Sermon on the Feast of St. Michael and All Angels
(Genesis 28:10-17, Psalm 103:19-22, Revelation 12:7-12, John 1:47-51)

For those of you who wonder, the feast we celebrate today is one of a series of feasts that doesn’t qualify as one of the Principal Feasts, like Easter, Christmas or All Saints but one of those feasts that so marks the Christian Worldview that when it’s assigned day, September 29th falls on a Sunday, it, in the words of the lectionary, “takes precedence of a Sunday.”

This happens every 5 to 11 years; so the next time is 2024, then 2030 and then 2041.

But why, in this age, would we continue to celebrate this feast? Surely belief in angels is one of those things that no longer can be believed in?

It is true that the church has never claimed that belief in angels or their dark cousins, demons, is one of the essential beliefs of the faith. There is the line in the great ecumenical creed that refers to God as the maker of all that is seen and unseen

But many simply take that to refer to “spiritual realities” and not literal beings.

But of course, as our age is proving in spades, the existence of science doesn’t stop any of us from believing a whole variety of things; there are people who believe in a flat earth, in Bigfoot, in all manner and sundry of entities and realities though which ones they’d be ready to spill blood for is another matter.

There are many people, there are many books and TV shows e.g. Touched by an Angel that purport to tell of guardian angels, warring angels and the like.

What are we to make of this feast then; the particular readings chosen for today?

Is there something of the good news of God in this feast that goes beyond controversial and esoteric belief?

Yes, I think so, and I’m one of those that remains agnostic as to the make-up of the “spiritual realities” that exist beyond matter.

I think, for one, that the line in the Nicene Creed is profoundly important. There is, if we think about it, a vast diversity of being that includes all that relates to matter but also all that might have some relationship with matter but that can’t in any straightforward way be defined by matter: things like consciousness, Love, hope, faith as well as things like spirit, soul, evil and sin.

These realities, despite the efforts of neuro scientists, simply can’t be quantified. And so, at some fundamental level, what this feast represents is the vastness, unquantifiableness of God’s Creation and our participation in it; angels standing in for all the mysterious edges and crevasses of Creation.

But that is not yet the grand good news of this feast. There is something else that I think runs like a thread through our readings today: the angels of scripture do not so much “represent the unseen realm” as a “something” but stand as “witnesses *for* someone” and they do so at crucial moments in the story.

They do not, in other words, draw attention to themselves but in their actions witness in word and deed to God’s intentions.

They witness *for* the One whose good news runs through the Bible as a whole: the good news that our future is not some indeterminate crapshoot but the pledge of One who promises to be with us in faithfulness; even in our own unfaithfulness!

Jacob is a prime example of this: his very name means “one who deceives,” someone who spends his life trying to manufacture advantage through shrewd calculation.

Now, because of his deceptive ways, Jacob is running from his brother Esau whose blessing he has just stolen, this on top of the stolen birthright.

It would seem that he is toast! The ancients believed in the law of cause and effect every bit as much as you and I; they too understood that the past will eventually catch up with someone

Viewed from this perspective, Jacob does not have much hope; but then he has his famous dream of the *malachim,* the Hebrew word for messengers or witnesses ascending and descending a stairway to heaven.

Out in this lonely field, he is granted the gift of a higher sight; the dark night sky with its impersonal sparks of light and vastness becomes a living mosaic of personal concern.

And then, astoundingly, there is the Lord making the same pledge and promise to him that was first made to his grandfather and his father; a promise that despite his past, the future is not lost but will be different.

Time and time again we see this same result when angels appear: at just those points in the story when it appears that surely the inevitable unfolding of consequences of the past will derail everything angels appear to say otherwise.

Think of the appearance to Abraham and Sarah at the oaks of Mamre when Sarah is so far beyond childbearing; think of Mary, think of Jesus’ temptation in the wilderness, at Gethsemane and of their appearance at the empty tomb; think of Acts where the apostles are required to do things that given any realistic view of reality would be impossible: walking out of garrison-secured prison barracks, for example.

I’ll make this brief comment about our second reading, only somewhat connected to what is written in our text for today.

If we look at the biggest picture possible, the future of the universe, we know that it will all wind down into nothingness, so says the 2nd law of thermodynamics; everything, even the universe will die in a wimper; it would seem that, however many “new things,” however much hopeful new possibilities open up, there is, ultimately no hope.

Therefore, it doesn’t seem surprising that the book of Revelation is one long list of angels, for there, in the ultimate sense, the past does not determine the future: “and there will be a new heaven and new earth!”

So, to bring it back to now, are we merely the product of our past? Well, yes; and yet all of us hope that something will happen that will yet transform our future and overcome our past!

And it is precisely this hope that runs through the Bible as a whole, the angels standing in at different places in witness to the One who turns this seemingly pipedream hope into a living hope!

Jesus says something remarkable in our gospel reading, alluding to the story of Jacob’s dream he says, “very truly I tell you (which is about as emphatic as you can get!) you will see heaven open and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man.”

If I was to point to the *someone* that the angels witness when there is this inexplicable opening of hope into a new future, it is this one, Jesus and the forgiveness that is offered by him at this table.

In order for our past to not become our destiny we need to be able to put our faith in One who can deal with our past! One who can forgive us when we fail, when we set habits that seem irrevocable!

This is what Jacob witnessed, Jesus says; this is what began the transformation from Jacob which means “deceiver” to the name given to him when he wrestles with the angel at night, Israel “he who wrestles with God and prevails”

In relationship with Christ we are slowly (three steps forward, two steps back), enabled to live from our own efforts at manipulation and control towards and into our forgiveness, towards claiming our belovedness.

Indeed, we can begin to become the *malachim,* witnesses alongside the angels of scripture and/or the angels around us: to be metaphysically inclusive let’s say witnesses alongside the reality of God’s energies and presence around us!

This feast marks my ordination to the priesthood, so when it falls on a Sunday, the word Eucharist/Thanksgiving holds special significance for me; it also reminds me what I signed up for on that day: to, like Jacob, go on a lifelong journey in which I gradually let go of control and allow God to name me

A journey on which I’m called to allow the living Christ to forgive me, to do whatever would be necessary to take “deceiver” out of me and help me become one who wrestles, not only with belief but for the sake of others.

Today I celebrate and recommit myself to the reality, by the Spirit I am sent out as witness with you my sisters and brothers. I always wonder where I’ll be the next time I celebrate this feast on a Sunday. Today I’m grateful that it is with you at St. Thomas/St. Matthew!