

On Angels

Dean Kate Moorehead's talk on Nine Levels of Celestial Beings given Sunday, September 2, 2018

Genesis 2:1 *Thus the heavens and the earth were completed in all their vast array.*

God made the heavens and the earth, and we cannot see the entirety of that creation. There is so much that God made that we cannot see. So much more than what we know. That vast array, as Genesis calls it, is indeed vast. It is more than we can fathom.

Angels. They stand at the edges of our consciousness. We tend to avoid them among intellectual circles. But they are there nonetheless- in the greatest of the Biblical moments, at the gates of the Garden of Eden, at the birth of Christ, at the tomb of the resurrection. Might it be time to wonder who they are?

Sir Isaac Newton and other Enlightenment thinkers drew the conclusion that reality must be based on what can be seen and proven. All else could be considered myth, story, narrative. Protestant theologians in the 21st century sought to find a way to take both Scripture and Newtonian science seriously. But how could some of these things be true when no one had ever seen them? So we quietly brushed off the miracles of Jesus, the possession of demons and the appearance of angels. Maybe they happened back then but they don't happen now. And we are intellectual people, are we not? Who can take these things seriously and embrace the profound progress of science?

But the past few decades have seen the rise of Quantum Physics and as it has trickled down to the masses, theologians and biblical scholars have begun to wonder once more. If we perceive reality in only three dimensions but there are many more than that, could it be possible that angels are in fact flying in front of our faces and yet we cannot see them? What if our perception is limited and miracles and healings and exorcisms and angels are all, in fact, quite possible, and you don't have to check your brain at the door to begin to wonder again if they are true? What if science has gotten so large and so cosmic that we, in fact, must entertain a reality beyond our visible sight? It seems that we have opened the door to miracles and to the awe and wonder of the cosmos.

The phenomenon of angels is never explained in Scripture, it just is. Angels appear in the second creation story and from there, they just seem to visit us as messengers of God. The Biblical study of angels is a process of research and discovery. It is like going on an archeological dig and then putting the pieces of a broken vessel together. Who were angels? Who are they now? The pieces of the puzzle are unique and beautiful, but they don't always fit together. We must remember that these are descriptions of experiences of angels, not a list of facts.

Before beginning to describe angels in their categories and complexities, let me remind you, good Episcopalians, that as people of reason and faith together, this may start sounding a bit hokey. This is the stuff of story and myth. These are deep truths about the Universe and who we are in relationship to God, but they are not historical facts as if we were reading a biography of Winston Churchill. That does not mean that I don't believe in the truth of angels, I really do. But

when we speak of them as if we are sure of them and the nature of our existence, we do ourselves a disservice and most intellectuals leave the room.

So for you highly scientific types, think of this as poetry, a deep truth about who we are, and listen without shutting down. You can take and leave what you want. Consider this a buffet of biblical research, up for your consideration and exploration. There are no tests and no pressure to believe any of it. Just enjoy. By the way, this field is called ANGELOLOGY. So, after today, maybe we can call ourselves ANGELOLOGISTS.

Of course, theologians throughout the centuries have tried to take these disparate verses from Scripture and make them into a hierarchy. I don't really buy into this...now that we can embrace more chaos, more that we don't understand- why do angels have to fit into strict categories? I think it was and still is just a method for learning, a way to place them into our minds.

From Scripture, we can discover nine kinds of angels, three dominions or spheres or categories, each containing three species if you will. I will cover these spheres from the top down, or closest to God to farthest-difficult to gauge of course but the holier the closer to the divine.

I. The First Sphere: The first sphere of angels whose purpose is to serve God the Incarnate Son.

Seraphim (Isaiah 6:2-7) The word Seraph means "Burning one." Interestingly, it also means serpent in Hebrew. The Seraphim are considered the highest class of angel. Their job is to guard the throne of God and to continually sing what we call the Sanctus, the words we all sing together at the height of the Holy Eucharist, when we all mysteriously transcend time and gather around the throne of God and the great table of the sacrament.

There is only one mention of the Seraphim in the Bible and this is by the prophet Isaiah when he had his vision. His vision was so powerful that it echoes through the centuries. Seraphim have three wings. Their job seems mainly to praise and we sing their song at the Eucharist each week.

