

Proper 22 C 2022 RCL
2 Timothy 1:1-14; Psalm 37; Luke 17:5-10
Rev. Dr. Adam T. Trambley
October 2, 2022
St. John's Sharon

Before Scriptures Readings:

Before the lessons today, I want to say a few words about the gospel to help us hear it correctly. The context is that Jesus has just been talking to the disciples about forgiving one another and holding each other accountable when they hurt each other. This work is some of the hardest work we do as a Christian community. This is why the apostles ask, "Increase our faith." We need a lot more faith dealing with each other than dealing with God.

When Jesus says, "If you had faith the size of a mustard seed" you could be throwing around mulberry trees, he is not scolding his disciples. The "if" here is translation of a Greek phrase that means that they do have that faith. It is like the bumper sticker "If you can read this, you are too close." The assumption is that, yes, you can read this and, yes, you are too close. Jesus is telling his apostles, and us, that, yes, you do have faith the size of a mustard seed, and yes, you can do miracles with it. You have all the faith you need. You are OK and you can do even this difficult work.

Then Jesus tells a story about servants and masters. This parable follows from what he has just said and is a message of humility that is meant for everyone, but especially for church leaders. If we see faith bring forth miracles, and if we forgive people and set boundaries when people are out of line, then we might get a swelled head. (And notice here I am using "if" like Jesus, assuming that there will be miracles and forgiveness, and some swelled heads of church leaders.) Jesus is reminding us that everything we do is in service to him. We don't do all these amazing things on our own or for ourselves. Our whole lives are lived for him. Of course, our whole lives lived for him is also a great joy for us and a blessing.

I hope hearing this before instead of after the gospel helps us hear Jesus' words more clearly.

Homily Proper

Thursday was the feast of Michael and All Angels, and since we talked about gospel a bit earlier, I'd like to talk about angels now. Scripture describes multiple types of angels.

The word angel, both in Hebrew and in Greek, means messenger. Angels are messengers of God, although not always in the mail carrier kind of way. Sometimes they are beings who carry out God's purposes in certain situations or who manifest God's presence with us. Angels, like us, were created to glorify God and, like us, they have an intelligence and a personality and some element of free will. Like us, not all of them have made the right decisions all the time. Unlike us, angels were created by God as spiritual beings. They are not ghosts, however, and they clearly have a presence that can also manifest in various ways in the physical world. When they need to, they can interact with us. When human beings die, we do not become angels. Our souls are kept in the presence of God until the resurrection of our bodies on the last day, but neither of these conditions is exactly like what angels are.

Scripture identifies three angels by name, and we generally call them archangels. Two of them, Michael and Gabriel, are at the top of our reredos. Gabriel shows up as a herald of God, and we remember him best when he appears to Mary at the Annunciation. Michael is the great defender of God's people and leader of the hosts of heaven. Jude and Revelation both show him contending with the Devil and winning. This description reminds us good is stronger than evil. Increasingly, our culture is enamored with philosophies talking about some cosmic balance. Christianity does not believe in a balance between good and evil or between darkness and light. Evil at its strongest is not at the level of God's servants. We believe in Divine Providence in which the plans and purposes of God unfold over time and that "All things work together for good for those who love God." Michael the Archangel is one of our great reminders of this fact, since he is a servant of God and conquers the evil one.

The third angel mentioned in scripture by name is Raphael in the book of Tobit. Tobit is part of the Apocrypha, a group of books that Jesus and his contemporaries considered scripture, and which most of the church has always held as inspired. In 70 AD, a bunch of Rabbis decided these books were no longer Jewish scripture and Martin Luther in the 1500s threw them out of his Bible because they didn't serve his arguments with the pope. They are part of the books that we as Episcopalians read in church and consider inspired, although we do not believe they are necessary for salvation. In the book of Tobit, Raphael appears in disguise to a good man and helps him heal his father of blindness and cast a demon out of his fiancé, which is important because this demon killed multiple of her previous husbands on their wedding night. Tobit is a great story, and I'd recommend reading it, which will take you a half hour to an hour some evening.

In the three Archangels, we see that angels bring good news and instruction from God, protect us, and bring healing to us.

Scripture also talks about the Seraphim and Cherubim who are worshipping before the throne of God day and night. This eternal worship is filled with majesty and glory and splendor, and these incredible beings invite us to join in. No laser light show or smoke machine at the wildest concert has anything on what the angels are bringing to the experience of divine worship. When

we say “Holy, Holy, Holy”, we are accompanying them. In our own corner the world we get to participate in a cosmic liturgy that is part of the blessing in this life and the next.

Scripture also talks about the angles that we usually call guardian angels. These angels are interceding with God for us and helping us through this life as much as we let them. They are instruments who God uses to remind us of his good news and purpose for us, to protect us, and to heal us. Growing up, I learned this children’s prayer to our guarding angels, which I still say regularly. I think it makes sense for us, and if people want it, I can distribute it.

*Angel of God, my guardian dear,
to whom God’s love entrust me here.*

Ever this day be at my side,

To light, to guard, to rule and guide. Amen.

All of us are important enough to God that God has sent at least one angel specifically to watch over us. We do well to pay attention to that guardian angel.

Finally, scripture talks about the angels of places and churches and nations. Sometimes these are also called principalities and powers or similar language. These angels are the personality of a group of people or an institution. We usually think of such things in sociological terms today, but the theological way to understand them is as having an angel.

Unlike the other angels we have discussed, these angels have fallen away from their sole purpose of serving and glorifying God. Talking about fallen angels doesn’t necessarily mean devils or beings sent to hell. They are not so much evil as fallen -- broken creatures that have made bad choices and are unable to live into the fullness of what God is calling them to be. Think about the Angel of the United States or an Angel of the Episcopal Church. Over the years these groups have made mistakes or done things that are hurtful to people but that doesn’t make them evil. Just in need of redemption.

These principalities and powers are meant to serve God, and scripture tells us that in the end they will bow down before Jesus. They will be who they were created to be. Part of our work as Christians is to recognize where the principalities and powers we are a part of do not serve God and we help restore and rehabilitate them.

We do the work of healing the principalities and powers in the ways that we often think about transforming institutions or societies. First, we pray, which is particularly powerful, especially when we think about our prayers being for spiritual beings and not just physical places. Second, we worship God and care for people. All the acts of love we perform have an eternal significance, and part of that significance is that affects the powers around us. When beings, people or angels, experience love, directly or indirectly, it changes them for the better, and these changes are lasting and real. Finally, we overcome the principalities and powers when we refuse to respond to evil with evil. This last behavior is important, and one that society seems to be forgetting. Today, we seem more and more willing to justify bad behavior by saying that someone behaved badly to us first. Such responses only deepen such sinful traits in our society and in the character of the angel of our society. If we want things to change, if we want our society and institutions to be more just, if we want our institutional angels to be better at serving and worshipping God, then we need to do what Jesus says on the Sermon on the Mount. Love

your enemies, pray for those who persecute you. Turn the other cheek. Give without expecting repayment. Walk the extra mile. These are the activities that transform the spiritual atmosphere, and therefore the entire reality in which we live in. We point the principalities and powers back toward worship and service of God.

So look for angels. They are certainly present, encouraging, protecting, and healing. They are here this morning, lifting our worship to God. Be aware and responsive to the ministry of your personal guardian angel. And do the work of engaging the principalities and powers with the Spirit of God within you, so that all of us, mortals and angels alike, can serve and glorify God with our whole beings, as we were created to do.