

Listen to the Gospel according St. Luke, the 16th chapter, listening for the work of angels in it. If you want to turn to it in your pew Bibles, it's Luke 16:19-31.

“There was a rich man who was clothed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day. And at his gate was laid a poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores, who desired to be fed with what fell from the rich man's table. Moreover, even the dogs came and licked his sores. The poor man died and was carried by the angels to Abraham's side. The rich man also died and was buried, and in Hades, being in torment, he lifted up his eyes and saw Abraham far off and Lazarus at his side. And he called out, 'Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus to dip the end of his finger in water and cool my tongue, for I am in anguish in this flame.' But Abraham said, 'Child, remember that you in your lifetime received your good things, and Lazarus in like manner bad things; but now he is comforted here, and you are in anguish. And besides all this, between us and you a great chasm has been fixed, in order that those who would pass from here to you may not be able, and none may cross from there to us.' And he said, 'Then I beg you, father, to send him to my father's house— for I have five brothers— so that he may warn them, lest they also come into this place of torment.' But Abraham said, 'They have Moses and the Prophets; let them hear them.' And he said, 'No, father Abraham, but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent.' He said to him, 'If they do not hear Moses and the Prophets, neither will they be convinced if someone should rise from the dead.'”

This is the word of the Lord.

In the name of ✝ Jesus.

That Gospel text just read is the one assigned for this Sunday, if we had not been celebrating this Festival of St. Michael and All Angels. It has been our custom here to celebrate this festival yearly, transferring it from September 29th, its actual date, to a nearby Sunday.

It's probably good that we do so, for this “wonderful order” of angels can be something of a mystery, and not only to 8th grade LSUS students. Yes, Mrs. Schwanz from LSUS asked me to talk to her 8th grade class about angels after one of her students (unchurched and unbaptized) asked her about them. I'm doing it this Thursday on the actual St. Michael and All Angels day. And today we at Zion celebrate the Lord's grace and mercy in the service of angels to mankind.

In the St. Michael texts, we have heard how Michael and his angels fight for us, especially against our ancient enemy, who has been against us from the start

and who defeated our primordial parents by cunning rather than might, and so corrupted the whole world. In these texts and throughout Scripture, we see the good angels depicted as mighty warriors, wielding flaming swords, and riding in chariots of fire. Who wouldn't be frightened of such mighty creatures? Indeed, after their banishment Adam and Eve did not challenge the mighty angels guarding their reentry into the Garden. And from gentle Mary to ordinary shepherds in the field to pious women at the tomb, human beings quaked at the appearance of angels. After all, the glory of the Lord radiated from them, and even the mighty seraphim cover their faces in the presence of the "*Holy, Holy, Holy ... Lord of hosts*" Isaiah 6:3.

But we need not fear the good angels, for they were created to serve us. As the writer to the Hebrews teaches us, they are "*ministering spirits sent out to serve for the sake of those who are to inherit salvation*" Hebrews 1:14. And they are at work for us even without our prayer, though praying, as Luther taught, "let your holy angel be with me that the evil foe may have no power over me" is not a bad petition to pray morning and night. For this is according to God's will and His command: "*For he will command his angels concerning you to guard you in all your ways.*" They are with us in infancy, as Jesus taught, "*in heaven their angels always see the face of my Father who is in heaven.*" And they serve us in death, as Jesus taught: "*The poor man [Lazarus] died and was carried by the angels to Abraham's side.*"

And there is comfort in that, for whether rich or poor, we all will some day die, but in Christ we do not die alone. As David says, although "*[your] father and [your] mother [may] have forsaken [you], ... the LORD will take [you] in*" Psalm 27:10. Yes, He has His holy angels there with you, so that we die with angels by our side, ministering to us, and Jesus says, they will finally carry us to Abraham's bosom. Nothing so comforting for the rich man, you notice. How stark is Jesus' description of the rich man's death. He died, was buried, and was in the anguish of Hades. But Lazarus, whose name means "God has helped," is cradled in the bosom of Abraham, not becoming an angel as popular culture would have you believe, but receiving eternal comfort from all the evil that befell him in this life.

Now, it isn't that Lazarus received this blessing because he was poor, hungry, and covered with sores. Just as it wasn't that the rich man received his everlasting punishment because he was rich, had fine clothing, and "*feasted sumptuously.*" No, the rich man was faithless. He would not listen to Moses and the prophets. He had no time, what with all the extravagant feasts that he had to plan and prepare for. He had no time to listen to God as he spoke through the mouths of the holy prophets. "Tomorrow, maybe tomorrow, I'll have time," he may have thought.

“Today, I must take care of my own affairs.” He was caught in Satan’s snare, as St. Paul writes, *“those who desire to be rich fall into temptation, into a snare, into many senseless and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evils. It is through this craving that some have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many pangs”* 1 Tim. 6:9-10.

The rich man had no time; not for God, and certainly not for his neighbor, especially not one as unkempt and disgusting as the beggar, Lazarus, who sat at his gate—no time and no heart apparently. The beggar only desired to eat the table scraps. Not even these were forthcoming from this self-centered rich man. No food, no medical help to treat his sores; only the dogs to lick poor Lazarus’ wounds. No, the rich man had no faith and no *“fruit in keeping with repentance”* Matthew 3:8.

Lazarus, on the other hand, had only God to depend on, and indeed that’s what counts for eternity. Nothing we do counts for anything before God. What counts is what God has done for us, and that’s what God tells us in Moses and the prophets, and now the apostles. What counts is our Lord Jesus Christ. What counts are the wounds and sores that He endured in the face of our sinful, self-centeredness. What counts are the dogs of Bashan that surrounded His cross of suffering for the sins of the world. What counts is the death of the One who became a beggar for you and died and was cradled in the bosom of the Father for three days before rising from the dead. What counts are His words that deliver to you forgiveness of your sins. What counts is the water splashed upon you to resurrect you from the spiritual death of torment that awaits all who die apart from faith. What counts is the hand of Christ that places on your tongue the soothing balm of His body and blood in this life that you may not have to suffer the torment of hell in eternity.

For as wonderful as the work of the angels is in our lives, that is not their work. Salvation is the work of God, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit — alone. The God, who created us along with the holy angels, who redeemed us by *“the blood of the Lamb,”* the same blood that is the only effective weapon in the cosmic battle for our souls, is the God who has called us to faith in Christ by the Gospel, caused us to believe not only that Christ, the Lamb of God, died to take away our sins, but that He has risen from the dead, so that, in our death, He will command His angels to carry us to our heavenly home. And it’s in that faith that, come what may, we can confidently confess: *“we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth,*

nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.” And in that same confidence, we can sing our prayer, as we will to close this Divine Service: “Lord, let at last Thine angels come, To Abram’s bosom bear me home, That I may die unfearing; And in its narrow chamber keep My body safe in peaceful sleep Until Thy reappearing. And then from death awaken me That these mine eyes with joy may see, O Son of God, Thy glorious face, My Savior and my Fount of grace. Lord Jesus Christ, My prayer attend, my prayer attend, And I will praise Thee without end.”

In the name of the Father and of the ✝ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.