

The Rev. Dr. David K. McIntosh  
September 26, 2021- Michaelmas & Baptism of Christian Scalzo  
Given at St. Mark's Church, Bridgewater

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

**“Surely the LORD is in this place—and I did not know it!” †**

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These stories we heard are fantastic... that is, they are not grounded in our usual experience of this physical/ tangible world. They are fantastic, bizarre, some may even consider them fantasy. They are appointed for us today, for the celebration of ‘Michaelmas,’ the Solemnity of St. Michael, the Archangel, and All Angels. And I hope you find them helpful on this the day of Christian’s Baptism into the Church.

Ancient Church tradition and the teachings of the early Church Fathers tell us that our world was created to be ordered and organized, yet always changing, according to God’s plan... Indeed, the word “nature” (from the Greek, *Phyos*) ‘becoming.’ As humans, we are at the highest level of nature... supposedly among the highest of material and spiritual beings. And, in the same act of creation that created the material world, God also brought forth spiritual realities... and among these so-called spiritual realities are angels.

The word ‘angel’ comes to us from the Greek, “*angelos*” translated from a Hebrew word “*mal’ak*,” meaning, “messenger.” So, angels are messengers of God to the rest of nature. The Archangel Michael is head of all angels... and the protector of God’s people; the Book of Daniel calls him the one “who stands up for the children.” His Hebrew name means, “who is like God” (mi-who, ke- as/ like, el- deity/ God). The tradition in Judaism is to present his name as a question, “Who is like God?” The answer, “no one,” promotes the concept that the Archangel Michael represents humility before God... for no one is like God. He and the ranks of heavenly angels are messengers, who remind us to focus on God and God’s mission, as in today’s Communion Hymn (#432): “O praise ye the Lord! Rejoice in his word, ye angels of light... For love in creation, for heaven restored, for grace of salvation, O praise ye the Lord!”

Angels are also important because they remind us that there is more to the created universe than what we can see, hear, taste, or feel. They remind us that all spiritual forces other than God are still creations of God, less powerful than God, and depend upon God, and just like humans, these creatures have the freedom and power to either accept or reject God’s will. Hence the questions I will ask Christian in a few moments, and all of us as we renew our own Baptismal vows.

Because God’s creation can either accept or reject God’s will, we get these stories about fallen angels and the great dragon... of the forces of evil and good doing battle in the unseen realms of the universe, described in the Book of Revelation. These are the unique visions of the author of Revelation (found nowhere else in the Scriptures). As such, they may reflect the hardships that were being endured by First Century Jewish Christians during the Jewish War with Rome, and after the destruction of the Temple. In other words, the author envisioned this great ‘cosmic battle’ as a means of coping with and interpreting the conflicts experienced in his own time (just as Isaiah and Jeremiah had

done hundreds of years before). For the author of Revelation, this story is one of hope, in God's ultimate triumph over the forces of evil.

Most of us who live in the modern world tend to believe only what is tangible and what our eyes can see, not some nonsense about angels. But I would remind us of the Creed we recite every week. We believe in one God, the creator of "all things, seen and unseen." The Christian understanding is that the spiritual, unseen world exists all around us, and our God comes to us in many ways, both seen and unseen. The story from Genesis of Jacob's Ladder is an important example of this. Jacob fell asleep after his long journey, far from home and in the midst of turmoil and great personal struggle, he saw angels descending and ascending between heaven and earth. Whether a vision or a dream, his spiritual experience was so powerful that he exclaimed, "surely the Lord is in this place, and I did not know it!"

The message to us today is, no matter where we are, no matter how hard our struggle, God is able to reach us. God reached out to Jacob, found him, and somehow invisibly touched him through the angels. This story provides us reassurance... no matter how bad things get, we are never far from God nor is God far from us. So true this morning in our celebration of Baptism, when Christ becomes truly present to us in this young child. God here with us!

How often do we feel lonely and abandoned by others... lost in our own worries and fears, and fail to see (like Jacob) that we are surrounded by God's messengers? How often do we get so wrapped-up in our work and the busy-ness of our lives, so preoccupied with 'stuff' that we fail to greet God's messengers when they pass us on the street or at work? How often do we worry over household things and how proper and nice our homes should look, that we fail to see the angels in its messiness— among family, children, and friends? God is here, among us in unexpected times and unexpected places... in the midst of the ordinary!

The voice of faith, found within these stories and within our celebration of Michael and All Angels, allows us to enter a new, wonderful, and fantastic place... a place deep within our minds and our hearts, where angels live and do the will of God. In this place, we get a glimpse of and can envision a world different from the one we experience day to day. A 'better world' filled with the love Jesus proclaimed. With the help of those unseen angels in our lives, we get to respond as Jacob did: "How awesome is this place... Surely the Lord is here... and I did not know it!"

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Following his Baptism, Christian will be given a candle to take home... Lit from the Paschal Candle, it's a symbol of the "Light of Christ"— the light which darkness can never overcome. It's a reminder that life is stronger than death. So often, these candles get put away in a drawer or 'remembrance box' and are forgotten... Instead, I encourage Michael and Toni to place this candle in a prominent place in Christian's room... to be lit again at those times he is most in need of a reminder of God's love... Not only at times of celebration like a birthday or accomplishment... but also when he gets teased or bullied, when he must leave home for his first day of school, or when he questions who

he is and whether he is loved. Light that candle at all those times and remind him of what happened here today... remind him of God's presence with him, and love for him... and of God's love for all of us.