

“Credo, Part Five: Creator of Heaven”:
A Sermon for Trinity United Church (Nanaimo, B.C.)
for September 29th 2019 (16th after Pentecost/Feast of St. Michael and all Angels)
by Foster Freed

Psalm 89: 1-18

Let’s dive right in; we have a lot of ground to cover as we continue to traverse the opening paragraph—the remarkably succinct opening paragraph—of one of the Church’s most ancient Creedal statements....The Apostle’s Creed. So far that creed has invited us to believe—to trust, to place our faith!—in the One God, the God it has named as “Father Almighty”. But now...now it pushes onward and focuses—as the Creed will pretty much focus henceforth—on the “acts” of God, the grand work undertaken by this God, placing—quite sensibly—the act of creation at the head of the list: sensible, since all of the other divine activity to which the Creed will point us, are actions which would not be possible minus the initiating act of creation.

In this, of course, the Creed is simply beginning where scripture also begins. Genesis, chapter one, verse one! *In the beginning God **created!*** There’s a bit more to that verse which we’ll get to in a moment, but note that its starting point is the same as that of all the great Creeds: the Apostle’s Creed with its “I believe in God, the Father Almighty, **Creator**...”, the Nicene Creed with its “We believe in God, the Father Almighty, **Maker**...” and our own New Creed with its “We believe in God who has **created and is creating**...” And yes: given that this act of creation is located “in the beginning”, it is not wrong to suggest that this is qualitatively different from the creative acts with which we, ourselves, are familiar. The fancy Latin term is creation *ex nihilo*: creation from nothing.ⁱ A great artist—a Picasso—takes materials that are at hand and fashions them into things of beauty. In contrast, when we speak of God having created “in the beginning”, we attribute a far more profound level of creativity to God: making the point that when God creates there is not yet anything “at hand” with which God might undertake that work. This is a uniquely creative act: a uniquely creative act that makes possible all further creativity, including yours and mine. At a bare minimum—and it is a vast minimum—the Creed invites us to “believe”...to place our trust in this endlessly “creative and creating” God. But, of course, there is more

The Apostle’s Creed—taking its lead from the Bible’s opening verse—speaks of God not merely as Creator...but as “Creator of “heaven **and** earth.” And it is important at this juncture to acknowledge that there is no way of discerning—with absolute assurance—just what it was the original authors of the first chapter of Genesis had in mind when they spoke of God as having created—in the beginning—*the heavens and the earth*. It is certainly possible—perhaps even likely—that they saw themselves as doing “science”, offering a description of the cosmos as we experience it even with our fancy telescopes and elaborate conceptual framework: with the earth beneath our feet (as the earth was beneath **their** feet), and the heavens above. Nevertheless! Even if the original intent of those who spoke of God as having created *the heavens and the earth* amounted to little more than a quasi-scientific description of the world they

experienced in its natural splendor, it is impossible to deny that the Bible—and later tradition, Jewish as well as Christian—came to see the distinction between heaven and earth in a far more sophisticated way: with heaven coming to represent...

...think, for instance, of Jesus' continual reference to "the **Kingdom of Heaven**"ⁱⁱⁱ...

...with heaven coming to represent not so much the sky above, but rather a distinct dimension of creation: a spiritual realm rather than a physical realm. That contrast—between heaven and earth—is sometimes posed (as the Nicene Creed poses it) as the distinction between things "visible" and things "invisible". That's a helpful distinction. For my purposes this morning, however, perhaps an even better way of distinguishing between heaven and earth is to regard "earth" as a realm fashioned precisely so that humanity might be at home in it...

...more on that a week from today!...

...and heaven, by contrast, representing the realm within which God and God's companions are at home. And yes: the key phrase here is the one that invokes "God's **companions**": for while it is most certainly the case that belief in the One God is absolutely bedrock to our faith, scripture and tradition alike powerfully testify that the One God is not a lonely god! Whether depicting—as our Psalm depicted—a Council in which God is surrounded by other heavenly beings, or even more dramatically (as the 82nd Psalm has it) a Council in which God is surrounded by what it unhesitatingly refers to as "the gods" (!), the earliest Biblical texts make it clear that belief in "one God" does not stand as an obstacle to the conviction that heaven, not unlike the earth, is filled not merely with the "being" of God, but with **beings** who share in the work of God. And yes: we have a wonderful name for those beings. Unlike the 82nd Psalm, we no longer call them gods. Unlike the 89th Psalm, we honour them with a title less vague than a mere reference to them as "heavenly beings" or "holy ones". No. We know them, at any rate are **meant** to know them as angels. As angels.

