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Angel and Evangel

A sermon preached at Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, Mo., on the Eve of Saint Michael and All Angels, Sept. 28, 1973, commemorating the 20th anniversary of the ordination of John Tietjen.

Rev. 14:6-7

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

The celebration of the Feast of St. Michael and All Angels is an occasion for the Christian church to reflect on the meaning of its worship and on the task of its ministry. The text I have chosen for this occasion from the Apocalypse of St. John the Theologian is familiar to most of us because of its application to the Christian ministry. It was applied to Luther by his colleague and pastor Johann Bugenhagen Pomeranus at the Reformer's funeral on Feb. 22, 1546, whence it became a "prophecy of Luther" in some Lutheran dogmaticians and the Epistle lesson for the Festival of the Reformation in some Lutheran uses; and it has long provided the theme for the masthead of *Der Lutheraner*. Here at Concordia Seminary the link between angel and Evangel is symbolized by the Gorsemann statue of St. Michael in front of Fuerbringer Hall. Thus it is highly appropriate that we use Michaelmas to think about the ministry—about one particular ministry on the occasion of its 20th anniversary, but through it about the ministry of the church as such.

Yet our consideration of the ministry tonight is set in the framework of a Eucharistic liturgy, which is also the framework within which the Christian picture of angels has developed. Conversely, we cannot understand the meaning of the liturgy in which we participate unless we know that by it we share in a praise that transcends this time, this place, and this order of reality. As Eric Peterson puts it in his moving little book *The*

Angels and the Liturgy, "the Church's participation in the angelic Sanctus . . . determines the essence of her worship" (p. 22). On the basis of the verses from the 14th chapter of the Book of Revelation which I read to you, I want this evening to examine how the ministry of Word and Sacrament ought to look if it is viewed in the context of the Feast of St. Michael and All Angels.

THE DIMENSIONS OF MINISTRY

"Then I saw another angel flying in midheaven, with an eternal Gospel to proclaim to those who dwell on earth, to every nation and tribe and tongue and people." The ministry of angels serves to remind the ministry of men that the borders of the worshiping community extend to include the whole of the one, holy, catholic and apostolic church.

This is a reminder that the church and its ministry seem somehow to require in each succeeding generation: "every nation and tribe and tongue and people." Therefore, as the Reformation correctly insisted, the vernacular tongue is the proper medium for the worship of the church; Babel has been undone by Pentecost so that he who by a multiplicity of tongues once overcame might likewise through a multiplicity of tongues be overcome. Therefore, as the Reformation sometimes forgot and as its heirs have also not always remembered, no one nation or tribe or tongue or people or denomination has been able to encompass in its liturgical experience or in its theological expression the depth and the diversity of the church catholic. Here the worship of the church has acted as a corrective on the incurable propensity of its theologians to equate

their particular formulations with the universal faith; through its hymnals and service books every denomination joins in worship with those whom it would have difficulty welcoming to its public services, men *and* angels. There is something about the relation between God and man as this is communicated through the ministry and celebrated in the liturgy that makes us want to particularize it and possess it rather than to be possessed by it. The history of every portion of Christendom supplies examples aplenty of this tendency, as does the history of Israel in the Old Testament and the history of primitive Christianity in the New.

But there are also examples aplenty of how the angelic message of "every nation and tribe and tongue and people" has managed to sound its thunderclaps and to drown out the chatter of lecture hall and chancery and cathedral. "Behold," said the angel in the Christmas Gospel, "I bring you good news of a great joy which will come to *all* the people" (Luke 2:10). The summons to this universal vision is the work of the Holy Spirit; and it was a valid intuition when the various creeds of the early centuries attached the doctrine of one holy catholic and apostolic church to their confession of the Third Person of the Blessed Trinity. For despite the metaphors describing the church as new creation or as body of Christ, it is peculiarly the economy of the Holy Spirit to reenact in each generation the ecumenical miracle of the first Pentecost. When we pray *Veni, Creator Spiritus*, He comes to take us up on our prayer and leads us into paths—and into associations!—that we would not have chosen for ourselves.

The angels of the seven churches here in the Book of Revelation are probably the particular bishops of particular places, but it is striking to see how over and over again in the choreography of the book an "angel" is the one to convey the message of

the Spirit about the universal vision. The church is universal not only geographically but also chronologically, and therefore it is the church of the saints and apostles, of the fathers as well as of the brethren; it is universal not only geographically and chronologically but also—if you will pardon the expression in a sermon—ontologically, and therefore it is the church of seraphim and cherubim, as well as of saints and believers. As we confess in Article XXI of the Apology of the Augsburg Confession, the angels "pray for us [*pro nobis*]," and the saints "pray for the church universal in general [*pro ecclesia universa in genere*]." Because we are joined in our ministry and in our worship by the ministering spirits who continually adore the Holy Trinity, we sing *their* hymn, the Sanctus, and sing it together with all those, past and present, who—in Greek and Latin, Syriac and Russian, Spanish and Swahili—confess with us the orthodox faith of the church catholic.

