

The Ministry Of The Angels

[Essay delivered at the Lake Lutheran Teachers' Conference in Libertyville, Illinois on
February 27, 1986]

by Professor John C. Jeske

I don't know what it was that led your Program Committee to choose the topic for this conference essay. If there was a special reason, it was not told to me. But I'm sure the topic you have chosen is one that is worthy of your attention and of a place on your conference agenda. For one thing, the doctrine of the angels is a doctrine revealed in the Scripture not only to comfort us but to strengthen us for lives spent in God's service. Secondly, it's a doctrine which is not understood well enough by God's people. As we live out our lives we've got companions, companions whom Martin Luther called "the best friends we've got," and as we carry out our daily tasks we're hardly aware of their presence.

In the Apostles Creed we regularly confess: "I believe in God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth." "By him," the apostle Paul tells us, "by him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible" (Col 1:16). We emphasize in our classrooms that some of the most remarkable things God created are invisible: the law of gravity, e.g., magnetism, atomic energy, infra-red and ultra-violet light rays, the wind, the oxygen we breathe. Foremost among God's invisible creatures, however, are the ones about whom this essay will center—the angels.

The Bible often refers to the angels as God's ministers. "Minister" is a Latin word meaning "servant," and that word pretty well summarizes the activity of the angels. The two primary areas of the angels' service will constitute the two divisions of this essay.

I. ANGELS SERVE GOD;

II. ANGELS SERVE GOD'S PEOPLE.

God never calls anyone to do a job for him without equipping him to do the job. He has equipped the angels to serve him. The angels are not just ideas or forces. Angels are not little babies who have gone to heaven. Angels are not fairies with wings and feathers who float around on clouds. Angels are powerful spirit-beings who do God's work. You will recall how one of these powerful spirits walked through locked prison doors to free the apostle Peter. Some of these spirits are named in the Scripture. Michael is the only archangel named in the Scripture, although the people who wrote our Communion liturgy seem to be sure there must be more. Gabriel is described primarily as God's messenger of mercy and promise. Gabriel appears on the pages of the Bible four times, always bearing good news—twice to Daniel (giving him a panoramic view of the history of the human race), once to Zechariah (announcing the birth of John the Baptist), and once to Mary (announcing the birth of our Savior).

Some of these powerful spirits are known as *cherubim*. They're always associated with God's glory. After our first parents had rebelled against their heavenly Father and had to be driven out of the garden of Eden, cherubim guarded the way to the tree of life. In the Old Testament tabernacle two cherubim made of gold stood over the atonement cover on the ark of the covenant, with wingtips touching, symbolizing the majesty of God.

Some of the angels are called *seraphim*. We meet them only in Isaiah's vision at the time God called him to be a prophet. Positioned above the throne of God, they called to one another:

"Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord Almighty,
The whole earth is full of his glory" (Is 6:3).

Isaiah's fascinating vision gives us some interesting additional information about how God has equipped the angels for their ministry to him and to his people. In Isaiah's vision these powerful spirits covered their faces and their feet in the presence of God. It's as though they somehow felt unclean in the presence of the absolute holiness of God. Somehow they felt it was improper for them to appear in the presence of God with uncovered faces and feet.

Clearly, then, God has equipped the angels with *intellect*. The angels are interested in God's plan of salvation. When they delivered the messages to Zechariah and to Mary and to the shepherds, they were not just obeying orders; they understood and were stirred by the good news they were announcing. The angels know as much about God's great and good plan as he has revealed of it, but as Old Testament prophecy began to be fulfilled in Christ's death and resurrection they were anxious to learn more. St. Peter tells us that the angels "long to look into these things" (1 Pe 1:12). In Ephesians 3 St. Paul speaks of a mystery that God revealed, the mystery that through the Gospel the Gentiles are heirs of God's grace together with Israel. Listen to St. Paul: "(God's) intent was that now, through the church, the manifold wisdom of God should be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms," in other words, to angels (Eph 3:10). The angels carefully watch how God builds his church on earth. They watch the work of the Holy Ghost — the planting of the church, its growth, its struggles, its victories — and in this way penetrate deeper into the mysteries of God.

