“What do you think about heaven?” . . . was a question asked of me earlier this week during a pastoral visit. The question came out of the blue (at least as I saw it). We’d been talking about other things: pets, books we’d been reading, etc. And then, “What do you think about heaven?” I’d been warned about questions like this in seminary . . . but it was the first time someone had directly asked me. I’ll admit that it caught me off-guard, and I know I paused a bit, before I answered: “Y’know, it’s funny you should ask, since I’m going to preach on that this-coming Sunday.”

It turned out, as we talked the other day, that his question wasn’t (at least on the surface) reflective of his own afterlife concerns, but related more to a conversation that he’d had with a Mormon friend about the topic. And, while it was true—I had thought about talking about heaven today—at that point of the week, “heaven” was just one among many topics I was considering. But, I took his question as an “angelic message”, and . . . here we are! So, this morning, heaven . . . and some of its “inhabitants”: angels.

As you may have gathered from the opening hymn, the Collect for the Day, and the lessons, we are celebrating the Feast of St. Michael and All Angels today. “Angel”, whether translated from either the Hebrew and Greek, simply means “messenger”, with an added implication of being a “royal” or “divine” messenger. So, one of the assumptions behind “angels”, of course, is that there is some place “other” than where we live that is their usual residence. In the context of today’s readings, of course, that “place” is heaven. Angels are then sent from that place with a message, perhaps with instructions to return to the Sender with an answer. That seems to be the implication behind both of our readings from Genesis and John’s Gospel: that the angels are descending and ascending, being, at least, one of the means of communication between the earthly and heavenly realms. For me, then, two questions arose: “What is it, from heaven, that needs to be communicated to those of us in the realms below?” And, the second, “What is heaven after all?” I’ll tackle the second question first.

So, what is heaven? As an historian, I remember a book that came out some twenty years ago: A History of Heaven: The Singing Silence by Prof. Jeffrey
Burton Russell. His book was, I understand, meant to be the beginning of a multi-volume work (he had written a four-volume work on the history of the devil!). But he must have run out of energy! That said, the History of Heaven does shed a LOT of light on the background of how we think of heaven. He deals with some biblical and other ancient ideas, but, it becomes clear that a lot of what we think reflects a lot of Dante Alighieri’s Paradiso. The last I heard, however, was that Dante hadn’t made it into the New Testament canon, so as we approach the idea of heavenly, angelic, messengers, it seemed more appropriate to look at the biblical material about the abode of angels, rather than the more commonly held beliefs.

There is quite a bit in the Bible about the “heavens” of course And a lot of it appears very early on; “the heavens” appear in the first verse of Genesis (and in the Hebrew Bible, “heavens” is usually plural). We learn, also in Genesis, that the heavens are the expanse over the earth (1.8). The Tower of Babel was built to reach the heavens (11.4). The heavens are the locations of the stars, and the source of dew (1.14, 27.28). They are the possession (14.19), and dwelling place, of God—as we heard in our first lesson, and as was implied in the reading from Revelations (12.7-8). So, in the Hebrew mind, the “heavens” were definitely a physical “location”, with physical properties.

Elsewhere in the biblical witness, we read that the Hebrew ideas about the cosmos (also reflective of other cultures) indicated an understanding of a three-part universe: the heavens, the earth, and that place below the earth. Job (26.11), in his arguments with his three friends, remarks that at God’s voice, the “pillars of heaven” are shaken. Again, the images are quite physical. There were, in other words, in the wider creation, multiple, distinct “worlds”—earth and heaven chief among them.

As much as heaven was understood as a place, it was understood to be the abode, the possession of, God. God was the ruler; the angels served God as messengers. And, heaven was understood to be the place where God’s glory resides and where God’s will was perfectly carried out — recall the visions of heaven in Isaiah and Revelation, where all the seraphim and cherubim engage in constant adoration (Is 6.1-5); that was their service. That’s why the heavenly rebellion (referred to in our reading from Revelations) was so drastic; that’s why Michael and his angels fought the battle of the faithful in heaven and cast the devil out—presumably to earth. The story of Revelations suggests that we can
NOW understand our predicament: the opponent to God has been cast out of that realm and is at work amongst us, in ours.

So, what is biblical heaven? Among other things (and I’m not going to get into the aspect of the “place we go when we die, in the sweet by-and-by), “heaven” was a physical place where God lived, where God’s creatures—seraphim, cherubim, archangels and angels—served their Ruler, and where God’s will was perfectly carried out. It was a place of perfection, from which evil had been cast down. And, in that perfection, lies our hope as well. From that perfection arise our “better angels” (in Lincoln’s words).

**Given that nature of heaven, then, what needs to be communicated?** As we’ve seen, for the ancients, there were multiple, distinct “worlds”, earth and heaven chief among them. And, for the Hebrews, earth and heaven were brought more closely together in the ark of the Covenant, and the Temple. In the later language of Celtic spirituality, there were (and, perhaps, are) “thin places” where the dividing line between the two worlds is permeable. The stone upon which Jacob rested his head was one; our Colorado neighbors might point to Crestone, or further south, to Taos. And our reading from John’s Gospel implies that Jesus himself was another.

In this context, then, the ascending and descending angels about which we’ve heard make a bit more sense. Two different worlds are assumed: one where God’s will is perfectly reflected, and another where, despite the presence of some faithful folks, God’s will was often challenged and/or disregarded. The ascending and descending angels, then, carry human and divine concerns back and forth. They bridge that “thin space” between the two worlds.

But the separation between the heavenly and earthly realms was not, in the biblical—especially New Testament—view, permanent. The hope, reflected in the book of Revelations, was that there would come a time when the current structure would collapse, and there would be a “new heavens and a new earth”, at the center of which would be the holy city, the new Jerusalem (21.1-2). That has become the hope of Christians: there will be a time when the “new heavens and the new earth” are all that there is. The problem, of course, is that we haven’t reached that point yet. “God” may “be in his heaven”, as the saying goes, but all is NOT right with the world. We don’t have to look far to see that.

So, in some ways, there is still a need for angels to bear concerns back and forth. I don’t think, however, that we need expect winged beings (winged angels, by the way, are mostly the product of Dante and Italian imagination). On the
contrary, as the writer of the book to the Hebrews puts it, angels are all around us; we encounter them “unaware” (13.2). John’s Gospel, however, as I mentioned above, seems to imply that Jesus, to whom we owe our allegiance, is a “new” bridge, that “thin place” where heavenly concerns and earthly realities come together. In his life and teachings, he was more than a messenger from heaven. He brought God’s realm to earth; he lived it. He put on the mantle of Michael the archangel, and did battle with the principalities and powers of this world. And in his death and resurrection, cast down evil and death as the ruler of our reality.

As Christians, it is Jesus whom we call “Lord”. That Jesus who proclaimed—as Luke put it—the coming kingdom of God . . . but as Matthew put it, the coming kingdom of heaven. As Christians, we are the body of Christ in this world; we are his hand and feet and intention. Whether or not heaven is physical “place”, it is a reality for us a followers of Jesus. It remains a reality where God’s will is to be perfectly reflected. And it is our task, as messengers, as “angels” who participate in that realm, to join with others, heavenly and earthly, to communicate God’s will and and work towards making that will done, “on earth as in heaven”.

Amen.