

The Festival of St. Michael and All Angels (observed)
St. Matthew 18:1-10: "The World's Least Are God's Greatest."
September 24, 2017 | Saude & Jerico Lutheran Churches

In Nomine Iesu

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Jesus, Brightness of the Father,
Life and Strength of all who live,
For creating guardian angels
Glory to Thy name we give
And Thy wondrous praise rehearse,
Singing in harmonious verse.

Blessed Lord, by their protection
Shelter us from harm this day;
Keep us pure in flesh and spirit,
Save us from the Foe, we pray,
And vouchsafe us by Thy grace
In Thy Paradise a place. Amen. (ELH 547, vv. 1-2)

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen. (Rom. 1:7, etc.)

The sermon text for this morning is taken from the eighteenth chapter of the Gospel according to St. Matthew. We read selected verses in Jesus' name:

At that time the disciples came to Jesus, saying, "Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?" / And calling to Him a child, He put him in the midst of them and said, "Truly, I say to you, unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. / "Whoever receives one such child in My name receives Me, but whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in Me to sin, it would be better for him to have a great millstone fastened around his neck and to be drowned in the depth of the sea. / "Woe to the world for temptations to sin! For it is necessary that temptations come, but woe to the one by whom the temptation comes! And if your hand or your foot causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to enter life crippled or lame than with two hands or two feet to be thrown into the eternal fire. And if your eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away. It is better for you to enter life with one eye than with two eyes to be thrown into the hell of fire. / "See that you do not despise one of these little ones. For I tell you that in heaven their angels always see the face of My Father who is in heaven." (ESV)

These are Your words, heavenly Father. Sanctify us by Your truth, Your Word is truth. Amen. (Jn. 17:17)

In Christ Jesus, who is "the greatest in the kingdom of heaven" and shares His greatness with you, dear fellow redeemed:

In 2009, the Barna research group asked a sampling of Christians across the U. S. to respond to the statement that Satan "is not a living being but is a symbol of evil." In other words, Satan is

not real, but is a name we give to bad things in the world. Almost 60% of Christians surveyed either strongly agreed or somewhat agreed with the statement. They did not believe Satan was a real being. On the other hand, a 2011 survey of Christians and non-Christians suggested that a large majority of Americans think that angels are real. Put together, these surveys indicate that a majority of *Christians* do not think the devil is real, while the majority of *people* think angels are.

Why do angels fare so much better in the national consciousness than the devil does? It is no surprise that people deny the existence of the devil. First of all, they do not want to believe that a totally evil being exists whose only goal is to get people to go to hell. They pass this off as “bogeyman talk” from Christians who are trying to get people in church. The other reason the devil’s existence is denied is by his own doing. If Satan can get people to ignore him, he can infiltrate their lives easily. Not recognizing this danger is like leaving the front door unlocked in a bad part of the city or sending your bank account information to “hackers anonymous.” Martin Luther writes that all the devil is looking for is a small opening. If his serpent-head can fit through, then the rest of his scaly body will follow.

But at least people believe in the existence of angels. This is good, except that their idea of angels is not exactly on the mark. They might talk about a dead person who now serves as their guardian angel, watching over them. Or they might content themselves to skip church and let their Bibles collect dust, because their angel will keep them safe. Such sentimental thoughts about the angels are contrary to what the Bible teaches. When people die they do not become angels. And the protection of angels is no substitute for hearing and learning God’s Word.

I

What the Bible teaches is that Satan and the angels are real. The devil and the demons were once good angels, created by God to serve Him and mankind. Sometime after the creation was complete, a portion of the angels rebelled against God, perhaps for the same reason that Adam and Eve rebelled—they wanted to “*be like God*” (*Gen. 3:5*). Of course, these created beings were no match for their Creator. When they could not defeat Him, they set their sights on God’s special creation. Today’s Epistle lesson from St. John’s Revelation, describes the devil like a prosecutor in a courtroom, who “*who accuses [God’s children] day and night*” (*Rev. 12:10*). But his accusations do not stand. All sinners are acquitted. Their penalty has been paid “*by the blood of the Lamb*” (*v. 11*).

But that does not stop the devil from trying. He plants seeds of doubt in the Christian’s mind. “Are you sure that God loves you? How could He forgive a sinner like you?” Or he approaches from the other side, “Look at how much better you are than other people! Look at how much you do, how much you give! What a fine example you are!” When pride and self-righteousness enter the heart, there is not much room for faith. Or the devil might afflict you like he did Job. He tries to steal away your daily bread to get you to question God and lose faith in Him. He turns Christian against Christian, and Christians against their church. He makes everything else in life seem more appealing and more important than God’s Word.