God has equipped the angels with *emotions* in harmony with God. We have it from the lips of our Lord himself that angels rejoice over one sinner who repents. St. Paul admonished the Corinthian Christians that women should appear modestly clothed in divine services (at that time that meant properly veiled) "because of the angels" (1 Cor 11:10). The angels, who were observing the goings — on at divine services, would be grieved at what they considered improper conduct.

God equipped his angels also with *wills*, wills that are in harmony with God's will. Jesus taught us that when in the prayer that bears his name he taught us to pray: "Thy will be done on earth, as it is in heaven." In the 103rd Psalm David urges all of God's creatures to praise the Lord. This includes also the angels, whom David addresses in the closing verses of the psalm: "Praise the LORD, you his angels, you mighty ones who do his bidding, who obey his word. Praise the LORD, all his heavenly hosts, you his servants who do his will" (Ps 103:20-21).

The first chapter of the Book of Job sheds some interesting light on the disciplined manner in which the angels serve God. We're told that the angels presented themselves before God, who asked them about the work they were doing. The service which the angels render to God is of different kinds. Unfortunately, since so much of it is unseen, it goes unrecognized and unacknowledged, and more's the pity. Some of the most spectacular angelic service to God which is recorded on the pages of Scripture consisted of blocking the plans of God's enemies. Genesis 19 tells how two angels came to the home of Lot, Abraham's nephew, in the city of Sodom and told him, "Get your family out of here, because we are going to destroy this place. The outcry to the LORD against its people is so great that he has sent us to destroy it" (Gn 19:13). St. Matthew tells us that on the first Easter morning an angel of the Lord came down from heaven, went to the tomb in Joseph's lovely garden and rolled back the stone — not to let Jesus out, but to show that he had already left. We're told the angel's appearance was like lightning and that he effectively paralyzed the guard the Jewish authorities had posted at the tomb. Reference has already been made to the fact that after Christ's ascension the enemies of God tried to block the work of the apostle Peter by arresting him and throwing him in prison, but that an angel served God by blocking that evil plan and freeing the apostle. The Bible makes it quite

clear, however, that our primary struggle as Christians is not against flesh-and-blood enemies, but against superhuman ones. St. Paul describes our struggle in these words: “Our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms” (Eph 6:12). From these words of the apostle it is apparent that something has gone fearfully wrong in God’s good creation. St. Paul again warns us that Satan, whom he calls the ruler of the kingdom of the air (Eph 2:2) is an evil spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient. Satan tempts us to repeat his sin, to reenact his original rebellion, to push God off of his throne in our heart. That’s basically what sin is — not just doing naughty things, but usurping the authority of God, wanting to exist alongside God instead of under him.

In this unholy task Satan has a vast army of secret agents working with him to lead God’s children astray, to harm them, and to block God’s good plan for them. Satan’s evil angels are not treated in detail in this paper, primarily because the essay topic suggested by the Program Committee focused attention instead on the ministry of the good angels. The more one studies the words of Christ and of his prophets and apostles the better one realizes that Planet Earth is a cosmic battleground. There’s a battle going on constantly between God and his angelic army, on the one hand, and Satan and his evil troops, on the other. You’ve simply got to believe that the forces of evil are alive and well in our world. Can you honestly believe that a loving God would design a world where there are things like bone cancer and crooked business and concentration camps and the debris from divorces that are destroying one out of every two marriages in our country? Can you account for the tragic inroads which the power of evil and of selfishness have made in your own life and personality, unless there are powerful forces of evil at work in our world?

If Satan and his evil angels are not at work in our world and in our life, how do you account for the frustration we often feel in our work and for the temptation to self-pity? You know the temptation as well as I: “What’s a person with all my gifts doing in a place like this? I’m too good for this. I really ought to be giving advanced harp lessons to a group of angels and instead I’m stuck with this bunch of clods.” Let there be no doubt: there are superhuman forces of evil at work in our world— not only that great big world out there, but also our own little private world.

