

The Church of St. Raphael the Archangel
Lexington, Kentucky
Sermon for Michaelmas ~ September 30, 2012
The Reverend Ronald D. Pogue

I was somewhat relieved when Fr. Johnnie told me that today we would be using the propers for the Feast of St. Michael and All Angels instead of the Sunday propers. I had been struggling to develop a sermon about faithful stewardship from the Sunday propers, which tell us about King Ahasuerus hanging Haman on the gallows that he had prepared for Mordecai in response to the report of Queen Esther, James' advice regarding anointing the sick and forgiving sins, and instructions from Jesus about cutting off hands and feet and plucking out eyes when those organs cause us to sin.

Perhaps you wonder why I was relieved. You may find yourselves asking, "What do angels have to do with stewardship?" That question certainly occurred to me. And, after some careful consideration of the readings, it occurred to me that Angels are all about stewardship!

For example, Jacob, the deceitful second-born twin of Isaac and Rebecca, emerged from the womb clinging to the foot of his brother, Esau. Jacob was running for his life when he had that dream in which he saw a ladder connecting heaven and earth with angels ascending and descending. He had deceived his father and cheated his hairy brother Esau out of his birthright. William J.A. Power, an Episcopal Priest and longtime professor at Perkins School of Theology in Dallas, used to refer to Esau and Jacob as "Harry and Grabby." The story of Jacob is the story of his spiritual and psychological development. Later in his life, he is compelled to return to his home to face his brother and suffer the consequences of his scheming. On the way, by the river Jabbock, he wrestles with the Angel of the Lord throughout the night and survives. Because of that, his name is changed from Jacob to Israel, which means to wrestle with God. From that time on, his family has gone by that name.

There is a subtle connection between the story of Jacob's Ladder and the story of Jesus' calling of Nathaniel. It is Philip who introduces us to Nathaniel in the Gospel of John. Philip has responded to the call of Jesus. He tells his friend Nathaniel that Jesus, the son of Joseph from Nazareth, is the Messiah. Nathaniel blurts out, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" It's the kind of insult with which people from rural places throughout the world are familiar. Nazareth is in Galilee and more sophisticated city folks considered everybody from there to be hillbillies. "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" Philip dismisses Nathaniel's condescension and simply says, "Come and see." When Jesus sees Nathaniel coming, he says, "Here is truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit." That is an allusion to the first Israelite, Jacob, who was filled with deceit. The conversation unfolds and Jesus lets Nathaniel know that he recognized the quality of his character before he opened his mouth. Nathaniel confesses that Jesus is truly the Son of God. Jesus promises that Nathaniel, "You ain't seen nothin' yet!" He says, "Very truly, I tell you, you will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man" (Jn. 1:51). That's another allusion to Jacob, who saw the Angels ascending and descending in his dream at a "certain place" thereafter referred to as Bethel (House of God) when he was literally running for his life from Beer-sheba to Haran.

So powerful was Jacob's numinous encounter with heaven at Bethel that he built an altar there to mark the spot so that he could return. Not only did he return; his descendants considered it a holy place for

generations and there was a family dispute later on about whether true worship should take place there or in Jerusalem.

Nathaniel's encounter with Jesus was no less memorable. He stood face to face with the One whom Moses and the Prophets said would come to deliver God's people. "Rabbi," he exclaimed, "You are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!"

And angels played a role in both stories!

Angels are God's messengers. Among other things, they remind us of our very special relationship with the Creator and Sovereign of the Universe. No other creature has such a favored status. The psalmist expressed it like this, "When I consider your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars you have set in their courses, What is man that you should be mindful of him? the son of man that you should seek him out? You have made him but little lower than the angels; you adorn him with glory and honor; You give him mastery over the works of your hands; you put all things under his feet" (Ps.8:4-7).

