



He will command his angels concerning you, to guard you in all your ways.

Ps 91:11

Angels Of God

Science tells us that our eyes can only see a small slice of the total reality that is around us. Visible light is just one band of wavelengths in the electromagnetic spectrum. Other electromagnetic waves, such as gamma rays, X rays, and radio waves are no different from light except that our eyes cannot detect them. If our eyes were sensitive to the wavelength our microwave oven used, we wouldn't need a light bulb inside to see what's cooking! The proverbial phrase, "there is more than meets the eye," is a truth about the fullness of reality. Similarly, there are more sounds in the world than can be detected with the human ear. Other living creatures can hear sounds that are above or below the pitches our ears can hear and electronic listening devices inform us that there is an enormous range of sound that fills the universe. Because of scientific discoveries, we know much more about the world than our five senses can tell us.

Likewise, because of God's revelation, we know more about reality than we could discover on our own. The revelation of God tells us that God's creation includes not only the physical earth and its living creatures, but also a whole world of invisible creation. In faith we know that God created the heavens and the earth, things that are seen and unseen. The world is filled not only with material creation, but also the invisible reality of angels. We cannot hear all the sounds that fill our world, yet the message and song of the angels fill the universe. We cannot see all the reality that fills our world, but we know

that we are surrounded by ministering spirits who have been sent forth to serve God (Heb 1:14).

When angels appear in the biblical stories, it is usually at the point of deepest mystery, when the wonder of God touches the lives of people most profoundly. They take us into the most dramatic scenes of the Old and New Testament. Like a spotlight shining on stage at the key moments, the appearances of the angels highlight the meaning and magnificence of God's action among his people.

Reflection and discussion

- Why is it difficult for me to believe more than what I can perceive with my five senses? What indicates to me that there is more in the world than what meets the eye?

- What do I already know about angels? What do I hope to learn?

Ministers of the Living God

The angels in the Bible are most identified by their mission rather than their form. Both the Hebrew word for angel (*mal'ak*) and the Greek word (*angelos*) mean "messenger." The word in itself says nothing about the essence or the form of these created beings. The biblical narratives rarely describe an angel's appearance; rather, they describe an angel's effect on people and on

events. In many biblical texts, the angel of God seems almost equivalent to God, a manifestation of God's saving will and concern in earthly life.

Though the angels are only occasionally manifested in human experience, they are a constant presence. The appearances of the angels are always in keeping with their function in the account, symbolic expressions of their ever-present activity. They mediate the power, support, and deliverance of God to human beings. They sometimes become visible in the biblical narratives so that certain people may benefit from the recognition of their presence. They speak in God's voice, become known as a mysterious presence, appear as fire and light, become visible in the form of human beings, or move through the air and encounter people on the earth. Yet a special kind of sight is necessary for angels to become visible, a sight which comes as a gift from God. When angels appear in the world, their presence reveals their spiritual world as integral to ours. They invite those who see them to step over the boundaries and limitations of the material world to recognize its share in the boundless and unlimited world of spiritual beings.

As presented in the Bible, the angels always call attention to God and to God's will for humanity. They point beyond themselves to the one who sends them. They never do anything on their own, but only what God wants and assigns them to do. Like the moon, they do not shine their own light; those who see them are always aware of the greater light they reflect. In relationship to humanity, the angels serve as mediators, messengers, guardians, and guides.

All the activity of angels is relational. The angels function within the embrace of God's care for creation and within the network of that mutual help, guidance, and intercession that ideally characterizes the relationships of people with one another. Their primary activity is to do God's will in loving obedience. The angels are either turned toward God in worship and praise, or toward human beings as bearers of God's revelation, providence, and protection.

Contrary to popular thought today, the appearance of an angel is not an event marked by sentimental sweetness and happiness. The biblical characters always demonstrated a respectful fear when an angel appeared. They knew that angels did not come to make life more serene, cheerful, and contented; usually they turned life upside-down. The angels always do more than simply manifest their presence. They demonstrate God's power and often point people's lives in a different direction.