But for all the ways the devil assaults us, we are not without protection. God commands countless good angels who did not join in Satan’s rebellion. He sends those angels especially to serve believers. The author to the Hebrews indicates this when he writes about angels, “*Are they not all ministering spirits sent out to serve for the sake of those who are to inherit salvation?*” (*1:14*).

And the psalmist says, *“For he will command his angels concerning you to guard you in all your ways”* (Ps. 91:11). We would be absolutely stunned to know how much the angels have protected us in our lives, from all sorts of trouble and harm. Luther writes that *“If it were not for the protection of the dear angels, no child would grow to full age, even if the parents took all possible care.”* That is how intent the demons are to destroy us.

But the demons cannot prevail against the angels, because the angels are sent by God and operate under His authority. You might think it is possible for a good angel to be separated from his fellow spirits and be ambushed by the demons. But the angels are never away from God’s presence. Jesus says in today’s text, *“For I tell you that in heaven their angels always see the face of My Father who is in heaven.”* The angels are always looking upon God, and He is always looking upon them and those they serve.

Specifically here, Jesus is talking about the angels’ service to the “little ones.” He is not referring to those of short stature. He is talking about little children. Isn’t it something! God sends His mighty angels to watch over and protect the little children. This is like the company CEO taking a shift in the daycare center for his employee’s kids, or like the number one golfer in the world cleaning up the messes kids leave at a putt-putt golf course. It seems as though the angels should have more important things to do. But no, Jesus says. They could do nothing better than care for children.

II

When His disciples wanted to know who was the greatest in the kingdom of heaven, Jesus brought a child before them and said, *“Truly, I say to you, unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.”* Then He took the point even further, *“Whoever receives one such child in My name receives Me.”* This should impress on us how dedicated we should be to the nurture and training of children.

God has given this responsibility first of all to fathers and mothers or guardians, and then to pastors and teachers. The devil and demons are constantly working to pollute the minds of the youth, to get them to despise God’s Word, to be greedy and selfish, to disrespect their authorities, to seek fulfillment in their own accomplishments. This is why they need to be taught how the Ten Commandments apply to their lives, and how they have not come close to keeping them. And they need the comfort and strength of the Gospel, that message which tells them there is hope. The Gospel gives them Jesus and changes their hearts, so that they desire the good that God gives instead of the empty promises of the world.

The world seems to offer so much. You can be the best athlete, the smartest student, the prettiest person if you just work hard, if you dedicate yourself to your dreams. But what happens if you do not reach the top? What if you do? Does the world’s adoration bring you any closer to heaven? Just the opposite. There are many great athletes, great thinkers, great beauties in hell. What good did their success in the world accomplish for them? They followed the devil’s temptations and now have the result. This is why Jesus warns about these temptations. He says that it would be far better for you to lose the parts of your body that lead you into temptation and *“to enter life crippled or lame”* or *“with one eye”* than to be condemned to hell with all parts intact.

God does not require you to be great as the world defines it—a great parent, a great friend, a great citizen, and so on. Who among us could say that we are these things? We know our sins. We know where we have failed our neighbors, including the youth in our care. God does not look for greatness; He looks for faithfulness, that you believe His Word. He hears the cry of the weary and burdened, and the humble repentance of the sinner. He listens to every petition for mercy and help, and He gives it. The Lord has not forgotten you. As ready as He is to defend you with His angels, He is just as eager to be gracious unto you and give you peace.

Jesus has made peace between you and God. He offered His perfect eyes for your sinful ones, His perfect hands and feet for yours that have led you into sin. He substituted His perfect love and concern for His neighbor, with yours which is not always pure. Jesus was thrown into the eternal fire of hell, so you would have the glories of heaven. The concern God has for your salvation is shown by the way heaven erupts in rejoicing whenever a sinner repents and trusts in Jesus. The good angels reflect what they see in the face of God. So when *“there is joy before the angels of God over one sinner who repents”* (Lk. 15:10), that joy is radiating from the face of your gracious Lord.

The world cares not at all about repentance and faith, or about the proper training of the youth, or about the actual mission of God’s angels. These things are unimportant to the world. But **The World’s Least Are God’s Greatest**. The saving work of Jesus, the conversion of the sinner, the tender faith of the child, the obedient service of the angels—these things are great in God’s sight. He loves you not for what you could be, but for what you are. You are His own child, bought by the blood of Jesus, saved by His death, acquitted by His resurrection, baptized into His grace, fed with His body and blood, destined for the eternal mansions.

Your humble, childlike faith in Jesus will not be disappointed when your time on this earth comes to an end. The angels will bring you into God’s kingdom where, like them, you will always behold the face of your heavenly Father.

Glory be to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Ghost; as it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be, forevermore. Amen.

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