

Preaching from St. Stephen's Pulpit

St. Stephen Lutheran Church, Williamsburg, VA

September 29, 2024

Bulletin

Beloved by God, my siblings in Christ; grace to you and peace from God our Creator and our Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

It's been interesting to watch the way that Protestants approach feast days and to think about how much has changed in the last 20 years. Before the 1990s, most of us in Protestant churches wouldn't have known any feast days at all, except for the ones that have become linked to saints that are linked to more secular versions of holidays, like Saint Nicholas or Saint Valentine. I was part of a church in Charlottesville, Virginia that celebrated the Feast of Santa Lucia on December 13. Looking back, I wonder if we celebrated her or if we wanted one more Christmasy thing to do that was a full-blown Christmas pageant.

Now it's not unusual to mark the feast days of certain saints, particularly female ones like Hildegard of Bingen or Julian of Norwich. It's a way to have more equality in our churches, a recognition of how females have sustained the faith, a recognition that has come and gone through the centuries. It's also easy to lift up these saints, and if we're not careful, it's possible to use them as a way to measure ourselves and find ourselves lacking. After all, we're not founding monasteries while writing letters to rulers the way that Hildegard of Bingen did or leading such contemplative lives that we shun all other contact with humans the way that Julian of Norwich did. Still, I hear about their lives, lives lived during time of great restrictions and hardships, and it inspires me to approach my own life differently.

Today's feast day is a different kind of feast day from the kind that commemorates humans who went on to be saints. In *The Divine Hours*, Phyllis Tickle's amazing prayer book resource, she tells us that the feast day that we celebrate today, the Feast Day of Saint Michael and All Angels, is the day that "the Church celebrates the role of angels in the divine plan."

Many of us have a very different idea of what an angel is than the more ancient approach to angels. I think back to the New York Times bestseller lists of the 1990s, and I remember the week when several books about angels topped the list. Many of them were not theological at all; in fact, they were quite the opposite. One in particular promised me that I would get to know my angels, which, when I read the

whole book, suggested that to know my angels was very similar to enslaving my angels to do my will. No thanks. Giving angels a mission is God's job, not mine.

Many of us have an idea of angels that is much more recent in Christian thought, the idea that when we die, we go to Heaven to become angels. This idea is not one that we find in ancient theology. A close read of the Bible shows us that angels are a completely different species than humans. Humans have more agency, more free will, but angels have more power in many ways. If we look at our more apocalyptic texts, like Daniel or Revelation, it's the angels who are battling Satan and his troops. And it's Michael who is in charge of these angel battalions.

So why don't we hear more about angels in our Lutheran and Protestant tradition? Sure, we hear about the angel Gabriel, who shows up in our Advent texts, bringing the Good News of God's impending arrival to Mary, who asks questions and then says yes. We almost never hear about Michael, and that's a shame. This feast day has much to offer the 21st century believers.

Much as my taste does run to apocalyptic tales of ultimate battles of good and evil, I'm not suggesting that we spend much time with those traditions. We might want to recover the idea of angel battalions fighting for us, but I'm more interested in the agrarian approach to this feast day, which in some parts of the world is still celebrated as Michaelmas. It's one of the harvest holidays, one of the quarterly celebrations that kept people rooted to traditions of the seasonal cycles and grounded in the realities of life.

The idea of a hinge holiday has great appeal. A hinge holiday is celebrated at the halfway point between the solstice and the equinox, and it's a way we shift from one seasonal direction to another. In *Holidays and Holy Nights*, Christopher Hill explains, "In summer we celebrate our at-homeness in the world. Michaelmas balances that feeling (for) in autumn we feel our not-at-homeness, the sense of wanting something else, something we can't name. We feel like wayfaring strangers... Summer is static – in Latin, solstice means 'the stationary sun' Summer is the sacrament of natural harmony with God... while autumn we fall away from the dreaming paradise of summer back into the conflict of light and dark" (pp. 36-37).

I know that some of us have trouble with this hinge point of the year which is pointing us to days when we get less and less light. Others of us have trouble with the reminders of death that we see around us: the end of a growing season, trees losing their leaves, cold weather taking over. Death is scary, and many of us hate the reminders that the season brings.

Death is scary. Perhaps that's why we developed the idea we become angels when we die—and yet, this shaky theology defangs several concepts which should, in fact, be scary. We will die—and before that, everything we love will die. How do we cope with that idea?

Some of us cope by clinging to the idea that there is a Divine God with a plan and a vision that's vaster than anything we could develop on our own. This God has more power than we can conceive of—including legions of angels, angels that are there for us too.

Some of us cope with the scariness of death by marking the seasons—we're entering the autumnal season marked by many holidays that remind us that death is unavoidable and perhaps nearer than we'd like: Halloween, All Saints, All Souls, and *Dis de los Muertos*. In some ways, today's feast day is a start to that season, a time of harvest, but also a time of remembering those whom we have lost.

You may have noticed that stores had their autumn and Halloween merchandise out by late July or early August. Our capitalist system is designed to have us spend more money not to remember life's priorities. Many of us in the 21st century live lives completely indoors, and if it wasn't for the end of daylight savings time, we might not even notice the shortening of the days. But earlier generations noticed and knew that these shortening days told us something important about our own lives. It's important to remember that our days are numbered, that we are like grass that flourishes and is gone.

Let us take a moment and notice as the light lingers. Let us mark the shift. Let us resolve to make something of our days, so that Jesus will say about us, too, that we are for him, not against him. Let us resolve to remain in the camp of Jesus and the angels who fight for God's vision of the cosmos.