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Well. As I have not attempted to disguise, this morning we are celebrating what is sometimes referred to as "Michaelmas"...or, more properly, The Feast of Michael, Gabriel and Raphael, (as it is known by Roman Catholics) or The Feast of St. Michael and All Angels (as it is known in Anglican and Lutheran circles). But I do hope...I do hope, even were this not a festival day devoted to the life of the angels...I hope that I would have found a way—in speaking of God as "Creator of heaven"...to have explicitly named and celebrated the ministry of God's heavenly host: a.k.a. the angels!

And I realize...I realize full well...that there is a sense in which—when it comes to such things as "angels"—a sense in which I am coloring way "outside the lines" in terms of the "comfort-zone" within which so many United Church folk reside. Nor are our misgivings entirely misplaced. The Reform Christian tradition (the **Calvinist**

tradition!)—which has placed its stamp on the United Church—has tended to be vigilant in guarding against a descent into superstition. Nor is that emphasis entirely misplaced where angels are concerned, because there are some pretty sharp **Biblical** cautions vis a vis angels. One especially stern warning can be found in the Letter to the Colossians whose author (maybe it was Paul, maybe it wasn't Paul, the older I get the less I care)...Colossians, whose author issues a handful of warnings against practices that can prove to be distractions for a community that wishes to be anchored in Christ. One such distraction is the worship of angels, which he strongly prohibits.ⁱⁱⁱ A similar caution stands behind the book Hebrews, with its opening insistence that we encounter something far more wonderful in Christ than we encounter even in the most exalted of angels.^{iv} Perhaps most helpful of all, is a striking exchange in the final chapter of the Bible's final book—Revelation—whose author, so overwhelmed by the prophecies that have been entrusted to him, bows before a ministering angel. The angel's shocked response could not be more decisive. *"You must not do that! I am a fellow servant with you and your brothers the prophets, and with those who keep the words of this book. Worship God."*^v Let's be clear. We do not worship angels. We worship God. And yet.

And yet we fail, or so I have come to believe...we fail to do full justice to the breadth of God's creative splendour when we turn a blind eye to the angelic realm. Knowing full well that angels are not normally accessible to our human senses in the way "things visible" are accessible, I am well aware that they therefore represent a facet of the faith which we can—in our alleged sophistication—choose to de-mythologize: treating the angelic hosts as something we have "outgrown". In part because I have immersed myself in a great deal of "near-death" literature—in which angels often have a role to play...and in part because—when I ponder my own life (especially some of the really idiotic choices I made during my late teens and twenties), I am entirely convinced that I would most certainly not have managed to make it to the grand age of 68 without the impressive Providential care of my Guardian Angel: in short, I can no more imagine the things of God minus the ministry of the angels, than I can imagine taking my next breath minus my heart and lungs. But, of course....

...far more impressive than my own personal experience is the simple fact that the angels are woven into **every** dimension of the Biblical witness: Old and New Testaments alike, in which they play an active part, not as cute little wood-nymphs and faeries (not that I have anything against wood-nymphs and faeries) but as powerful servants (messengers!) of the most High God: beings of light and life and love! And it goes without saying that we are all familiar with the role played by angels at Christmas: an angel announcing Christ's birth to Mary, an angel assuring Joseph that there is nothing improper with his fiancé being pregnant, and a whole choir of angels announcing the miracle to the gathered shepherds.^{vi} And yes: we are also familiar—at least I hope we are all familiar—with their role at Easter, encountering the frightened women at the empty tomb, assuring them that they have nothing to fear.^{vii} Those are the really big ticket appearances made by the angels throughout scripture....and yet, what I personally find even more intriguing is the way in which angels play a role in so many of the parables and teachings of Jesus.

Consider! Consider that when those who speak of a near-death experience tell us that they encountered an angel, they are simply echoing our Lord when he interprets his parable of the wheat and tares by describing the angels as “reapers” who will gather souls for God.^{viii} Consider! Consider that our Lord—in confronting a skeptical group of Sadducees—insists that we human beings, in the life of the world to come, will live in a way that will be “like the angels”.^{ix} Consider! Consider that when we speak of the specific ministry of the “**guardian** angels”, far from bathing ourselves in a sweet piece of folk-lore we ourselves dreamt up, we are merely echoing our Lord in his solemn warning that we are to treat children with love and respect since *their angels always see the face of my Father who is in heaven*.^x And yes: consider! Consider that when the “folk-religion” of our time (what we sometimes rather dismissively call New Age!) delights in the joys of the world beyond this one, that they are not doing anything different than what our Lord did when he assured his listeners that there is “great joy” in heaven whenever a sinner repents.^{xi} Trust me! The joy of which he speaks is one that joins together the angels with their God...Creator not only of earth, but of heaven: of things visible and invisible.

