

Sunday Sermon September 28, 2025

Three years ago tomorrow/today is a day we will never forget. Hurricane Ian roared ashore here in SW Florida and turned our lives upside down.

When Sue and I evacuated on Tuesday of that week, I brought along materials to prepare my sermon for the following Sunday. “Surely we’ll be back in church by then,” I thought to myself. I’ve always been an optimist.

We were going to celebrate the Feast of St. Michael and All Angels that Sunday three years ago. We were going to commemorate the 60th anniversary of this parish becoming fully integrated – a proud milestone – But as you know we were not here. Sue and I were in Orlando making phone calls to check on people, and to help those who needed to find a place to live.

Today, 3 years later, we are celebrating the Feast of St. Michael and All Angels in our beautifully restored church. Thank you God.

I like the verse from our first reading from Genesis. Jacob has had a dream: a ladder set up on earth that reaches up to heaven. The angels are ascending and descending. When Jacob awakens, he proclaims: “Surely the Lord is in this place. This is none other than the house of God. This is the gate of heaven.”

Yes – look around – surely the Lord is in this place. In these fellow travelers. This is where heaven reaches down and touches earth, where love seeks a home in each and every heart.

Angels – Megan McKenna tells us that the presence of the holy “exudes” from the angels. They are “evidence that God is taking notice of us.” Nice. Angels remind us that God is close, God is near. Last week, Fr. Stan reminded us that God is not an old man with a long white beard sitting on a cloud a million miles away. God is as near as the next person we encounter. As near as the people we love and those we have loved along the way.

My favorite scripture verse about angels is Hebrews 13:2 “Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it.” Entertaining angels “unaware.” Yes

That’s what happened, I believe, for our forebears here at St. Michael’s 63 years ago today when they proclaimed that their black sisters and brothers were not strangers who would have Sunday School class on the porch outside, but that they were beloved children of God who bore the divine image just as they did. They would be welcomed here to the table of the Lord.

Many people think angels look like these **STATUES** --- and they do.

But angels come in all shapes, sizes, colors, genders, ages – And those of us who went through the storm and its aftermath have seen all kinds of angels:

- They came down from the sky in helicopters and piloted boats to the beach to rescue people.
- They came in ambulances from Alabama. They pulled small boats behind pickup trucks all the way from Tennessee as part of “the Cajun Navy.”
- They opened their homes to the displaced.
- They came as boat captains who shuttled people to the island every day.
- Our city officials, police officers, firefighters, first responders worked endless hours in the midst of their own losses. Who can forget our beloved Mayor Holly beginning daily updates with “today is day 12... Day 36... Day 49 in our recovery.” Reassuring us that progress was happening. Calmly answering fevered questions.
- Dana giving us a daily wildlife update as a sign of hope: “mother nature is healing and so are we.”
- Remember the teams of volunteers from the UP, Iowa and church kids from Holy Innocents in Valrico who came to help, offered Vacation Bible School, collected dumpsters full of debris.
- And the teams of volunteers who went from house to house mucking out and removing drywall for strangers.

- And our own FP crews working here at St. Michael's in the most challenging conditions.
- And people giving away burgers at the Shack. And Operation Barbecue
- And teens driving around on golf carts giving away bottles of water.
- And mental health volunteers.
- And people here in our church saying "yes" to serving on the restoration team, capital campaign committee, buildings and contents, landscaping. Hours and hours day after day.
- And the donations that came in from all over the country.
- And, and, and... You can add your own "and" to that list.

Yes – angels look like these **STATUES –**

But we who have been through a life-changing experience have also seen them in the faces of people who did what they could to help a neighbor in need. People who put the love that we talk about here in our church into action.

The angels that we all saw in the aftermath of the storm are living reminders that when life is at its worst, God is near. God cares and God works through them, as God works through us, to bring healing and relief and to constantly remind us that we are never alone and always loved.

This celebration of the Feast of St. Michael and All Angels was delayed 3 years, but perhaps we have a deeper appreciation of angels today, as we remember and give thanks for the many ways they served and gave and showed us the goodness of humanity and God's love and care.

Amen