

25 September 2016
St. Michael and All Angels (observed)

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

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“Little Children”

Text: Matthew 18:1-11; Revelation 12:7-12; Daniel 10:10-14; 12:1-3

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

Little children are fed by their parents. Spoons of food are placed into hungry open mouths. So it is here too - bread placed into open mouths.

Little children are given drinks by their parents. First bottles, then cups help up to their lips. So it is here too - a cup of wine held up to thirsty lips.

Little children are read to by their parents. Stories to inform and to teach. So it is here too - stories read to teach us about ourselves, our world, and our God.

Little children are bathed by their parents, to wash off the grime of life. So it is here too - a bath to wash of the grime of sin.

Little children are born into a family. So it is here too - all of us have been born again, born from above, into the family of God.

All this is to say not that this is childish, what we do here. But that what we do here is for children. For the children of God. *For you*. No matter what your age, you are the children in Matthew's Gospel today. Children who always have angels serving you. Angels who always see the face of God.

In Old Testament Israel, the Tabernacle, and then later the Temple, had images of angels sewn into the curtains and molded of pure gold above the ark. For God was there, and wherever God is, there are angels. Always. It was a constant visual reminder of that invisible reality.

And though we do not have such visible images here, the invisible reality is the same. As children of God, children who have been given the Spirit of God, there are angels around you as well, there serving at your heavenly Father's instruction, protecting at His command, fighting those angels who want nothing to do with our Father, rage against Him, and want only to destroy what belongs to Him. Who want to destroy you. To destroy you now, but even more, to take you away from the promises of God in Jesus.

We heard of some of that fighting today. Michael and his angels fighting against the dragon and his angels. The dragon and his angels losing their place in heaven and being thrown down here, where their raging continues.

So how good to know that the angels of God are still active and serving and fighting for us here. Like the angel at the entrance to the Garden of Eden, they protect us from what is not good for us. Like the angels that filled the hills around Israel, they protect us from an enemy too large and too strong for us. When Jesus was here, they also served as divine messengers, first proclaiming the good news of His birth and then the good news of His resurrection. And still they stand at the ready, on alert, to serve.

Which is good, for there is great danger in this world and life. Not just physical danger, as we usually think when we think of danger - but *spiritual* danger. The danger of sin. That which is not of God or from God. That which seeks to take us away from God, promising life but giving only death. Like little children, we may not always see or feel or know the danger that comes with sin, but that makes it no less real.

And those who cause any of these little ones - you! - to sin, who put them into danger, they are treated as the evil angels were. ***It would be better for him to have a great millstone fastened around his neck and to be drowned in the depth of the sea.*** Better, for in the end, satan and his evil angels will be cast not into a sea of water, but a lake of fire. And better to chop off hands and feet and gouge out eyes, Jesus says, than to be thrown there. The message is clear: *God's little children are precious to Him. Don't mess with them.*

But here, perhaps, the message is not so good for us. The angels around us children of God, protecting us, serving us, fighting for us - that's good. We like that. But this word, this warning, is for us too. For us who not only sin ourselves, but who among us can claim that he has not caused another to sin? Is it not we who deserve the millstone? And we who need to pay for our sins with our evil hands and feet and eyes . . . with our very lives? Is it not we who are on the precipice of that lake of fire, looking into an eternity of fire which never goes out yet never consumes? And what angel can save us from that? Not from the accusations of an evil foe, but from the just judgment of our Father?

So what no angel could do, God Himself did. That's why the angels were so joyous in proclaiming the birth and the resurrection of Jesus. Jesus took the millstone we deserve and hung it around His neck. He gave His sinless hands and feet and eyes and life in place of yours. He took the fire of God's wrath against sin on the cross, that none of that be for you, but you be forgiven and restored to your place as children of God.

And so it is. Instead of being drowned in the depth of the sea, your sin and guilt are drowned in the waters of the Font, and then also in the Absolution, and you are given new life as a child of God. Instead of giving your body parts, you are given the Body and

Blood of Jesus for the salvation of you, body and soul. And as you receive these, humbled in repentance, you are the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. For you are in Christ. And the angels of God rejoice, as we heard a couple of weeks ago, over each and every sinners who so repents.

And they are not only rejoicing in heaven, they are rejoicing *here*, for remember: wherever God is, they are, and God is here for you in the gifts of His Word and Sacraments.

Which brings us back to the little children we are again. For another thing that little children are taught is to sing. We learn by singing. That's how we all learned the ABCs, and even the oldest among us here still remember that song. They may not remember a lot of other things they learned in school, but they remember that.

And so we sing. But not just by ourselves here - we also sing with the angels. When we sang *Glory to God in the highest, and peace to His people on earth* (LSB page 170) earlier, that was the song of the angels before it was our song.

And when we sing in a moment *Holy, holy, holy Lord, Lord God of power and might* (LSB page 178), that is the song of the angels around the throne of God that we are joining in with. Adding our meagre, cracking voices to their glorious, thunderous, temple-shaking voices.

And then later in that same song, when we sing *Hosanna, blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord*, we are joining not with angels, but with the children of God who welcomed Jesus into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, where He was going to die. And so with the same words we welcome Him here, where the same Body and Blood that rode on that donkey and hung on that cross are here for us, to give us the victory of His resurrection over the guilt of our sin and the power of the grave.

This is what satan is fighting to keep us from. Tempting us not just to do a sin here or there, but to find our life, our justification, our joy, our meaning, our hope, somewhere, anywhere else. To make us think that we're grown up now and can do it ourselves; that we don't need to be fed and given drink and read to. That we can stand on our own two feet! And so lure us away from the care and nurture of our Father that are here for us.

But Jesus reminds us today that the greatest in the kingdom of heaven are not those who grow up, who stand on their own two feet, or who can do it themselves - but the one who humbles himself like a little child. Who receives what she needs from the hand of her heavenly Father. And who knows there is no better place to be.

Which brings us, finally, to the fact that little children are carried where they go. Most of us here today were not carried physically, but some are. But we were brought here by the

Holy Spirit, given to us and who continues to keep us in the faith and connected to Jesus. And as we gather here, we await the day when God will send His angels one last time for us, to carry us, His little children, to Him, our Father. To our heavenly home. We sing of that too. *Lord, let your servant depart in peace* (LSB page 182).

So from start to finish, the angels are with us. Those working against God, but even more, those working in His service. You interacted with angels all this week, more than you know. So today especially we thank Him for them even as we look forward to the day when what we cannot see here, we will see there. When, as Daniel said, ***those who are wise shall shine like the brightness of the sky above; and those who turn many to righteousness, like the stars forever and ever.*** That place where there is no darkness, only light; no evil, only good; and no danger, only peace. Men, women, martyrs, apostles, prophets, patriarchs . . . all His little children with the angels. Together. Forever.

In the Name of the Father, and of the (+) Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Now the peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through faith in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.