Above him stood the seraphim. Each had six wings: with two he covered his face, and with two he covered his feet, and with two he flew. 3 And one called to another and said: "Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory!"

Cherubim- Cherubim are fiery angels whose job seems to be to guard, protect and transport. It was a cherubim that God placed at the entrance to the garden of Eden with a flaming sword. Most of their descriptions have them with four wings, but the Book of Revelation describes them with six wings like the seraphim. They seem to stand between God and the rest of the creation as guardians again, as fighters, designed to frighten as well as to protect.

The Cherubim have four distinct faces: a man, an ox, an eagle and a lion. These later became the symbols of the four gospels, which also stand at the boundary between the Son of God and humanity. The cherubim have four wings and their wings are covered with eyes. (I know, a bit creepy). I guess that they are always on the lookout.

God commands Moses to make two cherubim statues to attach to the ark of the covenant to guard it. (Exodus 25:17-22)

Solomon carved Cherubim into the Temple (II Chronicles 3:7-14)

Ezekiel has a vision of cherubim guarding the temple. (Ezek 10:1-5)

Ezekiel also prophesies concerning the King of Tyre and claims that he has been subsumed by a fiery cherub (presumably Satan) who was in Eden but sinned and was cast down by God and burned with fire. (Ezek. 28:11-18)

Modern English usage has blurred the distinction between cherubim and *putti*. *Putti* are the often wingless (sometimes winged) human baby/toddler-like beings traditionally used in figurative art.

Thrones- The "Thrones" (Greek: thronoi, pl. of *thronos*), or Elders, are a class of celestial beings mentioned by Paul the Apostle in Colossians 1:16 (New Testament) and by Daniel and Ezekiel. They are living symbols of God's justice and authority, and have as one of their symbols the throne.

In the book of Daniel, thrones appear as Wheels, they are unusual looking, even compared to the other celestial beings, plus they are said to be moved by the spirit of other beings. They appear as a beryl-colored wheel-within-a-wheel, their rims covered with hundreds of eyes. In the Book of Ezekiel, they are closely connected with the Cherubim "When they moved, the others moved; when they stopped, the others stopped; and when they rose from the earth, the wheels rose along with them; for the spirit of the living creatures [Cherubim] was in the wheels." Ezekiel 10:17 NRSV.

Christian theologians that include the Thrones as one of the choirs don't describe them as wheels, describing them as adoring elder men who listen to the will of God and present the prayers of men. The Twenty Four Elders in the Book of Revelation are usually thought to be part of this group of angels.

- II. The Second Sphere of Angels stand on the boundaries between the Universe and God and are responsible for order and the inner workings of the cosmos, from the stars to the miracles that occur on earth...These second sphere of angels are mentioned by Paul in his Epistles.

First among the second sphere are the Dominions. The "Dominions" (Eph. 1:21; Col. 1:16) (lat. *dominatio*, plural *dominationes*, also translated from the Greek term *kyriotētes*, pl. of *kyriotēs*, as "Lordships") or "Dominations" are presented as the hierarchy of celestial beings "Lordships" in some English translations of the *De Coelesti Hierarchia*. The Dominions regulate the duties of lower angels. They are believed to look like beautiful human beings with wings.

Next are Virtues or Strongholds. These angels are those through which signs and miracles are made in the world. The term virtue appears to be linked to the attribute "might", from the Greek root *dynamis* (pl. *dynameis*) in Ephesians 1:21.

Third in the second sphere of angels are the "Powers" or "Authorities", from the Greek *exousiai*. These are mentioned in Paul's letter to the Ephesians. The primary duty of the "Powers" is to supervise the movements of the heavenly bodies in order to ensure that the cosmos remains in order. Often depicted as warrior angels, the powers also combat evil spirits, especially those that

make use of the matter in the universe, and often cast evil spirits to detention places. These angels are usually represented as soldiers wearing full armor and helmet and have defensive and offensive weapons such as shields and spears or chains respectively.

The Powers are the bearers of conscience and the keepers of history. They are also the warrior angels created to be completely loyal to God. Some believe that no Power has ever fallen from grace (see [Ephesians 6:12](#)). Their duty is to oversee the distribution of power among mankind, which explains their name.

