

Not Ashamed to “Baby Sit”

St. Michael & All Angels (Observed) - w/ Holy Baptism
Matthew 18:1-10

#1115
30 September 2007

When you take a good look at the *reredos*, the wooden screen behind the altar, you see two six-winged seraphim. Just as Isaiah the prophet saw them for real in God’s throne room (Isaiah 6), we get to see six-winged seraphim depicted around the throne of God here at the altar. Yes, the angelic hosts surround us every time we gather for the Divine Service. In fact, God’s angelic hosts surround us all the time. You see, if we listen carefully to our Gospel reading today, we can hear our Lord telling us that the heavenly angels are not ashamed to serve us human beings. In fact, we might even say that God’s angels are not ashamed to “baby sit” for God’s children.

Now this is not to denigrate or put down the ministry of angels in any way! They have great work to do in the cosmic battle between God and the devil, between good and evil. St. Michael, St. Gabriel, and St. Raphael, are certainly mighty soldiers and messengers of God. They are certainly holy - set apart and belonging to God - because they serve in God’s unveiled presence, and they delight see Him face to face. And yet, these same sacred, mighty messengers are not ashamed to “baby sit” the likes of us, God’s human creatures, God’s redeemed children.

From the very first appearances of angels in the Scriptures, they get to “baby sit” us fallen human beings. Right after God evicted Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden, He assigned the cherubim, an order of the angelic host, “to guard the way to the tree of life” (Gen. 3:24). Yes, those cherubim had to watch and make sure that Adam and Eve did not get into something they should not get into, that is, the Tree of Life. You see, once they had fallen into death and sin, it would have been utterly disastrous for them to partake of the Tree of Life and live forever in their sin!

Then, some centuries later, two angels step into history to rescue Lot from the immoral, corrupt crowds of Sodom and Gomorrah. The outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah and their immoral,

God-forsaken ways had reached God and He decided to take action. But first He wanted to rescue Lot and his family. So, the two angels come to warn Lot about the impending doom for the twin cities of sin. It’s as if Lot just cannot figure out a way to “get out of Dodge” before the sulfur and fire rain down from heaven. The angels almost literally have to lead Lot and family out of town by the hand.

We could mention the angel whom Balaam did not see, even though Balaam’s donkey clearly did see, and even spoke about (Num. 22). We could mention the angel who appeared to Gideon to assure him that God had not forgotten His people, and that the LORD would use him for some pretty unorthodox battles strategies to conquer the unbelieving occupiers (Jdg. 6). We could even mention the angel whom God assigned to bring calamity on Jerusalem as a consequence of King David’s prideful obsession with his numerical census of God’s people (1 Chr. 21). David repented in sorrow and God relented in mercy. And it sure makes you wonder about the wisdom of being obsessed with numbers in God’s Kingdom - it sure seems to breed arrogant pride, not humble trust.

When angels appear in Holy Scripture, they are not ashamed to watch after God’s people; they are not ashamed to “baby sit,” if you will. In fact, when the book of Hebrews mentions angels, it says, “*Are they not all ministering spirits sent out to serve for the sake of those who are to inherit salvation?*” (1:14). Yes, angels have the God-given and God-pleasing vocation of taking care of God’s “little ones.”

And that brings us back to our Gospel reading today. We hear about angels only in the final verses, but the whole account still tells us about the ministry of angels. Jesus’ disciples wonder and worry about “*Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?*” You would think that they would have figured that one out by now, especially the three disciples who actually saw Jesus transfigured:

Jesus is the greatest in the Kingdom, and He shows His greatness by humbling and lowering Himself. But for those who wanted to make a name for themselves and get their way from the Lord, Jesus gives a little object lesson. *And calling to him a child, he put him in the midst of them and said, "Truly, I say to you, unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven."*

That's why God's angels are not ashamed to "baby sit": they get to watch over and protect God's "little ones" even while they, the angels, joyously gaze on the face of God. And that's why we need not be ashamed to be God's "little ones." Why strive for our own greatness? Why struggle to elevate ourselves? Why hold on to the temptations and the sins that only separate us from God Himself? No, our Lord Jesus invites us to turn and be like "little ones," His "little ones" – "little ones" who humbly confess their sins, "little ones" who rely on His cross-won mercy and forgiveness.

Today, our Lord puts little Mary Esther in our midst. What a precious, little object lesson! As she is baptized, she shows us how God's kingdom works. She is washed clean from sin, and God makes her His dear, precious "little one." She is joined to Christ Jesus and His death and resurrection. Now she gets to live all of her life dying to sin and rising to newness of life. Our gracious heavenly Father even assigns an angel – a mighty, heavenly body-and-soul-guard – to "baby sit" Mary, to watch over her and minister to her by protecting her all the days of her life. That's what our Lord has also done with each of us, no matter how young or old.

Let's go ahead and think more of children in church. What a joy to have little ones squirming around in God's presence! What a delight to hear them rustle around a bit – or sometimes a bit more. After all, they too get to receive the forgiveness and life of Jesus delivered through His water, words, and meal. So, when you see a child in church, don't think poorly of him, no matter how noisy or squirmy he may get. You see, that little one is very precious to our Lord – so precious, in fact, that He assigns a big, burly, heavenly body-

and-soul-guard to watch over him and defend him.

But God's "little ones" are not just the ones who are physically small or chronologically young. Jesus talks of "little ones who believe in [Him]." He's talking about each of us, each of His baptized "little ones." Yes, He cautions us against "temptations to sin," and He exhorts us to cut them off as if they were diseased body parts. You see, our merciful, humble Savior was Himself a "little one" when He took on our human flesh and rested in the manger and in the arms of His Virgin Mother. He was also cut off from God's people and nailed to a cross. But in that cutting off, He restored us to life with our heavenly Father. And now His forgiveness frees us up to cut off whatever causes us to sin, whatever causes us to falter in faith toward our loving, heavenly Father, whatever causes us to look down on one of His "little ones," whether they are 10 days old or getting closer to 10 decades old.

You see, Jesus is the greatest in the kingdom, because He became the humblest "little one" in order to bring us back to our Father in heaven. And now, in His grace and mercy, He makes us like Himself. As the Apostle John said, *"See what kind of love the Father has given to us, that we should be called children of God; and so we are.... Beloved, we are God's children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is"* (1 Jn. 3:1, 3). That's why God's angels are not ashamed to "baby sit" the likes of us! That's why we thank God for His marvelous gift of angels! That's why we can think of them – especially the six-winged variety depicted on our altar – when we come to feast at the Lord's Table. Yes, they join us and surround us even as we feast on our Lord Jesus in His meal of mercy and life!

So, as we learn to pray, both morning and evening, from the *Small Catechism*, God sends His holy angels to be with us, "that the evil foe may have no power over us." God's angels are His "ministering spirits sent out to serve for the sake of those who are to inherit salvation." And, no, they are not at all ashamed to "baby sit" us, God's "little ones." Amen.