



SAINT THOMAS CHURCH FIFTH AVENUE
in the City of New York
The Reverend Canon Carl F. Turner, Rector
www.SaintThomasChurch.org

Sunday, September 29, 2019
The Feast of Saint Michael and All Angels

Festal Evensong
at 4:00 p.m.

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A Sermon by
The Reverend Dr. Patrick S. Cheng, *Theologian in Residence*
on
2 Kings 6:8-17 and Revelation 5:1-14
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On the Threshold

You may not realize this, but you are surrounded by angels each time you walk into Saint Thomas Church.

Look up the next time you enter the narthex from Fifth Avenue. There, you will see four stone angels looking down on you, each holding one of the four light fixtures from the ceiling. Then look down at the central mosaic on the floor. There, you will see the words of the angels who announced Jesus' birth to the shepherds: "Peace on earth to men of good will."

Look to the right, and you will see two archangels flanking the World War II memorial altar. On the left side is the angelic warrior, Saint Michael, holding his sword. And on the right side is the angelic messenger, Saint Gabriel, holding his trumpet.

And looking to the left as you enter the second set of doors, you will see Saint Michael slaying Satan in the form of a dragon above the World War I memorial.

You are surrounded by angels each time you walk into Saint Thomas Church.

Today is the Feast of Saint Michael and All Angels. On this day, the church recognizes the unique ministry of angels. In the words of the collect of the day, the ministry of angels is twofold. First, angels "always serve and worship [God] in heaven." And, second, angels "help and defend us on earth."

Tonight's readings contain both aspects of this angelic ministry: serving and worshiping God in heaven; and helping and defending us on earth.

In our lesson from the Book of Revelation, we hear about the angels serving God through worship in heaven. In his vision of the apocalypse, Saint John the Divine sees myriads and myriads – and thousands and thousands – of angels surrounding the throne of the Lamb of God. And what are they doing? They are serving the Lamb through worship – by literally singing his praises.

And in our lesson from Second Kings, we hear about angels helping and defending human beings on earth. In that passage, the king of Aram is pursuing the prophet Elisha, who is in the city of Dothan. When the king surrounds that city with an army of horses and chariots, Elisha's servant is terrified. But then God

opens the eyes of Elisha's servant, and he sees an angelic army of horses and chariots of fire surrounding Elisha. The angels have come to defend Elisha and his servant here on earth.

Tonight's readings show us that the biblical witness about angels is rich indeed. But, as a 21st century theologian living and working in the bastion of secularism known as Midtown Manhattan, I must confess that it can be challenging to say very much about the theology of angels.

I'm not the only one who feels this way, of course. The great 20th century theologian Karl Barth wrote that angelology, or the doctrine of angels, is the "most remarkable and difficult [area] of all." He cautioned that much of this area could devolve into "theological caprice" or "valueless, grotesque and even absurd speculation."

The Reformation theologian John Calvin gave a similar warning over 450 years ago. Calvin wrote in his *Institutes* that "we should not indulge in speculations concerning the angels." He encouraged us to "leave those empty speculations which idle men have taught apart from God's Word concerning the nature, orders, and number of angels."

So what can we say theologically about angels? With all due respect to John Calvin, this "idle man" – also known as your Theologian in Residence – will at least try to say *something* meaningful about angels this evening!

I want to take us back to the fact that we are surrounded by angels when we enter Saint Thomas Church. Recall that the angels are located in our narthex – which is the threshold, or transitional, space between Fifth Avenue and our nave. The narthex is an appropriate place for these angels because, at their essence, angels are threshold creatures.

First, angels are threshold creatures between God and humanity. The word "angel" comes from the Greek word *angelos*, which means "messenger." The primary job of angels is to serve God by delivering messages to human beings. The archangel Gabriel announces the incarnation to Mary of Nazareth. Angels announce the birth of Jesus to the shepherds. And an angel of the Lord announces to Mary Magdalene at the empty tomb that Christ has been raised. Angels are threshold creatures between God and humanity.

Second, angels are threshold creatures on the ladder of creation. Thomas Aquinas argued that angels must exist because they fill the gap between human beings and God. Think about it. Human beings are created and have bodies. God, by contrast, is uncreated and has no body. But there's a gap in the middle. Logic tells us that there must be something in between human beings and God. That is, there must be something that is created – like humans – but that has no body – like God. And that's exactly what we have with angels. Angels are created and yet have no bodies. As such, angels are threshold creatures on the ladder of creation.

Third, angels are threshold creatures between life and death. You may know the words of *In Paradisum*, which is the final anthem in the Book of Common Prayer's burial liturgy. We sing or say: "Into paradise may the angels lead thee; and at thy coming may the martyrs receive thee, and bring thee into the holy city Jerusalem." Angels bring us from earthly life to eternal life. Angels are threshold creatures between life and death.

And so here we are at evensong, which is a threshold event in and of itself. Here we sit at the threshold between day and night. The sun is setting, and the stars are rising. It seems appropriate at this time to reflect upon the threshold moments of our lives. What have been some of those times for you?

Some of your threshold moments might have been joyful, such as the transition from sickness to health, or from singleness to marriage. Other threshold moments might have been painful, such as the transition from adulthood to old age, or from being with a beloved companion to being alone.

But regardless of where you might be in the transitions of your life, angels are God's promise that you are never alone. Angels are threshold creatures between God and humanity. As such, they connect us with God. And angels bear the Good News of the ultimate threshold being: Christ Jesus, who was both fully human and fully divine – and who became human so that we could become divine.

I'd like to close with an excerpt from the Litany of the Holy Angels from the original *Saint Augustine's Prayer Book*, first published by the Order of the Holy Cross in 1947. I invite you to close your eyes and to say the words "pray for us" after each phrase:

O ye Angels of God, Guardians of his people Israel,	<i>Pray for us.</i>
Announcing the birth of Jesus,	<i>Pray for us.</i>
Ministering to Jesus in the wilderness,	<i>Pray for us.</i>
Strengthening Jesus in his agony,	<i>Pray for us.</i>
Appearing at his Resurrection,	<i>Pray for us.</i>
Comforting the Disciples at the Ascension,	<i>Pray for us.</i>
Ministering to the heirs of Salvation,	<i>Pray for us.</i>
Rejoicing over the sinner that repents,	<i>Pray for us.</i>
O ye Angels of God, protecting us with ceaseless care,	<i>Pray for us.</i>