

## **Sermon for 29 September 2024**

### **St. Michael's Episcopal Church**

#### **Norman, Oklahoma**

**The last time I preached, about 3 ½ months ago, I did something I had never done with a sermon—I gave it a title—Remember. In that sermon I spoke about the word remember as meaning “to put back together” not simply to think about something that happened “once upon a time.” The Greek word used for that kind of recall is “anamnesis,” which literally means “not forget.” To re-member is to make present in this moment. Kurt Vonnegut, toward the end of the novel *Slaughterhouse Five*, takes off on a flight of fantasy where he posits that in the afterlife one may access any moment of time as the present, which comes close to what I think is what he means by heaven. On that Sunday in June I had those of us who were here repeat re-member several times to imbed it into our lives and hopefully celebrate the images you relived at that moment.**

**Little did I know then that these few months later I would be preaching to this community again as we re-member our lives together at this parish of St. Michael. I know I have relived many memories of almost 50 years—off and on—with the community of St. Michael, as well as any number of others who live in my life in Norman, many of whom have passed from this life. Seeing and visiting with folk last night erased those years and brought back, not memories but the people themselves. We proclaim that we**

**are surrounded by “a cloud of witnesses” who are the souls of the departed, but also Angels and Archangels and all the company of Heaven, whether we can see them or not—or perhaps I should say whether we recognize we see them or not.**

**Every time I have had the privilege to preach on St. Michael and All Angels Day, I have challenged the congregation to open their minds and hearts to the reality of the heavenly host. Our culture speaks of guardian angels with a bit of either tongue-in-cheek or wishful thinking, not certain whether angels are a figment of imagination or “by-God” real creatures. And if real, how do we interact with them? Like space aliens or protectors?**

**During the Renaissance, depictions of angels became soft, feminine creatures in art. However, I want to remind us of how angels are greeted by mere mortals throughout the scriptures from Genesis to Revelation-or as my friend Hal Greenwood used to say, “from genuine Morocco to maps.” Side note-on the cover of a leather bound Bible is usually stamped Genuine Morocco, and maps follow Revelation-the last book of the New Testament. Whenever an angel appears to human beings their first utterance is “FEAR NOT!” Who on earth would be afraid of a soft, beautiful creature?**

**Our Hebrew forebears understood the cosmos vastly differently than we do, but they had experiences of the world that have been lost to people who are FAR superior in education and understanding of science and technology. (sarcasm) One of my favorite professors of English at**

**Sewanee was a gentle man named Abbott Cotton Martin. Abbo as he was called by students-but not to his face-looked a great deal like Winston Churchill and smoked Mark V cigars. Mr. Martin would say to a student who mocked classic authors as being uneducated or too simple to be taken seriously, "Sir, you think you know more than the ancients. Hmmpf! They are what you know." When we denigrate the experiences of the authors of the Old—or even—the New Testament, we cut ourselves off from experiences of the holy that can inform and educate us today in the life of the Spirit.**

**There are categories of Angels in both Hebrew and Christian theology. From the Greek, *angelos* is a messenger. In Genesis, whenever God appears, he is often thought to be an angel. Think of Abraham, aged 99 visited by the 3 men/angels who foretell of the birth of a child to Sarah who happens to be 90. Or the angel with whom Jacob wrestles at Jabok Ford. I could go on but let's look at angels a bit more, and let's start with our Patron St. Michael.**

**The highest category of angel is Archangel; in fact *arch* in Greek means high. In Christian understanding there are 4 archangels-Michael, Gabriel, Raphael, and Uriel. Michael is the general of the angelic army and the protector of believers in God. He is depicted with either a sword or spear, usually defeating the serpent/Satan. On his sword is a balance, as he also measures the souls of the departed to see who is worthy of entering heaven. We meet Michael in the OT book of Daniel and the book of Revelation. He also appears in some Jewish non-biblical writings. Gabriel is the**

**announcer. It is he who appears to the Virgin Mary in the Gospel of Luke to inform her she is to bear the Son of God. Appropriately his symbol is a trumpet. Raphael is an angel of healing and is connected with water. He is depicted with a string of fish. Although not named, he is traditionally understood to be the angel that roils the water of healing at the pool of Bethzatha in the Gospel of John. Uriel is mysterious as he only appears in non-biblical Hebrew writings, as “the angel over the lights.” Notice that all the names end in “el” which in Hebrew is one of the names of God and therefore connected with God. From history there are too many categories of heavenly beings to begin to include, so let’s move on to, “So what?”**

**Well, you might be thinking this is all well and good, even interesting, but what does this have to do with my life in Christ? Angels are messengers and ministers of the living God, sent to help us in everyday life, as well as the trials and tribulations we encounter. That might be difficult to grasp if one doesn’t believe there can be these heavenly messengers. But. Even non-Christians speak of “guardian angels”. Christian theology since biblical times has posited that there are angels who work with/direct individuals, cities and towns, countries, and even the world. Even in our secular society, the “angel of death” is spoken of with some trepidation, especially in times of disaster. The grim reaper is an image I’ll bet you are familiar with, especially as we move toward All Saints’ Eve.**

**Are there angels in your life? I will unequivocally say yes indeed. In fact here in this worship space is a**

**representative image who appeared some 35 years or so ago and who moves about this space from time to time. Where is Michael right now? Who can spot him? Not the ferocious general ready to defeat the Great Dragon, it would seem, but a guardian, none the less. At least a reminder that we are not the only sentient beings in the cosmos. Or even here on Imhoff Road.**

**Time spent in this space is not meant only to heal our wounds of body and soul, but to strengthen us to go out into the world to do the work God has given all of us to do. Which is to feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, welcome strangers, clothe the naked, care for the sick and those in prison. And proclaim the good news of God in Christ---as St Francis said, “use words when necessary.”**

**We are living in times when faith has become irrelevant to the majority of our society. However, Christ has called us to be beacons to those around us who hunger desperately for some good news, which they won't find on FOXNews or CNN or any of the local channels or newspapers. We are the announcers of good news! We are to be bearers of light. We are the healers of brokenness. We are to lead the charge. We are to be servants of Christ whose place of ministry is out those front doors. Now go out and be an angel to someone!**