

Modernism has done a fair job of domesticating our experience the angels. Or maybe the putti—those sweet little naked babies with tiny wings and tiny trumpets—maybe the putti just managed to get the better PR and marketing over the years. Putti are so often confused with cherubim that we use the word “cherubic” to describe plump, innocent, beautiful babies. But that’s not what a cherub is. Cherubim (that’s the plural for cherub) are first mentioned in Genesis guarding Eden with a flaming sword. They were originally understood to have a lion’s body and eagle’s wings. When Christians began to depict cherubim, they added four faces so that each cherub had the face of a man, the face of an ox, the face of an eagle and the face of a lion. More terrifying than sweet and innocent!

Angels are also not loved ones who have died. Episcopalians recognize our relationship to those who have died as the communion of saints. But that’s not what an angel is. A good many Christians, along with secular culture, have lost touch with the explanations of angels that are an important part of the Christian experience—our foundational stories.

In the 5th c. C.E., Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite laid out what is still among the most influential angelic hierarchies for Roman Catholics and Anglicans, called *De Coelesti Hierarchia (On the Celestial Hierarchy)*. The Orthodox have a slightly different arrangement and the Protestant perspective is vastly different. The nine-fold *Celestial Hierarchy* puts the cherubim as the second rank of heavenly beings. Those closest to God are the seraphim, who appear first in the Book of Isaiah. The prophet describes each of the seraphim hovering about God’s throne room as having six wings—two that they used for

flight, two that covered their faces and two that covered their feet (“feet” being a euphemism for their genitals).

These fiery, flying serpents praise God continuously and we will shortly join our voices with theirs as we sing with them, “holy, holy, holy LORD, God of power and might, heaven and earth are full of your glory.” The voices of these dragons shake the doorposts and thresholds of the temple, and fill it with smoke, which, by the way, is part of the reason that Anglicans love incense! And, if you remember, it was a seraph who *wounded* St. Francis with the stigmata. No sweet dimply babies here!

The first sphere of heavenly beings in *De Coelesti Hierarchia* comprises the seraphim and then the cherubim, who are not quite as close to God as the seraphim and then, because three is a holy number, come the “thrones.” These beings are the holy manifestations of God's justice and supreme authority. In the second sphere of three come the ranks of dominions, virtues and powers. Finally, in the third sphere, we get to the principalities and then, *seven ranks away from God*, come the archangels, followed by the angels—the “messengers” of God.

Anglicans and Roman Catholics tend to recognize three archangels: Michael, Raphael and Gabriel. We first hear of Michael by name in the book of Daniel, where the prophet refers to him as a great prince among angels. This is a title that Michael shares only with his angelic brother, Lucifer, with whom he battled and overcame in the Revelation to John. Notice that the passage we heard from Revelation is all past tense. Michael and the angels have cast Lucifer out of heaven to underline his defeat brought about by the death and resurrection of Christ. The deed is done! Lucifer, the accuser, (the *ha-satan*) was and is no equal to God's agent, Michael, let alone to the Almighty God.

Michael, God's agent who saved Abraham from the burning furnace that Nimrod threw him into. Michael, God's agent who interacted with both Jacob and Moses. Michael, God's agent who stopped Abraham from sacrificing Isaac. Michael, God's agent who overcame the angelic princes of other nations like the angel Samael, an evil accuser of Israel. Michael, God's agent who led the angels in casting Lucifer out of heaven. Is it any wonder that the first words out of an angel's mouth when they come face to face with people is some version of "Do not be afraid?" This archangel Michael is not the fat-cheeked, naked baby with a harp that so many have come to expect an angel to be like.

But then, our encounters with the Divine are so rarely what we are expecting. Think of Nathaniel—an outspoken rabbinic scholar of Torah—who's skepticism is melted away in his encounter with Jesus; John's Jesus who says of Nathaniel: "Here is a true Israelite." One who truly struggles with God—that's what the name Israel implies; one who *sees* God. Nathanael responds by echoing John the Baptist, who just a few verses earlier, said: "I myself have seen and have testified, that this is the Son of God." "Rabbi," says Nathanael, acknowledging his teacher, "you are the Son of God." And then Nathanael adds the phrase that will come to be connected to the crucifixion: "You are the King of Israel!" But the encounter with this Jesus, this rabbi from Nazareth, transcends Nathanael's knowledge and messianic expectations, as well as those of all the disciples and our own. "Do you believe," Jesus responds, "because I told you that I saw you under the fig tree? You will see greater things than these."

The final verse completes the invitation Jesus made in the beginning of John's Gospel. The first words John's Jesus spoke were these: "What are you looking for?" Jesus asks this of Andrew and either the beloved disciple or Philip a few verses before our reading. They answer by asking Jesus where he is staying, and Jesus says simply, "Come and see." This is, of course, the same phrase that

we heard Philip say to Nathanael. Specific invitations to specific people. However, when Jesus says at the end of our reading, “Very truly, I tell you, you will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man,” the pronoun is plural. What that means is that Jesus is not just promising Nathanael, but rather, as so many Southerners might say “All y’all will see heaven opened.” Us! You and me and everyone who hears or reads Jesus’s invitation to come and see. *Adeste fidelis*. “Come and behold him, born the king of angels”—*all of us!*

“Come and see.” Such simple, open and inviting words. And right in harmony with them, the words of the angels, “Do not be afraid.” Michael, whose name means: “Who is like unto God?”, and Raphael, whose name means “God’s healing,” and Gabriel, whose name means “the strength of God,” all three say “Do not be afraid!”

Their advice is timely, because right now, right here in this place, Christ is present and more awesome than we can possibly expect or imagine. The archangels implore us to not be afraid, but to come and see. “Come and see” the holy synthesis of heaven and earth in the bread and wine made flesh and blood; “come and see” the healing reconciliation of divine and human as we make our communion together; “come and see” the strength of a living community, the Body of Christ, that unites the temporal with the eternal. Come to this table as a gateway to the holy where angels continue to ascend and descend, and do not be afraid, but join your voice with angels and with Michael, Raphael and Gabriel, and all the company of heaven singing “Holy, Holy, Holy.”

And one of those voices may also have a message for you at some point! Open yourself to the reality that you have been found, and are known and deeply loved by God. Watch and listen and then be amazed, but never afraid, when one of God’s angels carries a message from God’s loving heart to yours.