Reflection and discussion

- Why does God occasionally manifest the presence of angels in the world of human experience? Of what benefit are the angels to those who experience them?

- In what way are the angels' appearances to people in the Bible different from their popular characterization today?

The Mission of God's Angels

Among the many functions of the angels in the Israelite and Christian traditions, their role as intermediaries is crucial. They are constantly crossing the divide between God and humanity, bridging the gulf between heaven and earth. Because they are in direct touch with God, angels reveal God in their very essence. They help people on earth to perceive divine power in the world, and prepare them for ever-deeper experiences of God and ultimately for union with God.

There was a strong conviction in ancient Israel that human beings were not capable of having an unmediated encounter with God. Expressing the dangers of a divine encounter, God said to Moses, "You cannot see my face; for no one shall see me and live" (Exod 33:20). So encounters between God and human beings in the Bible often involve the mediation of angels. Through angels, God is present, though not directly. The fiery angel speaking to Moses

from the bush joined the divine world to the material earth. God's voice is heard, his power is felt, his presence is real, but in a way that our humanity can begin to comprehend.

The ladder envisioned by Jacob, the stairway connecting heaven and earth with angels ascending and descending, symbolizes the Old Testament mediation of angels. They bring the saving power of God to humanity and invite individuals to step over the boundaries of the material world into the limitless world of God. In the world of ancient Israel, the fiery seraphim and cherubim were known as guardian figures of God's heavenly throne, preventing full access to God's presence, hiding God's glory with their protective wings. Yet, in the New Testament the angels' mediation is overshadowed by the perfect mediation of Jesus Christ. As both divine and human, his very being is the presence of God in the world and the perfect expression of humanity joined to God. Superior to the angels and adored by them, Christ breaks the boundaries that prevent access to God and opens wide the passage to heaven. As sharers in the mediation of Christ, the angels serve him and facilitate God's mission of bringing salvation to all people through him.

Closely united with the angels' function as intermediaries is their role as messengers of God. The angels never speak or act simply on their own; they always speak for and act on behalf of God. Yet, as messengers, they are not mere couriers. They are more like representatives or ambassadors who speak and act in the place of the one who sent them. As bearers of God's word and will, the angelic messengers appear at strategic points in the history of salvation. Often their message is in the form of a birth announcement, heralding new possibility into the lives of people who had begun to lose hope. At other times their message is a commission to lead God's people. The angel comes not only to communicate a message but also to offer tangible assurance that God is continually present with the one he calls. At still other times the angels announce divine help to God's people and offer instructions that move God's saving plan to a new stage in history.

A further aspect of the mission of God's angels is their service as guardians of God's people. The Israelites experienced the protective care of God on their perilous trek through the wilderness and in the establishment of their place as a nation in the promised land. But they also experienced God's personal and individual care as shown in the angels' protection of Hagar and Ishmael in the desert, of Isaac in the testing of Abraham on the mountain, of

the three young men in the fiery furnace of Babylon and Daniel in the lion's den, of Tobias along his journey, and of Peter in his prison cell.

The Bible offers credible evidence of individual guardian angels for each person, offering not a substitute for God's loving presence, but a manifestation of it. Like God, the angels care about each individual person. As Jesus tells us, "There is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents" (Luke 15:10). Jesus urges us to take care of God's lowly people, "for I tell you, in heaven their angels continually see the face of my Father in heaven" (Matt 18:10). The personal ministry of guardian angels is an extension of God's unbroken attention toward us: guiding us, protecting us, rescuing us, and ultimately bringing us to everlasting life. The God who is so intimately involved even with the flowers and birds that not a single sparrow falls to earth without the Father's knowledge also helps each individual person through the ministry of his angels.