And yes: to repeat! I know full well that for many of us, all this talk of angels and the joys of heaven may seem ever so slightly (or perhaps not so slightly) over the top. Trust me! I am no stranger to that concern. No doubt that explains why I found myself—this past week—gravitating toward the opening sentence to one of my favorite books, American psychologist Scott Peck’s *The Road Less Travelled*. That book’s opening sentence, quite frankly, is unforgettable, partly because it only contains three words. Which three words? “Life is difficult”. That’s the whole show. “Life is difficult”.

More accurate words have never been spoken, which is why—as a faith community that seeks to follow Jesus in mature, adult ways, in ways that are genuinely responsive and responsible—it can be easy for us to regard celebration of the angels with their “more joy in heaven” as the worst sort of escapism. Indeed! Perhaps some of us will be especially suspect of such talk on a Sunday when this congregation is preparing to make an important decision about its future, hopefully doing so sanely and soberly, responsibly, as a community of adult disciples who have put away childish things!^{xii} I know all that...I know those concerns, I share those concerns. But surely there is a difference between being serious **in the work** that awaits us...and taking **ourselves** too seriously in the work that awaits us. You see: to speak of the “hosts of God”, to speak of God’s angels...and their work of providential care...doesn’t diminish **our** responsibility for the things we undertake inside these church walls as well as the things we undertake out there in the world. God forbid. But what an awareness of those “heavenly hosts” and their providential care most certainly can and should do, is serve as the most graphic of reminders that our United Church creed isn’t merely blowing smoke when it assures us that “we are not alone...we live in God’s world!” And what a world of wonder it turns out to be!

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Permit a final thought. I was delighted this week to notice...perhaps I knew this but had forgotten...delighted to note that the very first use of the word “angel” found in the Bible, occurs in the most unexpected place^{xiii}. That first use of the word is located—not surprisingly—in the Bible’s first book: Genesis. And yes: it is used in connection with the saga of Abraham...Abraham, Sarah and their son Isaac. And to be sure: angels eventually do appear to Abraham and Sarah...and eventually manage to rescue Isaac from a bleak fate at one especially critical juncture.^{xiv} But Abraham, Sarah and Isaac are **not** the ones—those main Biblical characters...they are **not** the ones to whom an angel **first** appears in that saga. That honour, in fact, belongs to **Hagar**: Sarah’s servant, Abraham’s mistress, mother of Ishmael, so badly mistreated that she runs off into the wilderness, presumably to die along with her child: when an angel finds her, ministers to her, comforts her, strengthens her...and assures her that while Abraham and Sarah may have cast her off, her God has not cast her off. And you know:

For me there is something delightful in the fact that an angel makes so early an appearance ministering to one of the “side-characters” in the Biblical story: a sharp reminder and a clear warning that the angels—though very much a part of our specifically Christian story—are woven fully into the life of the world...into the lives of all people in all times and places which is why even those who know nothing of Christ, know of God’s angels. More to the point: that the work of God’s angels—at the end of the day—is part and parcel of the work of God...which is to say: part and parcel of the grand and glorious work of love! Work that most certainly is both grand and glorious!

And glory be to God: whose power working in us can do infinitely more than we can ask or imagine. Glory to God—the God who delights in colouring outside the lines—glory to God from generation to generation! In the Church...and in Christ Jesus. Now and for ever more. Amen!

ⁱ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ex_nihilo

ⁱⁱ For instance, Matthew 4:17

ⁱⁱⁱ Colossians 2:8

^{iv} Hebrews 1:5

^v Revelation 22:8,9

^{vi} Luke 1:26, ff; Matthew 1: 18ff; Luke 2: 8ff

^{vii} For example Matthew 28: 2ff

^{viii} Matthew 13: 36ff

^{ix} Mark 12: 18ff

^x Matthew 18: 10,11

^{xi} Luke 15:10

^{xii} 1st Corinthians 13:11

^{xiii} Genesis 16:7. Technically the first angel in the Bible is found at Genesis 3:24, the angel who is appointed to block our access to Eden. But he is described not as an angel, but as a “cherubim”.

^{xiv} Genesis 22:11