Angels have a way of getting our attention. They sure got Jacob's attention. They got the attention of Balaam, Joseph, Mary, Shepherds, Magi, and a host of others in our spiritual ancestry. Quite often, when an angel shows up, his greeting is, "Fear not!" Right! You readers of the Bible know that when anyone in the Bible says that, something scary is going on or about to happen. The angel is there to fortify the person to whom it is about to happen. Don't be afraid! God is about to do something fantastic. And in that moment in some out of the way place, some ordinary moment, the scales fall off the eyes of some regular person and the angel helps us see that *heaven is touching earth*.

Angels open our eyes and quicken our consciousness so that we can see, even for a brief moment in time that we are standing in the gate of heaven that we have a favored relationship with our Creator, and that we have a purpose, a mission that can be fulfilled by no other creature. We are the stewards, the responsible ones, and the givers. God partners with us, supplies us with a bounty, entrusts everything to us, and *all so that we can give*. In order for us to be spiritually healthy, we need to embrace our vocation as stewards. That vocation sets us apart from other beings and makes us human. The discipline of tithing helps us remember that everything we have, whether spent, saved, or given away, is a sacred trust from God. What we do with the first 10% influences what we do with the remaining 90%.

We do things to mark places where heaven and earth touch. We build cathedrals and churches, we sit in the same pew every week, we return to places where that thin veil has been parted for us and our lives have been transformed. We designate and consecrate meeting places with God, like this sanctuary and this altar. We sing of Angels, and Archangels, and all the company of heaven, recalling scenes like the one from today's reading from the Revelation to John. Angels are there, always in the wings, so to speak, pulling back the curtain so that we can see ourselves in a land in which heaven and earth touch, where things earthly and things heavenly are joined by the Incarnation of Jesus, the Son of God, upon whom angels ascend and descend.

There is a shape called the "vesica" that is used in most Episcopal dioceses for the seal of the diocese. The rings of our bishops usually have the diocesan seal engraved in them and they are used to place wax seals on ordination certificates and other documents. If you will watch, you'll notice that the

Church is about the only place you'll ever see the vesica used. Perhaps it is because this particular geometric design is the perfect intersection of two perfectly round circles and it symbolizes the intersection of two realms – the heavenly and the earthly. As Christians, you are I are supposed to be conscious that we live in that place. We call it “the kingdom of God.” In various ways, angels remind us of that.

So, today, as we celebrate the Feast of St. Michael (and St. Raphael) and all Angels, I invite you to listen for the rush of angel wings and consider the places in your life where your special vocation as stewards in and of God's creation has been revealed to you. Recall those moments when you knew what it was like to be God's instrument, times when you have experienced the heavenly joy of generosity, occasions when you were truly a follower of the One whom Moses and the Prophets foretold, whose life was characterized by giving and not by having, an Israelite in whom there was not deceit.

And, I invite you to consider a place one place in particular where heaven and earth should touch each time you go there - your checkbook. What if you learned to approach your checkbook with the same reverence you feel when you approach this holy altar. What if you listened for the voice of an angel in there saying, “Fear not!” So that, whether you are writing a check for God's tithe, a gift for someone you love, a purchase you have decided is important, or anything else, you realize that you are standing in the gate of heaven. There are so many other voices calling to us, telling us about things we need to do with our treasures. Wouldn't it make a difference if we were reminded that our checkbook is a place where a steward experiences heaven touching earth?

Our home in Galveston is directly across the street from the synagogue. Rabbi Jimmy Kessler and I became close friends during the ten years I lived and served there. He and I would often sit on our verandah or in his study and talk about things. Once I asked him about Jewish teaching concerning angels. I'll always remember one of the things he said to me. “The rabbis have said that God appoints an angel to every living thing. Even every blade of grass has an angel, whose job it is to stand beside that blade of grass and say, ‘Grow! Grow! Grow!’”

That's what an angel needs to say to a blade of grass because of its particular place in the scheme of things. A blade of grass, particularly bluegrass, needs to grow! And what about you and me? Surely God expects more from us than from a blade of grass or any other living thing. What do you think our angels have to say to us? Probably a lot of things. But of one thing I'm sure. Your angel is there to remind you of your special role as a steward of God's creation. Whatever else your angel says to you, I am confident he is saying, “Give! Give! Give!” Because that's what we need to hear and we really can't hear it often enough.