal God's wonderful order, but the one to whom the angel appears is often left improvising, and is greatly tested, often over long periods of time, and will likely be misunderstood and challenged by well-intentioned orthodox souls. "*Where did you get that crazy idea? Show us your credentials! We've never done it that way!*"

In his 2013 memoir titled *My Bright Abyss*, the author Christian Wiman contemplates the slow-motion drama that can unfold between the divine and the human: "*What you must realize ....*" he writes, "*is that there is no right way that is going to become apparent to you once and for all. The most blinding illumination that strikes and perhaps radically changes your life will be so attenuated and obscured by doubts and dailiness that you may one day come to suspect the truth of that moment at all. The calling that seemed so clear will be lost in echoes of questionings and indecision .... Wisdom is accepting the truth of this. Courage is persisting with life in spite of it.*"

We shouldn't end our reflection here without also wondering if or how 'a wonderful order' may be seen in today's reading from Revelation. War breaks out in heaven, but then there is resolution. The text seems to affirm the wonderful order of peace and righteousness that have been intended by God since the creation of the world, that will be manifest by God through the Archangel Michael, and that for now endure by way of faith and hope in us.

You'll note as well that the text ends with a note of implicit caution: '*... woe to the earth and the sea, for the devil has come down to you with great wrath, because he knows that his time is short!*'

Chilling lines. The devil's wrath continues to be unleashed amongst us by way of our violence, our betrayals ~ of others and of our own highest good ~ our mistrust, our greed, our blind eyes, our silences when we should speak out, and so many other manifestations of what must be seen as *disorder*.

One take-home assignment for us today may be to locate a place where the battle is being waged, whether in our world, or in our neighborhood or household or in our own heart. Perhaps we can also imagine, alongside that sorrowful battle scene, what God's wonderful order might look like, might be like, in the place of that sorrow. And then we might ask about our own place in, our own responsibility for that wonderful, divine order.

My cautions about angels notwithstanding, they do invariably remind us that we are not alone, even when we imagine ourselves to be. So let us also take to heart and make our own the petition in today's collect: *Mercifully grant that, as your holy angels always serve and worship you in heaven, so by your appointment they may help and defend us here on earth. Amen.*