A MINISTRY OF AWE

"And the angel said with a loud voice, 'Fear God and give Him glory, for the hour of His judgment has come.'" The ministry of angels is an echo of that divine ministry which began when, in the words of St. Mark, "Jesus came into Galilee, preaching the Gospel of God and saying, 'The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent, and believe in the Gospel.'" (Mark 1:14)

The ministry of our Lord, which we as well as the angels are privileged to carry on, is then a solemn call to repent and believe, to fear God (which is what it means to repent), and to give Him glory (which is what it means to believe). It is an interesting index to just how sentimental much of our religious language has become that "fear God" sounds much grimmer than "repent" and that defining "believe" as "give God the glory" would seem to some people to come from the

heritage of John Calvin or the Society of Jesus. For that matter, the creeping power of sentimentality has infected the name "angel" itself: Humperdinck's "fourteen angels" and Botticelli's cherubs and the use of "angelic" to mean naively pure have taken us a long way from the time when, in the words of the Second Book of the Kings, "the angel of the Lord went forth, and slew a hundred and eighty-five thousand in the camp of the Assyrians; and when men arose early in the morning, behold, these were all dead bodies" (2 Kings 19:35). Even for the history of the Middle East, such statistics are chilling. In the sentimental atmosphere of modern Christianity not only the angels but "gentle Jesus, meek and mild" has become a caricature of the Gospel reality. Little wonder, therefore, that the ordained ministry of His church is, in the current folklore, a collection of amicable nonentities and that the purpose both of their preaching and of the worship they lead is thought to be one of providing aspirin for the spirit. When they speak of the person of our Lord, the liberal romantic and the conservative moralist may differ in their formal attitudes toward the Council of Chalcedon—if, indeed, either of them has ever heard of it—but in their outcome they are closer together than either would find comfortable.

We need the ministry of angels to recall our piety, our ministry, and our worship from such sentimentality of whatever stripe, to the realism of the Biblical Evangel. The life, death, and resurrection of our Lord is the utterly unsentimental action of a God who took sin seriously enough to give us Christmas, Good Friday, and Easter and whose clear-eyed mercy was exhibited in this, "that while we were yet sinners Christ died for us" (Rom. 5:8). And therefore the angel in our text has this Evangel: "Fear God and give Him glory, for the hour of His

judgment has come." In the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ that hour of judgment has struck, for God "has fixed a day on which He will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom He has appointed" (Acts 17:31), *der rechte Mann, den Gott selbst hat erkoren*. Standing in that judgment and supported by that mercy, we join in the worship of the angels before the throne of the Lamb, slain and resurrected. We join in their awe and reverence at His presence, in the repentance and faith that was the content of His message and the object of His ministry. Because our awe can so easily become the paralysis of terror and the numbness of guilt, we need to remember that we are the little ones whose angels in heaven always behold the face of the Father (Matt. 18:10); and because our confidence about being those little ones can so quickly degenerate into smugness and *securitas*, we need to be reminded that even the angels who behold His face use two of their wings to cover their faces before Him. (Is. 6:2)

Nowhere in all the life of the church is this combination of confidence and awe in the presence of the *mysterium tremendum et fascinans* expressed more profoundly or more successfully than in the liturgy of the Eucharist. Theology has frequently been intellectually presumptuous and churchmanship has sometimes succumbed to the arrogance of power, but here—in the postures of Eucharistic devotion, before that which is so real and yet so veiled, the true body and true blood of our Lord—here the whole church, and even its theologians and prelates, may learn again the Evangel of Christ's angel: "Fear God and give Him glory."

A MINISTRY OF CREATION

And the angel continued: "And worship Him who made heaven and earth, the sea and the fountains of water." The ministry of angels comes to the aid of our ministry and to the support

of our worship by identifying the God of Eucharistic worship with the Lord of the cosmos.

The ministry of the angels makes it impossible for us to relegate the creation to some such sphere as "natural theology," for it summons us in the name of the crucified and risen Lord to worship the Maker of heaven and earth. There have been times in the history of the people of God when the natural world was so pervasive and demanding a reality that believers were tempted to equate God with the natural powers. Therefore the prophets of Israel and the Reformers of the church fulminated against anything that even had the aroma of pantheism, and they declared the transcendent sovereignty of a God who was "wholly Other." Today's need, it seems to me, calls for the other pole of the dialectic, the recognition that the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ is the God of planets and oysters, of heaven and earth, of the sea and the fountains of water. As both Luther and Thomas Aquinas asserted, grace does not abolish nature but sustains and perfects it. Therefore Holy Baptism is not a corollary of the use of water to wash or cool or slake our thirst, nor is the Lord's Supper a special kind of banquet, nor are the angels part of the system of natural forces investigated by the researches of astrophysics or meteorology. Yet God does "make His angels winds" (Heb. 1:7), He did baptize Israel in a cloud and in the Red Sea (1 Cor. 10:1-2), and the breaking of bread in the Eucharist does make all breaking of bread sacred by association (Luke 24:35; 1 Cor. 10:31). What we need today is a new and better way

to recognize what the tradition of the church—especially as expressed by the Greek fathers—saw in its vision of Christ, the cosmos, and the Creator. Grace and nature are not identical, but they are not antithetical either; they are, by virtue of the doctrine of the Trinity, distinct and yet in continuity. As the ministry of the angels mediates to us this continuity of nature and grace, so the ministry of the church must through Word and Sacrament teach us to "worship Him who made heaven and earth, the sea and the fountains of water."

Our explication of the text from the Apocalypse bears out why it was that the early centuries of the church gave to St. John, as they did later to Saint Gregory of Nazianzus, the title "the Theologian" (or "the Divine"); for the angel's Evangel sets forth, albeit in reverse of the usual order, the fundamental doctrine of Christian faith as summarized by the 318 fathers of the Council of Nicaea in their Trinitarian confession. The ministry of the church is the translation of this ancient confession into the stuff of human life in contemporary society and culture. As tonight we ponder the ministry of the church made concrete for us here in the 20-year ministry of John, our brother and father in Christ, we elevate not his name but the name of the Lord. And as tonight we gather together around this family table, it is not for ourselves or by ourselves that we do so, but "with angels and archangels and all the company of heaven we laud and magnify His glorious name." In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy

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