

Sermon for the 17th Sunday after Trinity & St. Michael and all Angels Sunday

Sermon Text: Hebrews 1:7, 13-14



⁷ *Of the angels he says, “He makes his angels winds, and his ministers a flame of fire.”* ¹³ *And to which of the angels has he ever said, “Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet”?* ¹⁴ *Are they not all ministering spirits sent out to serve for the sake of those who are to inherit salvation?*

In the letter to the Hebrews, we hear about God’s angels and Christ and the congregation of Jesus Christ. Here we think about the numerous Old and New Testament statements, all of which couldn’t be listed individually. We follow three references from these few verses in the letter to the Hebrews.

Firstly, in His many ways, the Lord God makes His angels appear and act. A verse from Psalm 104 is quoted here. It says about the angels: “He makes His angels winds, and His ministers a flame of fire.”

The picture of just gentle and sweet angels is crossed out. In its place comes another picture, a picture of elemental power and strength. In Psalm 103:20, it says: “Bless the Lord, O you His angels, you mighty ones who do His word, obeying the voice of His word!” The heavenly singers of God’s praise are at the same time a heavily armed force of the Lord. They are able to enforce God’s will against other powers and people in such a way that we have to stop and listen.

As Isaiah was called to be a prophet in the temple of Jerusalem, the earthly world melted away before his eyes and another world opened the eyes of his spirit. Isaiah sees a high and grand stepped throne and on the throne sits the Lord. The prophet cannot and won’t describe the LORD. He only says: the train of His robe filled the temple. But then the prophet sees even more. Strange creatures stand near the throne of God, angels around the throne of highest majesty. The prophet calls them seraphim. Seraph means fire snake. The seraphim must have had something inside them that looked like holy fire and unearthly light. Fire from God’s original fire; a reflection of His eternal light. And with six wings these angels hovered around God’s throne – with two wings they covered their faces, with two they covered their feet, and with two they flew. In other words, the seraphim are all about reverence and adoration. They veil themselves and bow before Him who alone is Lord, before the fountain of holiness, before the eternal source of all created creatures and things.

And they mightily proclaim His honor and glory. “Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of His glory.” Heaven and earth are filled with God’s sovereignty and power. The seraphim sing this so powerfully to one another that the prophet Isaiah notices how the temple shakes from it and the room is filled with smoke before the prophet’s eyes. Incense from the angels’ worship of God. It is fitting then that there are two angels painted above the altar here in our church.

From looking at the angels around God’s throne to looking at those whom the Lord God appoints among us on earth. Back to the quote in Hebrews: “He makes His angels winds, and His ministers a flame of fire.” Where could something like this occur? When Israel escaped from Egypt and ended up at Mt. Sinai after going through the Red Sea, and on the way from Egypt to the Red Sea, a

pillar of clouds, during the day, placed itself between Israel and the great Egyptian army pursuing them. At night, a pillar of fire moved before Israel so that the Israelites could continue their escape in the darkness. When Israel reached the Red Sea, the Lord God summoned a strong East wind. In a short time, the wind created a passage through the arm of the sea, which isn't too deep in any case. And Israel could pass through. But it was fatal for the Egyptians – the strong East wind ceased and turned away. Their army sank into the flood waters.

It was all a mighty act of God. The LORD God worked in the pillar of clouds and pillar of fire and in creating the storm through His mighty angels. It was also the angels of God that shook the mountain at Sinai, gathered the clouds and flashed the lightning like in a giant storm, and the voice of God sounded out like an echo of a trumpet. This all happened through the mediation of God's holy angels so that Israel should understand the sacred solemnity of the hour.

Certainly, God can also be very different, as God teaches us through His appearance which happened centuries after the conclusion of the covenant at Sinai, but in the same place for the disheartened and lamenting prophet Elijah. God Himself is clearly present to comfort Elijah and entrust him with new assignments. At God's coming, there is a great, strong storm, rocks break. Then comes earthquake and fire. But all this just announces God's presence, God Himself is not in it. God reveals Himself in a still soft breeze, in the calm after the storm. In the power of His comforting and newly sent words. Elijah covers his face with his cloak. He doesn't lament anymore, he hears and receives new strength. But before that, God's holy and strong angels were at work in the storm, earthquake and fire. They make known a bit of the omnipotence of God.