The tenth chapter of the book of Daniel gives us a glimpse into some goings-on normally hidden from human eyes, this ongoing supernatural conflict between Satan’s secret agents and God’s angels. God informed Daniel that Satan had actually assigned one of his agents to work in the Persian government, to try to hinder God’s will in and through the Persian government and to attempt to use the Persian government to frustrate God’s good plan. God speaks to us about the evil angels not to scare the bejabbers out of us, but to help us learn to recognize and respect the power and influence Satan’s evil angels have in our lives.

This would be a pretty discouraging situation if we did not know that God has provided us with powerful allies in our battle against the supernatural forces aligned against us. It’s especially important that we remember this because all around us we can see Satan winning his little victories. We know how successful he has been in encouraging even Christians to feed the appetites of sexual lust, e.g., instead of starving those appetites. By persuading people to ignore what God has said about the role of man and woman, he has destroyed tens of thousands of marriages and cluttered our cities with the wreckage of ruined lives. Within the past weeks striking evidence of Satan’s evil activity hit the headlines of the religious press. The president of the Lutheran Church in America was asked: “Would you permit a person who believes in the verbal inspiration of the Bible to be a member of the new Lutheran church?” He answered, “Yes, but we wouldn’t let him teach at our seminaries.” Satan and his evil agents are forever trying to discredit the truthfulness

of the Word of God, to deny the authority of God's Word, just as the devil did to Eve in the Garden of Eden. With the poet Hans Brorson, therefore, we must say and sing:

"I walk in danger all the way,
The thought shall never leave me
That Satan, who has marked his prey,
Is plotting to deceive me."

But how happy we can be to be able with Brorson also to confess

"I walk with angels all the way, They shield me and befriend me:
All Satan's power is held at bay
When heavenly hosts attend me."

The most striking evidence that God uses his angels to judge the wicked still lies in the future. At the conclusion to one of his parables Jesus made the statement: "The angels will come and separate the wicked from the righteous and throw them into the fiery furnace, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth" (Mt 13:49f).

Combating and counteracting the pernicious activity of the evil angels and their hellish master is, however, only the reverse side of the real work of God's secret agents, and that is to serve him by advancing his good plan for a sinful world. The angels have a deep-down loyalty to God and an inexhaustible love for him. As a result they're jealous to see that God's will is fulfilled in us. When God gave his law to ancient Israel from Mt. Sinai, he did so through the ministry of angels. St. Paul once wrote to the Galatian Christians: "The law was put into effect through angels" (Ga 3:19). To this day the message of God's law, or as the Epistle to the Hebrews calls it, "the message spoken by angels" (He 2:2), plays an important role in God's good plan to hold on to us and to guide us as we continue our pilgrim's progress to our true homeland. Angels served God by preaching the first Christmas sermon to a group of shepherds on the fields of Bethlehem. It was an angel concerned about the safety of the Christ child who served God by appearing to Joseph in a dream with the message: "Take the child and his mother and escape to Egypt, and stay there until I tell you" (Mt 2:13). Thirty-three years later angels preached the first Easter sermon to some frightened ladies and some confused disciples.

From the earliest pages of world history we can see that the angels find joy in praising God. God himself informs us that after he had completed his work of creation, "all the sons of God (the angels) sang for joy," (Jb 38:7). And in the very last book of the Bible the apostle John gives us a preview of a scene from the opposite end of world history. John heard a choir of many angels numbering thousands upon thousands, and ten thousand times ten thousand. They encircled the throne of the Lamb and sang: "Worthy is the Lamb who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and strength and honor and glory and praise!" (Re 5:11f). From the first chapter of world history down to the last chapter the angels serve God by praising him for what he has done

II.

