

“To Fight Beside Angels”
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Genesis 28:10-17; Revelation 12:7-14

“War broke out in heaven.” Of all the strange, wondrous sights and sounds John experienced in his revelatory vision, nothing is more puzzling. We might be baffled by the many obscure symbols and metaphors that attempt to contain in human language a reality mere words cannot fully express, and some people obsess over how to decipher the meaning of those. And certainly we’re fascinated by the images of intense glory, and struggle to grasp its immaculate brightness so full of color, not to mention the strange creatures who attend the throne of God, some of them frightful in appearance. However, nothing’s more striking than those relatively straightforward yet scandalous five words, “War broke out in heaven.”

We think of heaven, and rightly so, as a realm of perfect peace in the presence of a God who is love. John wrote extensively about the joyous, ecstatic worship shared by humans and angels alike, a worship in which we in some measure share. For at each Eucharist, as we prepare to make holy the bread and wine offered, we sing with “angels and archangels and all the company of heaven . . . ‘Holy, holy, holy.’” Elsewhere, an elder explained to John that this perpetual worship arose in part from the gratitude of those who once suffered terribly, but now know no pain, whose tears are wiped from their cheeks by the very hand of God.

So how, why would any creature rebel against this beautiful life everlasting and attempt to overthrow God? What could possibly motivate part of the angelic host to do that – for that is who the dragon, the Devil, Satan, and his hoard were; angels! Why wage a war that they had to know was unwinnable; a war, therefore, started solely out of spite?

Most people think it's about pride, the same sort of pride we show when we think we know better than God how to live our lives. "As above, so below," goes the ancient wisdom, and *vice versa*. So maybe pride is the reason, but evil – a force personified by those rebellious angels – evil is a lot more subtle than we'd might like to believe.

It doesn't just come out raging treason against God. Instead, it can seem so reasonable. Evil whispers. Evil implies. It lies to get its way, to gain sway over God's beloved creatures and corrupt them into something unrecognizable – violent, vicious, cruel, heartless, mean, greedy. Yes, the battle continues, and always shall until that final day when God's inevitable triumph is complete, and the whole cosmos is made holy once more.

In the meantime, each September 29th, we pause to give God thanks and praise for St. Michael and All Angels, for our guardian protectors who fought and still fight against the dragon, however and wherever that wicked beast chooses to manifest itself. They guide us onto the pathway of faith, seeking to provoke within us "the better angels of our nature," as Abraham Lincoln put it. And the angels of God who serve Him loyally do so much more, as we well know, occupying a host of roles.

They bring comfort and strength and hope to exhausted, discouraged prophets like Elijah, who battled against the corrupt and idolatrous leaders of his day who threatened his life. Angels also reach out to rascals like Jacob who really didn't deserve it, which was the whole point. Those chosen by God to fulfill His purposes never deserve it. Grace doesn't work that way. Instead grace received with humility transforms the undeserving into people who can act as agents of God's purpose.

Angels are messengers that bring good news into the darkness of our world. They visited shepherds at night and sang of a newly born baby come to bring life and rebirth for all. Angels,

like Gabriel, approached Mary with a rather audacious piece of information. “God’s picked you to bear the Son of God, the Messiah. Are you in or out?” And when Jesus was at risk from the evil King Herod, angels came to Joseph in dreams, “Get out of here quick, and go to Egypt!”

In the wilderness, after Jesus met the test of temptation, angels tended to him, and in the Garden of Gethsemane, as he faced the agony of betrayal and the torture to come, the angels were there, too. When women came to anoint Jesus’ body in the tomb on the third day, angels met them there to confirm the truth that their eyes could not believe, and to give instructions on where they might find the Risen Christ.

And greatest of all, angels act as the harbingers of God’s presence. Jacob dreamed of a ladder with angels ascending and descending, but they were merely the prelude, because then God stood beside him and spoke words of great promise for Jacob and future generations. When Mary said yes to Gabriel, she simultaneously said yes to God, and God’s presence conceived within her something so great that we still can scarcely conceive it. When angels arrive, God is often not far behind.

Of course, not everything’s all sweetness and light with angels. Our culture portrays them as creatures of mercy, which they are, who are easy to interact with, which they often are not. In the Bible, when angels arrived, they consistently told people, “Do not be afraid,” and for good reason. It wasn’t just because of their otherworldly appearance.

People knew enough to know that if an angel paid you a visit, life was about to change, probably in a radical and risky direction, if you accepted the commission they brought from God. And if you reject the calling, refuse the reality of it and rebel against God, then woe be unto you. If an angel drops by to chat, be prepared for a blessed but potentially dreadful experience.

Yet we welcome them – their protection and guidance; their messages and comfort; and the challenging summons they bring from God. For in them, we see an example of noble obedience we would be wise to follow. In their presence, we are brought closer to the glory of God, and when they come, it is always to advance the cause of love, without which the world would be a living hell.

Of course, there are some among us who have never seen an angel, either waking or sleeping, or felt their presence in some other way. Perhaps we were simply unaware or unprepared, or perhaps an angel hasn't paid us a visit – yet. Please don't worry about that. Not every person in the Bible, not even people of great consequence, had an encounter with an angel, because it's not always necessary. Angels are emissaries, mediators between God and people, but sometimes, God chooses a more direct approach, unmediated by his heavenly servants.

So those who receive angels are no better or worse than those who don't, and those who don't aren't any better or worse either. As a very small child, I dreamed of an angel, who stood there and said nothing. I have deduced that I have a guardian angel, paid overtime with plenty of vacation days piled up, because in my younger years I did many foolish things – mainly involving speedometers – that without a guardian to protect me, I should have died a long time ago. Some people call that luck. I choose to call him by a different name.

Whatever the case, “War broke out in heaven,” and the instigators were cast out and thrust down to Earth, where they continue their efforts to undo God's good creation, causing chaos and discord, injustice and corruption. Theirs is ultimately a futile quest, and the forces of evil know that, but are most eager to take as many of us down with them as possible, purely out of spite.

We are not helpless in this fight. Angels defend us, but they also call us, at God's behest, to fight beside them, not as glorious heroes, but as humble servants. For if in the struggle against evil – against deceit and malice and pride and greed – we sit complacent, content to be safe as the war rages on, then we cannot be counted as allies of God, nor among the communion of saints among which all faithful angels are numbered.

We have a choice to make, just as Mary and Joseph and Elijah and Jacob and Jesus and countless others did. In one way, it's a hard choice, because it involves sacrifice. There are plenty of people heavily invested in the ways of evil: lies, cheating, bullying – and they will protect their "privilege" to their dying breath. But in another way, it isn't too hard of a choice, because if John's revelation is clear about one thing, it is this: the loss and suffering we incur for the sake of the Gospel are worth it, and we already know who wins in the end. And deep in our hearts we also know that to fight beside angels for God – for love and hope and peace and truth and joy – to fight beside angels for what is right, for what God wants, is the greatest honor we will ever know. Amen.