



Grace Lutheran Church, State College, PA

Rev. Scott E. Schul

Michael and All Angels: September 29, 2019

Sermon Title: "Someone to Watch Over Us"

Gospel Text: Luke 10:17-20

One of the hardest things for a parent to do is to let go of our children. For instance, when Emilio was a little boy, either Linda or I would hold his hand and walk him to the bus stop. We'd stand and make conversation with the other parents, all while keeping at least one eye on our child, and then as the bus would pull up, we'd snug up his hood, give a final instruction or two, watch him climb aboard the big yellow bus, and then wave as his traveled off to school. We had a similar routine at pick-up time.

Eventually, our kids grow tired and maybe a bit embarrassed at all the supervision. They quite rightly want to stretch their wings and experience a little independence. I remember when Emilio expressed that wish. At first, we walked him part-way and then stopped and watched as he made the rest of the journey to the bus stop by himself. Sometimes we'd act like we were letting him go all the way, but we'd sneak behind a tree and keep an eye on him, hoping he stayed safe and on-task. Eventually, even the most cautious of parents has to let their children go. Yet no matter how old they get, we never stop worrying about them.

Do you ever wonder if God has a similar feeling about us? After all, we are made in God's image. And so maybe God has that same parental sense of desiring us to be independent, and yet aware of how we so often misuse that independence in ways that can harm us or others. Is it possible that God provides someone to watch over us?

That's the question we have the opportunity to explore on this Festival of Michael and All Angels. The festival arose within the church around the year 450. It grew in popularity over the centuries and was carried over by Luther and the Reformers onto the Lutheran calendar, where it's marked each September 29th. Most Lutheran churches observe fixed-day festivals like this only when they fall on a Sunday. And so on this September 29th, that's why our paraments have changed from green to white, and why our Bible lessons are focused on Michael and angels. It's a day to remember that God has indeed provided someone to watch over us.

We tend to trivialize and domesticate angels as mythological creatures like fairies and gnomes – cute little pretend beings who fill the pages of children's books and serve as adorable statues in our gardens. But angels are more than myths; they're found throughout the Bible, in both testaments. Ancient Jewish writers named four angels: Gabriel, Michael, Raphael, and Uriel. Amidst the "heavenly hosts" of angels who appear in the New Testament, only two are explicitly named, Michael and Gabriel.

Based on the Biblical record, what exactly do angels do? Well, the very word “angel” in Greek means “messenger.” Gabriel is the best example of that – he is the one we hear about at Advent and Christmas, the one who announces the forthcoming birth of John the Baptist, and the angel who invites Mary to participate in the incarnation of Jesus.¹

In Luke’s Gospel, Jesus describes how the angels rejoice in heaven when we repent and turn back to God.² And in Matthew’s Gospel, Jesus speaks of angels as the ones who indeed do watch over us.³ Isn’t that a comforting thought? Martin Luther certainly thought so. He wrote his famous Small Catechism as a simple tool for lifelong study and devotion, especially within families. One of my favorite parts of it are the lovely little prayers he wrote for daily use. The Morning Blessing is to be prayed when you first wake up. The Evening Blessing is prayed right before you turn in for the night. Both of them end with this heartfelt plea: “Let your holy angel be with me, so that the wicked foe may have no power over me.”

I can’t say that I’ve ever seen an angel, at least not the heavenly sort – you know, the kind we picture with wings and flowing white robes. But I believe there were many times in my life when God’s angels were watching over me. These were times when I was tempted to go somewhere, say something, or do something that might have caused me or someone else harm. Looking backwards over my life, they were times when a little nudge here or a little prompting there altered my course ever so slightly, but just enough to change my life. Sometimes it was to spare me from a bad influence or bad decision. Other times it was so that my path would cross with the life of another person – an earthly angel - whose life and influence would be decisive in my life.

Are there times in your life when perhaps an angel was watching over you? And if you believe, as I do, that the angels *have* watched over you, then isn’t it reasonable to believe that they *continue* to be present in your life? Angels are a constant reminder that God *loves* you and is *with* you, especially during the hardest of times. Yes, there are times in our lives when we crave independence, but, no matter how self-reliant we *think* we are, truth is we *all* need someone to watch over us.

This isn’t just therapeutic happy talk designed to make you feel better about yourself or your life. The presence of God’s angels as messengers of guidance, direction, and hope is integral to our faith. We speak of it most directly on Sunday morning during the liturgy at communion time. It’s in something we all the “Preface to the Eucharist” - the portion the pastor chants before communion. Every Sunday it includes this line: “And so, with all the choirs of angels, with the church on earth and the hosts of heaven, we praise your name and join their unending hymn...” And then we all begin singing “Holy, Holy, Holy,” confident that the angels *are* celebrating and singing it along with us, just as they have long sung those very words, as recorded in the book of the Prophet Isaiah.⁴ At that moment in our liturgy each Sunday morning, God proclaims that the division between heaven and earth is *tissue-thin* and *blessedly porous* so that we can join our voices to those of the angels and *together* praise our Lord. It’s a joyous reminder every Sunday that *we have someone to watch over us*. The Lord has neither forgotten us nor abandoned us.

I want to conclude today with a few thoughts about one particular angel, Michael. Our reading today from Revelation portrays a vision in which Michael is a loyal warrior angel who leads an angelic army against the devil and holds the forces of evil at bay until the final victory is won by Christ, the Lamb of God. Not surprisingly, in Christian imagery and iconography Michael is typically portrayed as a powerful male in armor, carrying a spear or sword.

But Michael's power is far more than physical. Like any great messenger, he also carries with him the banner of truth. He relentlessly proclaims that Jesus and Jesus alone is King. Like many Biblical figures, including Jesus himself, Michael's very name reveals his mission. In Hebrew, Michael means "Who is like God?" It's the question Michael puts to anyone who attempts to substitute himself for our one true God. His name drives us back to the first and most important commandment, "I am the Lord your God; you shall have no other gods before me." Michael stands as a cautionary reminder that the *only* thing in heaven and earth in which we *can* and *should* invest our faith and trust is our Triune God.

But Michael and the angels also remind us that this God – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit - loves us fully, completely, and eternally. We can *never* be separated from that love. No matter what storms rage around us, we will *always* have someone to watch over us. Thanks be to God! Amen.

Citations

¹ See Luke 1

² Luke 15:10

³ Matthew 18:10

⁴ Isaiah 6:1-3