Therefore, dear brothers and sisters, criticism must be allowed when angels come back into fashion these days. People can buy them like a talisman. But it's clear that these are not the angels spoken of in the Bible. For many, angel is just another word for fate or luck.

Nor should one take away or change songs in which angels appear. "Let Your dear angels be our protector and guardian." That isn't cheesy. Rather, it is sincere. It was to express our familiarity with the thought: we may ask God as children ask their father for protection and guidance through His holy angels.

What Johann Sebastian Bach so wonderfully tender yet powerfully put to music at the end of his St. John Passion is also right and worthy of poetry and prayer: "Oh Lord, at my end, let Your dear angels carry my soul to Abraham's side." In death, we will all again be as small and helpless as children. There, we may plead, babbling, like a child.

For what is left of our time on earth, we should accustom ourselves to talking a bit greater and more strongly about God's angels. The text teaches us. And in accordance with the scriptures, Dr. Martin Luther takes us with him to pray an appropriate prayer in the morning and evening prayers: "Your holy angels be with me, that the evil foe may have no power over me." Help me through Your strong guardian in the fight against Satan.

Second reference: "Are they not all ministering spirits sent out to serve for the sake of those who are to inherit salvation?" The answer to this question is crystal clear. Yes, they are. God guards and shapes the path of faith and life of His people through His angels, so that they find the narrow gate and enter through it into eternal life.

An abundance of stories and words from the Old and New Testament could show us that. But we can now only choose one example.

Jacob, the patriarch, is fleeing into an uncertain future and sees heaven open at night in Bethel. And the angels of God descending a ladder and then ascending again. The angels show him and God's own word assures him: You are not alone. You are not dependent on your own wisdom and strength. Where you no longer see a path, I want to build a way. Where you despair of the goal: I have placed it before you and will bring you there. My angels will be with you, to serve you.

It applied then as well as later for Israel as God's people and community and for the individual Israelites who hoped in God's goodness. The angel of the Lord will walk before you. "The angel of the Lord encamps around those who fear Him and delivers them" - Psalm 34:7.

When the Syrians besieged Dothan, the place where the prophet Elisha was staying, the prophet's servant completely lost his courage in the face of such a powerful army with horses and chariots. But Elisha said to him: "Do not be afraid, for those who are with us are more than those who are with them." And the prophet prayed for the servant: "Lord, please open his eyes that he may see." The Lord opened the eyes of the servant and he saw the mountain was full of horses and chariots of fire all around Elisha – 2 Kings 6:17. God's angel army to protect the prophet! Wonderful evidence of the truth of the Psalm quoted earlier, which is also the verse of the day: "The angel of the LORD encamps around those who fear Him and delivers them."

Of the words of Jesus in which angels appear, only two should now be mentioned. One is about angels and children. The other is about angels and those who are dying. In any case, God's strong servants for the smallest, the poor, and the helpless.

"See that you do not despise one of these little ones. For I tell you that in heaven their angels always see the face of my Father who is in heaven." - Matt. 18:10 And Luke 16:22 in the parable of the rich man and the poor Lazarus: "The poor man died and was carried by the angels to Abraham's side."

This encourages us to also ask for ourselves, for the service of God's holy angels, that we are guarded and preserved in body and soul for life and until death in order to inherit eternal salvation.

We can only hint at the third reference to angels and Christ. It is quoted from Psalm 110: But to which angel has He ever said: "Sit at my right hand, until I make your enemies your footstool"? Indeed, no angel can be addressed here. Because only One is the eternal Son of God, only One is the victor over sin, death, and the devil, only One is the Lamb of God and our Savior, only One has unity with the Father and the Holy Spirit, who is Lord over all, King of all kings and Lord of all lords.

But the angels worship and serve Him and they serve us because God loves us because we belong to the body of Christ, to His church.

That's why we don't call upon the angels, but we call upon God to send us His angels. We love and honor God's holy angels, but our prayers are for the Triune God alone. Amen.