Sometimes, as we have seen, they do this directly. Sometimes they serve God indirectly, through his people. The epistle to the Hebrews describes the angels as "ministering spirits sent to serve those who will inherit salvation" (He 1:14). I have the feeling that the angelic blessing with which we're most familiar is the physical protection the angels provide us. Martin Luther often expressed the truth that whatever evil enters our lives comes not so much from natural causes as from the evil angels and the devil, and that if God through his angels did not check the fury of Satan, we could not live for one

moment. If for just a single day God would withdraw his angels, Satan and his legions could very well destroy the human race.

Think of how God reassured Jacob of his angelic protection. Genesis 28 recalls how this man had to leave home after he had deceived his father Isaac, and cheated his twin brother Esau. When night fell he was a long way away from home and lonely and afraid. And then, God gave Jacob a dream in which he saw a stairway extending from where he lay all the way to heaven, with angels of God ascending and descending on it — ascending to God with Jacob's needs and prayers, and descending to Jacob with God's answers and his help. Twenty years later Jacob was on his way back home. Genesis 32 tells us: "Jacob went on his way, and the angels of God met him. When Jacob saw them, he said, 'This is the camp of God!' So he named that place Mahanaim" (Gn 32:1). Mahanaim is Hebrew for "two camps," or "twin armies." God knew, and so did Jacob, that Jacob's own resources were insufficient to protect himself against the hostile Canaanite tribes through whose territory he was traveling and from the anger of Esau, who might still be seeking to get even for what had happened twenty years earlier. And so God opened Jacob's eyes to see the heavenly armies that were encamping around his family as he headed toward home and toward a reunion with Esau.

The second book of Kings records that the prophet Elisha had a similar experience. The king of Aram (present-day Syria) had sent a detachment of soldiers and battle chariots to arrest Elisha. The scriptural account in 2 Kings 6 brings us this surprising story:

"When the servant of (Elisha) got up and went out early the next morning, an army with horses and chariots had surrounded the city. 'Oh, my lord, what shall we do?' the servant asked.

'Don't be afraid,' the prophet answered. 'Those who are with us are more than those who are with them.'

And Elisha prayed, 'O LORD, open his eyes so he may see.' Then the LORD opened the servant's eyes, and he looked and saw the hills full of horses and chariots of fire all around Elisha" (2 Kgs 6:15-17).

Like Elisha's servant, we're not always aware of the mighty army that surrounds us, but the word of the psalmist is no less true for us than it was for him: "The angel of the LORD encamps around those who fear him, and he delivers them" (Ps 34:7).

Some of you may be familiar with the name of Carrie ten Boom, a lovely Dutch Christian woman who spent time in a Nazi prison camp just because in Christian love she shielded some of her Jewish countrymen from the awful fate the Nazis had in store for them. Miss ten Boom told this interesting story about the angels to illustrate that although they may be invisible to us they may be very visible to those who threaten us.

"In our days the angels are not less active than in Bible times. In the Congo, missionaries told me of an experience they had. In a home, a kind of boarding school, lived two hundred children of missionaries. Rebels decided to kill all the children and their teachers. Around the house was a low ledge and few soldiers were in the house, but this was little protection against such a multitude of enemies. When those in the home saw a great number of rebels coming they all knelt and prayed for protection. Suddenly they saw the rebels turn and run away. The next day the same thing happened, and again the third day. After this they stayed away. One of the rebels was injured and was taken to the hospital by people who had found him at the roadside. The doctor who was dressing his wounds asked him: 'Why didn't you enter the house, since you intended to kill us?' The man answered: 'We could not. We saw hundreds of soldiers in white uniforms and were frightened.' Soldiers in Africa never wore white uniforms."

Miss ten Boom concluded: “Those men had seen angels. The missionaries understood that angels had protected them.” (*Not I, But Christ*, 36f).

It occurs to me that just on this point the angels have something to say to people who spend a lot of time with children. Every one of us will confess to having more than once become impatient with serving children. We’re tempted instead to lord it over them, to rule in our classroom. The angels are not as proud as we. If it weren’t for the protection of angels children would not even survive to adulthood. Jesus once had to remind his disciples: “See that you do not look down on one of these little ones. For I tell you that their angels in heaven always see the face of my Father in heaven” (Mt 18:10).

