

In the name of ✠ Jesus.

Last Sunday, we heard Jesus tell the disciples of His passion, death, and resurrection and then gently scold them for their obtuse reaction, arguing about who would be the greatest in the kingdom of God.

If that sounds a lot like this Sunday's Gospel, you're right. Our text from St. Matthew today covers the same ground as last Sunday's, though Matthew does it with his own perspective and with different details. In fact, one of those details is the reason that this Gospel from Matthew was chosen for this Festival of St. Michael and All Angels. As Jesus taught the disciples about the humility of the child He had set in their midst and warned them about causing "*one of these little ones who believe in me to sin,*" He warned them further: "*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.*"

Angels play a major role in God's economy of salvation, that is, in what God does for us men and for our salvation. Much of what angels do in this economy is contained in what they are called — angel: ἄγγελος in the Greek and מַלְאָךְ in Hebrew — they mean messenger.

You know the major part angels play in the unfolding of Jesus' own story. An angel announced the miraculous birth of the forerunner to Zechariah and the barren Elizabeth. The angel later appeared to a young virgin and announced her great blessing — to bear the Son of God, the Son of David, Christ the everlasting King. Shortly thereafter, an angel would appear to Joseph to soothe his hurt and anger, assuring him of the Divine conception of this child in the womb of Mary. Nine months later an angel appeared to shepherds out in a field, tending their flocks. This angel announced the birth of this Divine Christ Child, humbly wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger. He is the Savior of the world — good news for all people. And a heavenly host of angels sang, "*Glory to God in the highest ...*" (Luke 2:14).

Sometimes the angel's message did more than inform; it warned and so protected, as when Joseph was warned to "*take the child [Jesus] and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until*" further notice (Matt. 2:13). Joseph did exactly that, keeping the young King far from Herod's sword. The angel did appear again to Joseph in a dream telling him when it was safe to return from Egypt (Matt. 2:19-20).

At Jesus' resurrection, too, angels were there at the grave announcing Jesus' victory. One way they did that was by rolling away the stone, allowing the disciples to peer in and see the empty tomb. But they also appeared to the women

at the tomb and proclaimed to them the good news: “*You seek Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has risen; he is not here*” (Mark 16:6). And later, at Jesus’ ascension, to the disciples who had witnessed Jesus ascending back to the Father who had sent Him, the angels said, “*Jesus ... will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven*” (Acts 1:11). Jesus will indeed come again in glory on the clouds (1 Thess. 4:16-17), St. Paul says; and Jesus says, all His angels will accompany Him (Matt. 25:31).

But angels do more. They are “*ministering spirit,*” Scripture says (Heb. 1:14). “*Bless the LORD, all his hosts, his ministers, who do his will,*” David sings (Ps. 103:21). Angels ministered to Jesus ... for example, as Jesus entered His ministry, angels attended to their God and ours (Mark 9:13), and as He neared the completion of His earthly mission, an angel offered Him aid (Lu 22:43). Legions of angels stood at the ready to answer the Father’s call to deliver Jesus from the hands of sinful men (Matt. 26:53) — but Jesus wouldn’t ask, for He knew the Father’s will was “*to crush Him,*” to “*put Him to grief,*” to offer His sinless life up as “*an offering for [our] guilt*” (Isa. 53:10).

God, however, did not create angels to serve only Jesus in His flesh, but us, too, “*who are to inherit salvation*” (Heb. 1:14), from lowly child to prominent prophet and apostle. These warrior spirits serve us by protecting us against our enemies all about us and fighting for us, as they did for Elisha, delivering him from the king of Syria (2 Ki 6), and as they did for Peter and the apostles, delivering them from the clutches of those who sought to silence the Gospel (Acts 5, 12).

On the other hand, if the Lord’s good angels are “*mighty ones,*” (Ps. 103:20), so too are those angels that sinned and were cast out of the Lord’s presence. These evil angels continually seek our downfall, as Luther says, by leading us into “*false belief, despair, and other great shame and vice*” (Luther, Lord’s Prayer, 6th Petition). The devil and his demon horde are our enemies our whole life long, and thus we pray constantly, “*But deliver us from the evil one.*”

Like it or not, we have been conscripted by water and the word into the Lord’s army. Arrayed in “*the full armor of God,*” we now struggle against “*schemes of the devil*” and against “*the spiritual forces of evil*” (Eph 6:11-12), as St. Paul says.

Nevertheless, don’t imagine that the outcome is unsure, for God’s plan of salvation is not dependent on us. Surely, we still fight a cosmic battle with the angelic host at our side, and to us that “*the fight is fierce, the warfare long.*” But we can hear “*triumph song*” being sung in the distance (LSB677), for ultimately “*the strife is o’er, the battle done*” (LSB464). Christ has won the victory. By cross and resurrection, Christ stomped on the head of the ancient serpent and crushed his head. Ours is little more than a “*mop-up operation,*” for though this serpent still

twists and squirms and writhes, he has been defeated by the "*blood of the Lamb.*" His house has been plundered; his gates cannot stand against Christ's church militant.

Therefore, let us rejoice in His victory on this day, and let us feast at the victor's table. Let us be strengthened for the skirmishes yet ahead of us, but let us prepare ourselves always for one last work of the Lord's ministering spirits. Let us ready ourselves by fidelity to God's word and sacraments for the day of Christ's return with His harvest angels at His side. Sustained by these, let us look to Christ and live with the sure and certain hope that we who trust in Him as our Savior will be gathered safely as fruitful ears in the Lord's garner evermore (LSB892).

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit.