

Genesis 28:10-17; Psalm 103:1-5, 19-22; Revelation 12:7-12; John 1:47-51

“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.”

When I was younger, I remember watching the television show “Touched by an Angel” with my family. Many of you are probably familiar with this show. It follows 3 angels, who each episode would go to be with a person or a few people who needed comfort or encouragement as they faced some challenge or crossroads in their lives. The angels appeared like humans to them and generally befriended them, and then at the end they would reveal “I am an angel, sent by God” with a message of some sort.

I liked that show as a child, and I liked the angels, although I wasn’t sure that was exactly how angels worked. Actually, I was *quite* sure I didn’t know how angels worked. And as I got older, I only became less certain about what angels were like, or even whether they existed. I think many people lump them into a category with ghosts or aliens as hypothetical, unlikely, or non-existent phenomena.

We see other images of angels as well. There are the little fat naked cherubs, who are cute, but I’ve never been quite clear on what those ones do. There is a range of greeting-card type depictions of angels, and the more sort of sweet they appear, the more unreal or incredible they might seem to some of us.

So here on this feast day, the Feast of St. Michael and All Angels, perhaps we might ask ourselves what we think or believe about angels. What are they really like? Are they real? Do they have a real connection to our lives?

When I was in seminary, I took a class where we studied the theology of angels. And I was very open to the possibility of their existence – they do appear in various forms throughout Holy Scripture. But I guess I didn’t feel like angels, or the question of the existence of angels, had that much to do with my life. The angel Gabriel and others appear at big moments to certain people like the Virgin Mary, but angels weren’t something I thought a lot about or felt very *personally* connected to.

But I remember reading a commentary on a parable of Jesus from an early Church Father that really turned around my whole perspective. It was a commentary on the parable of the 99 sheep and the one that gets lost. You’ve heard the parable, how the shepherd leaves the 99 to go in search of the one. And very often today we hear this parable interpreted to speak of how Jesus seeks out the lost – those people who have sinned and turned away from him. And we may think of ourselves as lost sheep, or as ones that didn’t stray so far, although truly each of us does stray from God, with some regularity.

But in the ancient world, I discovered, the common interpretation of this story was quite different. Many, many early Christian writers, from Irenaeus of Lyons to Gregory of Nyssa, interpreted this parable with the 99 sheep being the *angels*, and *humanity* being the 1.

And this makes some sense, as angels, the ones who did not rebel against God at the first, do not sin. But none of us humans can truthfully claim to have never strayed – to have never sinned.

When I first heard this interpretation I was startled. But very quickly I began to love it. It suddenly painted for me a whole new picture of the relationship and connection between humans and angels. We are all the “sheep” – we have a common nature – *we* are the rational creatures of God – of all God’s Earthly creations humans and angels are the two that have rational minds. So despite the difference in physical body or spiritual body, we have much more in common with angels than with even the smartest of other animals.

And I love that we belong to the same flock! We belong together, humans and angels, and though humanity has separated ourselves from God and from the angels by choosing to sin, the angels miss us, and think of us as their brothers and sisters, and want us to return to be with them and worship God with them.

And this interpretation of the parable gives a rich meaning to the work of the shepherd as well – that Jesus, our Good Shepherd, worked so hard to win us back – that he “left the 99”, left his throne in heaven, and came to live among us, to find us humans, and invite us home to the nearer presence of God.

In the passage we heard from the Book of Revelation today, we can hear the joy of the angels that Jesus was successful, and that humanity is no longer separated from God or from our angelic brethren. In this passage they call out to each other to rejoice because “the accuser of our comrades has been thrown down.” Sin and death and the devil have been conquered by Jesus, and the angels rejoice over what that means for us returning to them. In our translation today the angels call us “comrades”. But in fact in the original Greek the angels call us “*brothers*” or “brothers and sisters”.

It stirs something in my heart to think that angels think of us in that way. The universe feels a little more full – a little less lonely – to think that all around there are other beings, other creatures of God, that see us as brothers and sisters. It’s a concept that seems like a gift to be able to believe. Something I’m happy to believe.

And worship is one of the ways and one of the places where we are united right now. We don’t have to wait to join a choir in heaven. When we come to worship here we are united to the angels by that worship. We join in the continuous praise of heaven, and heaven is present with us here. Worship, and above all the Eucharist – the Body of Christ, the Bread of Heaven, the foretaste of the Heavenly Banquet – the Eucharist unites heaven and earth.

And the unity of heaven and earth is a joy to remember especially on this day when we commemorate the 159<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Dedication of Grace Church – at the congregation’s original home in Old Town, Alexandria. “Grace Church” has moved spots, changed buildings, and of course is a completely different group of people than it was 159 years ago, and yet there is a continuity of this congregation. We know people who know people who knew people who tie us all the way back to that original group of people who left their home parish and gave incredibly of their time and efforts and money to begin this new congregation and to serve more people.

And in our worship today we are united with them as well. The Eucharist enables a kind of mystical time travel that unites us, through the Body and Blood of Christ, to Jesus’ last moment on the Cross, to his rising from the tomb, to his return at the last day, and to every other moment, on *every other altar*, where He has come and been present to His people. And so today we are united to the first Eucharist ever offered by Grace Church. We are united to all those who have ever worshiped with this congregation – those on earth and those in heaven. We are united to the angels who worship alongside them and us. And above all, of course, we are united to all of these, because we are united to Christ.