The essayist does not imagine for a minute that he’s telling you things you do not know. We all know about the blessed work of God’s angels. Morning and evening we pray with Luther: “Let your holy angel be with me, so that the devil may have no power over me.” But one of Satan’s devices is to divert our attention from the help God offers us in our struggle against the forces of evil. The Bible in hundreds of different places teaches that God has countless angels at his command and that he has commissioned them to aid his children in their struggles against Satan, but —and here’s the thing — those struggles are not only physical. Satan is interested not only in harming your body, but your soul as well. Think of the mother who came to Christ saying: “Lord, Son of David, have mercy on me! My daughter is suffering terribly from demon-possession” (Mt 15:22). That’s what Satan would like to do to the children of your congregation, too - control them physically and spiritually. And yet what regularly happens to these children in your congregation and school? Lambs of the flock are being protected from Satan and his hellish crew. God’s Word is being taught to dozens and hundreds of children. They’re learning which end is up in life; they’re finding out what makes life worth living and death worth dying. Surely the angels of God have a hand in that. In the closing portion of this essay let’s explore some of the spiritual blessings God gives us through his angels.

We know from the Scripture that God is concerned about the lost. You can just sense the ache in God’s big heart as he told his ancient people of Israel: “Why will you die, O house of Israel? I take no pleasure in the death of anyone, declares the Sovereign LORD” (Eze 18:31f). If God is interested in the lost, then it follows that his angels, who are in complete harmony with him, are also concerned about the lost. The Scripture testifies to this. In the early days of Christianity, an angel knew about an Ethiopian who had come to Jerusalem to worship, to find the true God, but who was returning to his native Africa with an empty heart because he hadn’t found in Jerusalem what he was looking for. “An angel of the Lord said to Philip, ‘Go south to the road — the desert road — that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza’ “ (Ac 8:26). You know the rest of the story. That visit, initiated by an angel, led Philip to the Ethiopian and brought him to a saving knowledge of Jesus Christ.

Another example of how interested the angels are in the lost is recorded a couple chapters later in the book of Acts. Cornelius was a Roman army officer who in a vision saw an angel of God who said to him: “Send men to Joppa and bring back a man named Simon Peter” (Ac 10:5). The upshot of that angelic message was that Cornelius was baptized — again through the auspices of an angel who was concerned not only about somebody’s physical safety, but about his spiritual welfare.

But the angels are concerned not only with the lost; they’re concerned also about the spiritual welfare of those who are already saved. Isn’t that something we don’t often think of? Do you realize that the angels are interested in the welfare of Christian congregations? They’re deeply concerned about what’s going on in your congregation and in your school classroom.

The angels observe how you and I respond to God’s call in our daily life. In 1 Timothy 5 St. Paul gives young Pastor Timothy instructions on how to treat older men and

widows and elders and slaves. He then adds: “I charge you, in the sight of God and Christ Jesus *and the elect angels*, to keep these instructions without partiality, and to do nothing out of favoritism” (1 Tm 5:21). When one of our pupils disappoints us, and our sinful nature wants to lash out with angry words, how helpful it will be to remind ourselves: “Careful! Angels are watching!”

Why has God told us about how the angels serve us, serve our physical and spiritual welfare? Why has he provided abundant detail about how the angels protect our bodies against disasters spawned in hell? Why the additional detail about how the angels help us in our spiritual struggle against Satan? Why? For at least two reasons. The doctrine of the angels is, first, a tonic for our faith. It’s a reassurance straight out of heaven to know that as we travel that long road to our place at our Father’s side we’re not in this Christianity thing alone. At his ascension Jesus did not disappear with a wave of his hand and a cheery “So long! Hang in there, and maybe I’ll see you some day— if you make it!” It’s a tonic for faith to know that during the entire period from our birth day to our death day we are surrounded by those powerful creatures whom Luther calls “our best and most loyal friends.” The Bible’s teaching about the ministry of the angels reassures us that God means business with our soul’s salvation.