But even though we experience intimacy with God through the mission of his angels, we cannot tell the good news of angels without also admitting the bad news. Though created by God as good in their nature, angels were given a will to choose how they would respond to their Creator. Some chose to reject God and his reign, becoming adversaries of God's kingdom. Those who chose to rebel became adversaries of God's saving will for humanity and spend their angelic energies tempting humanity to reject God's loving plan. Though Jesus spent his ministry breaking the powers of evil in the world and freeing people from demonic bondage, even Jesus was tempted by the devil. His saving death and resurrection conquered the powers of Satan, but the final implementation of that victory awaits Christ's glorious coming at the end of time. Meanwhile we struggle with a deceptive enemy, disguised as an angel of light (2 Cor 11:14), prowling like a lion (1 Pet 5:8). Yet we remain steadfast in faith and joyful in hope, knowing that the war is won though the struggle continues. The power of evil is defeated; the influence of Satan is limited and his days are numbered (Rev 12:12).

Though some angels have rebelled, the vast majority of God's angels will accompany Christ at his glorious coming. They function as ministers of God's judgment, working to bring about the final triumph of God over evil and bringing creation to completion. All the angels will accompany Jesus as he comes as judge of the living and the dead, and they will gather the faithful into God's eternal kingdom (Matthew 24:31; 25:31). In the book of

Revelation, angels fill the visions, interpreting God's final will for humanity and guiding the progress of events leading up to the completion of God's creation in the new and eternal Jerusalem.

The highest service of God performed by the angels is worship. If we were to hear it unimpeded, the song of the angels would surely be a most beautiful sound. In their eternal praise of God, their ministry finds its origin and its purpose. The worship of the Church on earth is a participation in the worship offered by the angels in heaven. When we worship we are offered the continual assistance of the angels, helping us bring our worship more in tune with theirs. Only when the effects of sin are purified from our lives in God's eternity will we be able to fully share the music of the angels and worship God with perfect love and in harmony with all creation.

Reflection and discussion

- Which of the many functions of the angels in the Bible seems the most important to me?
- Which of the functions of God's angels surprises me? What angelic mission do I want to learn more about?

The Angels and Us

Whenever I travel to New York from the small city in which I live, I am always a bit awed by the masses of people coming at me on the sidewalks, traveling in all directions. Then I think about all the people living and working above me in the massive skyscrapers and all the people traveling below me in the subways. My mind expands to the planes flying above from places throughout the world and the web of connections of these fellow human beings with the masses of people in other places across the globe. Trying to imagine that God sustains the lives of each of these people and cares for them individually, not just now but throughout their lifespan and into eternal life, is a bit too much for my mind to comprehend.

But this study of God's angels has given me a new way to think about God's providential care for each individual person. God's myriad of angels makes his promise, "I will never leave you or forsake you" (Heb 13:5), seem real and possible. Having God's angels as intermediaries, messengers, and guardians gives me confidence to sing with the psalmist: "For he will command his angels concerning you, to guard you in all your ways. On their hands they will bear you up, so that you do not dash your foot against a stone" (Ps 91:11–12).

If angels are created spiritual beings, then they can come to us through their own spiritual power, through other people, in our dreams and imaginations, in sudden insights that flash through our minds. They come to help us interpret life and to help us in healing and guiding ways. In these many ways, angels make God's loving closeness tangible, expressed in real experiences. They connect our world with the world of God. Angels are one way in which the unfathomable mystery of God enters into our everyday reality.

The more we study the work of God's angels within the history of salvation, the more we may become aware of their presence here and now: in our personal lives, in works of generosity and care for others, in God's ongoing revelation of himself to us, and in the liturgical worship of the Church on earth. Greater awareness and deeper understanding of the mediation and ministry of angels will help us be more aware of the full potential of our relationship with God.

Reflection and discussion

- How might the angels help me to trust more confidently in God's providential care?

- What divides our world from the spiritual world of God's heavenly agents? In what way can the loving ministry of the angels better connect our world with God's world?

Prayer

Creator God, you have made all things, both material and spiritual. Thank you for the mission of your angels as mediators, messengers, guardians, and ministers of your justice and loving care. During this study, teach me the many ways that you manifest your saving love to me and help me to understand more clearly the mystery of your devoted providence. Send your angels to minister your will for me and to guide, encourage, and enlighten me as I read and contemplate your inspired word.