

Feast of Michael and All Angels
September 29, 2019
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I love the various juxtapositions in our prayer this afternoon. When your rector sent me the outline of what was planned for today - recital, rededication of the organ, recognition of the Organist Emeritus, evensong with sermon, benediction of the blessed sacrament, observance of the Feast of St. Michael and All Angels, all topped off with (of course, this being the Church of the Ascension!) a lavish reception - I thought, why not throw in an ordination or two and maybe some confirmations. I love the exuberance of it all. I love the care and tending of that instrument up there to lead God's praises. I love the invitation to lavish contemplation of the mystery of Jesus present with us in the Eucharist. I love the Feast of Michael and the Holy Angels because of its sheer, audacious recognition of spiritual realities beyond our capacity to see or touch or measure. I love all of it. I am grateful that the church tonight has the opportunity to throw a great big celebratory, holy, music-marinated party. Church of the Ascension, you deserve this. God delights in you and it is good and right to revel in that love and to return, just a little of it with joy and wonder.

And then there are those readings we've heard. One more juxtaposition. Those dark and even terrifying readings from Scripture. "There shall be a time of anguish," says the prophet Daniel, "such as has never occurred since nations first came into existence." That'll be the prelude for the angels to do their work. "The sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, the stars will fall from heaven," says Jesus, "and *then* people will see the Son of Man coming with the angels." Um. Did someone make a mistake?

This is supposed to be a party, right? Well, yes it is. But these apocalyptic passages are an important reminder of what this party is *for*. What our commemoration of the angelic host is for. What our worship of the living Christ in the eucharist is for. What all of this, all of this, is for. The purpose of the whole Christian enterprise. Namely, the redemption of this broken, beautiful world. The restoration of all things - you and me included - to a right relationship with one another and with God. To rescue us from our own worst actions and their consequences. This is serious. This world has teeth and God knows it. God does know it.

There is much scholarly speculation about the history of the notion of angels in both Judaism and early Christianity. The first recorded liturgical commemoration of the Archangel Michael, so often called the Prince of the Angelic armies, comes from around the 4th century. But both in Scripture and in those earliest Christian observances, the common thread is the frank recognition of the human need for protection from illness and exploitation, from sin and sorrow, from evil forces that threaten our very existence. God's messengers (which is fundamentally what the word "angel" means) are sent to aid us and protect us and fight for us in a world full of dangers to body and soul. In our time, of course, the concept of angels has been trivialized into something, shall we say, a little less consequential than all that. Precious moments cherubs are not quite what the Bible has in mind. In our day the great and glorious angelic hosts of heaven have become trendy and have been subverted into chubby babies with wings, svelte art deco ladies, or movie stars in tennis shoes and jeans. Pop culture has been able to do more damage to the general understanding of angels than any number of deconstructing theologians could ever do.

I wonder if you know the works of the British writer, Phillip Pullman. He's most famous I think for his young adult novels, particularly a trilogy called in the United States, The Golden Compass, in which angelic figures appear prominently. Rowan Williams calls Pullman, CS Lewis' evil twin. Pullman describes himself as a "Church of England atheist." In any case, his novels are about God, but not in the obvious way. He is a fierce critic of what so much of religion has made God out to be. How religion sets up little versions of God and then worships the mistake. Here's an example of what he has to say about all this:

I know whom we must fight...it is the Church. For all its history, it's tried to suppress and control every natural impulse. That is what the Church does, and every church is the same: control, destroy, obliterate every good feeling.

Well then. I do not believe that's what we're doing here tonight. And I *do* believe that part of what we are here tonight to do is to thank God precisely for the grace of being able to delight in the goodness of creation - feelings, impulses and all - it's the point of the sensual, exuberant way we worship here. The world around us - quite without the church's help - does a bang up job of destroying, disfiguring, and obliterating that delight. Watch the news.

So in the lengthening darkest all around us, I hope you will join me in trusting that at least part of the work of the holy angels is to guard us, to watch over us as we carve out spaces of delight in this anguished world, to celebrate the ultimate goodness and love of a Creator who will stop at nothing to bring us all home.