Our Lord has warned us that as the world approaches its end things are going to get worse before they get better. Unless Judgment Day intervenes first, each of us is going to face an enemy whom we’ve never before met head-on, and that is death. It’s all right, I suppose, for poets and hymn writers to refer to death as a sweet sleep, but I’d prefer to believe St. Paul, who calls death “the last enemy to be destroyed” (1 Cor 15:26). Death is the result of our sin, and as such death is the king of terrors. How wonderfully reassuring, therefore, to know that in our last hour, in the greatest crisis we’re ever going to face, God’s angels will be present to snatch us out of the jaws of eternal death, to rescue us from the king of terrors and hand us over to God. Jesus made that quite clear a few days before he died. In one of his last sermons he pointed out that when God’s magnificent trumpets break into our world God “will send his angels ..., and they will gather his elect from the four winds, from one end of the heavens to the other” (Mt 24:31). Martin Luther emphasized what a tonic this doctrine is for our faith when he wrote: “Know that angels are at your side not only in life but in death.” No wonder that the Lutheran church has for centuries been happy to sing these words written by one of her sons:

“Lord, let at last Thine angels come
To Abram’s bosom bear me home,
That I may die unfearing” (TLH 429:3).

The doctrine of the ministry of the angels is often presented to us in the Scripture as a tonic for our faith. St. Paul, however, made one more application of this doctrine. Listen to this passage from his first letter to the congregation in Corinth, in ancient Greece. That congregation has been called the apostle Paul’s “beloved, brilliant, and wayward child.” In chapter 11 of the first Corinthian epistle St. Paul admonished the women of the congregation to appear modestly clothed in divine services in other words, properly veiled, “because of the angels.” The angels, who were observing the goings-on at divine services, would be grieved at what they considered irreverent conduct.

To be sure, there are substantial cultural differences between 1st century Greece and 20th century America; short hair is no longer the mark of a loose woman, as it was in ancient Corinth. But isn’t there an essential truth in St. Paul’s words here, truth which makes the doctrine of the ministry of the angels an incentive to living a sanctified life? The fact that the angels are interested in the work of the church should spur us to perform faithfully whatever work God may have given us to do. Isn’t it true that our decision-

making inside and outside the church would be simplified if we'd remember: "Remember: the angels, your best friends, are watching."

Perhaps you will not think it too trivial if I mention one additional way in which the doctrine of the angels can serve as an incentive in our sanctification. I'm thinking here of our worship. Mention was made earlier of the song which Isaiah heard the seraphim sing as they approached the throne of God: "Holy, Holy, Holy is the LORD Almighty!" Mention has also been made of the angels' song on the first Christmas Eve: "Glory to God in the highest!" If even the highest ranks of angels bow in worship and adoration before Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory, isn't it appropriate that redeemed sinners do the same? Matter of fact, you and I have even more reason for praising God than do the angels. They don't know from experience what it means to be saved, since they've never been lost. They sing to God only because he is such a great God. You and I have additional motivation.

Think of that when you come to that part of the Communion liturgy known as the "Sanctus," the hymn Isaiah heard in his vision. Think of the angels when you're tempted to become bored while singing the "Glory be to God on high" in our Sunday morning liturgy. Remember that that was the song the angels sang over the fields of Bethlehem, and I'd be willing to bet that on that first Christmas Eve there wasn't a hint of boredom in either the singers or in those who heard them sing.

In summary, then: God gave us the doctrine of the ministry of the angels as a tonic for our faith and as incentive for our sanctification. In heaven we're going to be like the angels. What's important for them now is what we're going to consider important in heaven. The angels' activity can give us somewhat of an idea what it's going to be like to be in heaven. What's most important for the angels? Sitting on clouds? Playing harps? Serving the Savior; that's what. Angels know that serving the Savior brings the only real joy there is. And here's the thing: God wants to give us that joy already now. We needn't wait. Don't wait. There's angels' work to be done.