III. The Third Sphere are the angels that relate directly or indirectly with humans.

The "Principalities" are also mentioned in Paul's Letter to the Ephesians ([Eph 3:10](#)). Principalities are the angels that guide and protect nations, or groups of peoples, and institutions such as the Church. The Principalities preside over the bands of angels and charge them with carrying out God's will.

The Principalities are shown wearing a crown and carrying a [sceptre](#). Their duty also is said to be to carry out the orders given to them by the upper sphere angels and to give blessings to the material world. They often oversee groups of people. They are the educators and guardians of the realm of earth. Like beings related to the world of the *germinal ideas*, they are said to inspire living things to many things such as [art](#) or [science](#). They bring inspiration to the human mind.

Archangels- The word "archangel" comes from the Greek ἀρχάγγελος (*archangelos*), meaning *chief angel*, a translation of the Hebrew רַב־מַלְאָךְ (*rav-mal'ákh*) It comes from the Greek *archein*, meaning to be first in rank or power; and *angelos* which means messenger or envoy. The word is only used twice in the [New Testament](#): [1 Thessalonians 4:16](#) and [Jude 1:9](#). Only the [Archangel Michael](#) is mentioned by name in the New Testament.

In most Christian traditions [Gabriel](#) is also considered an archangel, but there is no direct literal support for this assumption. It is also worth noting that the term 'archangel' appears only in the singular, never plural, and only in specific reference to Michael.

The name of the [archangel Raphael](#) appears only in the [Book of Tobit](#) (Tobias). Tobit is considered [Deuterocanonical](#) by Roman Catholics (both Eastern and Western Rites), Eastern Orthodox Christians, and Anglicans. As part of the Apocrypha, the Book of Tobit is not acknowledged by most Protestant denominations, such as Reformed Christians or Baptists. Raphael said to Tobias that he was "one of the seven who stand before the Lord", and it is generally believed that Michael and Gabriel are two of the other six.

A fourth Archangel is [Uriel](#) whose name literally means "Light of God." Uriel's name is the only one not mentioned in the Western Christian Bible, but plays a prominent role in the Apocrypha read by Anglican and Russian Orthodox Christians: The second [Book of Esdras](#). In the book, he unveils seven prophecies to the prophet [Ezra](#), after whom the book is named. He also plays a role in the apocryphal [Book of Enoch](#), which is considered canonical by both the [Ethiopian Orthodox](#) and [Eritrean Orthodox Church](#). The Catholic Church [does not regard Uriel](#) as an angel just as the Book of Enoch is [not part of the Catholic Bible](#).

Some believe that the seven archangels are the same as the seven spirits of God that stand before the throne described in the [Book of Enoch](#), and in the Book of [Revelation](#).

The [Seven Archangels](#) are said to be the guardian angels of nations and countries, and are concerned with the issues and events surrounding these, including politics, military matters, commerce and trade: e.g. [Archangel Michael](#) is traditionally seen as the protector of 'Israel' and of the [Church](#), the forerunner of the spiritual [New Israel](#).

It is possible to make a distinction between archangel (with a lower-case a) and Archangel (with an uppercase A). The former can denote the second-lowest choir (arch-angels in the sense of being just above the lowest Choir of angels that is called only "angels") but the latter may denote the highest of all the angels (i.e., Arch-angels in the sense of being above *all* angels, of *any* Choir. The seven highest Seraphim, Michael, being the highest of all).

The "angels" are the final category and the ones who most often relate directly with human beings. The Hebrew word for angels is *malakhim*, and the Greek ἄγγελοι, plural of ἄγγελος, *angelos*. Both words in Hebrew and Greek mean a messenger or envoy. As the lowest order, the angels are the most recognized by human beings. They are the ones most concerned with the affairs of living things. Within the category of the angels, there are many different kinds, with different functions. The angels are sent as messengers to humanity. Personal guardian angels come from this class.

Where does all this leave us, this pondering of nine categories? If nothing else, I hope that it leaves you with a sense of awe and wonder and with the notion that there is much that you cannot see or experience that may in fact exist. When Jesus spoke of humility, I think he was referring us to the very real fact that our brains are rather small and, in comparison with the workings of the universe in all its *vast array* (*Genesis*), there is much that we cannot understand.

Questions

1. Are you willing to consider the existence of angels?
2. What do you feel about the hierarchy?
3. Have you ever felt the presence of an angel or angels in your own life?