



Saint Thomas Church Fifth Avenue  
in the City of New York

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[www.SaintThomasChurch.org](http://www.SaintThomasChurch.org)

**Sunday, September 29, 2013**  
*The Feast of Saint Michael & All Angels*

*Festal Eucharist*  
*at 11am*

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A Sermon by  
The Reverend Victor Lee Austin, Ph.D.  
on  
Genesis 28:10-17 & Saint John 1:47-51  
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*YOU AIN'T SEEN NOTHIN' YET*

The feast of Saint Michael and All Angels brings much joy to many of us. It is the 18<sup>th</sup> such feast since Father Mead was instituted here as rector. Father Mead has long studied angels; as any of you who have taken it know, angels figure prominently in the rector's Christian doctrine class. Our rector knows thoroughly everything that the Bible teaches about angels, and he holds that knowledge passionately as important to our Christian faith. So it is not mere fancy for him to say that he has put his rectorship here at Saint Thomas under the protection of Saint Michael and the angels; that's not just some quaint manner of speaking; for him, it's bedrock truth and existential reality.

The protection of angels is, shall we say, nothing to sneeze at. Sneeze at the devil if you wish; indeed, the devil has a smell that should bring to all healthy nostrils a violent sneeze. But don't sneeze at angels. There are spiritual forces for good in this vast universe of God's creating.

The very name "Michael" points to the role of angels in defending what's good. "Michael" means the question "Who is like God?" It is the challenging question posed by this prince-angel against any who would claim to displace God, to be "like God" in the sense of usurpation. Susan and I, who were married on this feast day in 1978, often reminded our son about that question mark on his name. A "Michael" is not one who like God; a "Michael" is rather one who takes up God's cause against his opponents.

The opposition to God goes back as far as we can see. The serpent, the snake in the garden, tempted our first parents with the thought that they could be "like God," insinuating that they had in themselves the autonomy to declare what's good and what's evil. I do not need to tell you that this is a live temptation today, and not just for individuals. We see the usurpation of God in many social practices and trends of thought.

The problem is that when we humans set out to push God aside and define for ourselves what's right and wrong, good and evil, we end up harming ourselves and wounding our humanity. Angels oppose all this, and by opposing God's enemies they at the same time defend the goodness and dignity of every human being.

But protection—that "Michael"-function—is hardly the end of what angels do. Just as significantly, angels have a revelatory function. Think of Gabriel, appearing to the virgin Mary and revealing to her what an utterly unexpected thing God was prepared to do, and revealing to her furthermore that she could freely

participate in that unexpected thing. But let's go back further than Mary, back into the second millennium B.C. It is the story of our first reading today.

A man is escaping from a messy situation; his brother has reason to take his life and the brute force to do so. The man comes to a certain place for the night, and in his sleep he dreams. He sees the sky open, and there's a ladder, propped up from the earth into that hole in the sky. A connection exists, in this place, in his dream, between his life on this earth and the place where God dwells. God in this dream is up there in heaven, far away, and yet there is communication between God and man: there is that ladder, and the angels of God are going up and down upon it. God speaks to him in his dream, and confirms that he has a future. God will be "with" him and "keep" him into that future; despite the messiness and danger and forthcoming troubles and struggles, his life will never be cut off from the life of God.

That is an angelic revelation: that no matter where we go, no matter what happens to us, we have access to communication with God. We will never be cut off.

This is true for us, and not merely an ancient picture that might make us feel a little better, because *Jesus is that ladder*. There was a man named Nathaniel sitting under a fig tree. His friend Philip found him there, and urged him to come meet Jesus. When Nathaniel arrives, Jesus recognizes him, and calls him a man without guile. Nathaniel is perhaps flattered (who wouldn't be?), but he doesn't know how Jesus knows him. Jesus tells him: "Before Philip called you, when you were under the fig tree, I saw you." And Nathaniel believes. He calls Jesus the son of God and the king of Israel.

But then Jesus says, You will see greater things than these. "You will see heaven opened, and the angels ascending and descending upon the Son of man."

Jesus deliberately references Jacob's dream. And the "you" in what he says—"You will see . . . angels ascending and descending"—that "you" is plural. It means all the disciples. It means all those who hear this Gospel read through the centuries. It means you who are sitting here in a pew on Fifth Avenue and Fifty-third Street in this 18<sup>th</sup> year of the rectorship of Andrew Mead. For you to see, angels ascend and descend upon Jesus, who is Jacob's ladder but not confined to that place where Jacob had his dream but is wherever the Holy Spirit is. Since Jesus' gift to all who would receive it is the Holy Spirit, wherever you are there is this ladder, there is this communication; wherever you are, you are not cut off from God.

But don't forget the preamble: "You will see greater things than these." Or if you prefer, "You Ain't Seen Nothin' Yet."

We often look to the past with regret and to the present with fear of losing what we have. People we have loved dearly have died, and those we love dearly right now may be slipping away. The leaves are starting to turn brilliant colors, but they will fall, and the dark time of the year will come upon us. You're young and in the fullness of your life, but times are difficult and you wonder if you'll ever get the opportunities that the previous generation enjoyed. Or you're like me, a widower who with good health might still have a few productive decades. Or your own summer is coming to an end, and winter may be closer than it seems.

Friends! All these thoughts are wrong and delusional because they leave angels out of the picture! Remember Jesus' words: *You will see greater things than these*. Cities pass away. Empires fall. Buildings crumble. While we have time, we work to shore them up and perhaps improve them a bit. But when New York City is as much an ancient memory as the Roman Empire, you, a creature of God made for eternity, you will still be alive; and if you are God's friend, you will still be a creative, communicative creature, in love with God, in love with all those who love God, in that place of true communications. You ain't seen nothin' yet. Thanks to the Son of God, upon whom the angels even now ascend and descend!