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ST. MATTHEW ORTHODOX CHURCH

Hebrews 1:10-2:3

“THE ANGELS”

A five-year old girl was asking her father a lot of questions about things he didn't know much about. She asked him, “Daddy, do angels sleep?” He answered, “Well, I never thought about that. I don't really know, but I suppose maybe they do.” She said, “When they sleep, do they wear pajamas?” “Oh, my, I have no idea!” he replied. She said, “I bet they do, because all the pictures show them wearing fancy white robes and if they slept in the robes, they would get all wrinkled up. So they must wear pajamas!” “Okay”, said the beleaguered dad, “whatever you say. I'll agree they might wear pajamas.” “One more question”, said the little girl----“How do they get those pajamas over their huge wings?” At that point, the father changed the topic of the conversation! (in “Our Daily Bread”, 12/30/04)

Our information is somewhat limited---angels' pajamas aren't the only thing we don't know about them. But we do know *some* things about angels. Today's epistle reading, from St. Paul's letter to the Hebrews, is Hebrews 1:10-2:3. And in that passage (and some of the verses both before and after those assigned verses), we learn a fair amount about the holy angels. St. Paul's real focus in this passage is on Jesus Christ, but he does give some info about angels, too. So let's look at what the Holy Apostle says about them.....

He tells us in chapter 1, verse 7, who the angels are---God “makes His angels spirits and His servants flames of fire.” Angels are spirits created by God. Spirit beings, spirit persons created before we humans were made. They are not physical like us, but we know they sometimes take on a physical appearance in order to communicate with people.

St. Paul calls them (quoting a psalm) in verse 7 “flames of fire”. We know he doesn't mean that literally because they are spirits---and fire is physical. But he uses such “picture language” to clue us in on a couple of things about the angels. Like fire, they are powerful. And like fire, they are pure.

So St. Paul tells us that angels are spirit beings created by God. They have no bodies, which is why we call them in our Orthodox services “the bodiless powers of heaven” or “the incorporeal powers of heaven”. And they are very powerful and exist on a much higher level than us. And they are pure and holy, except for the fallen angels---the devil and his demons---who rebelled long ago against God and ceased being pure and holy.

Next, what do the angels do? St. Paul tells us three things in these verses in Hebrews.

1. They worship God. St. Paul writes in chapter 1, verse 6----“Let all God's angels worship Him.” The main priority for angels is to worship God. They love to worship God. And so they attend our liturgies to join us in our worship of God. That is why there are icons of St. Michael and St. Gabriel on the side doors of the iconostas---to remind us that the angels are here with us to worship God. So, as I know I've

mentioned to you before, if you come to church some Sunday or other day and you think to yourself----“Boy, kind of low attendance today.” It’s not as low that day as you might think-----there are invisible angels here worshipping with us.

We can’t count these angelic worshippers in worship attendance statistics because we can’t see them-----usually. Sometimes angels do take on physical appearance temporarily. That has sometimes happened to not very holy people. But usually angelic appearances are to very holy people, indeed----people whose “spiritual eyesight” is very good! It does happen.

Back in the 1990s a priest fell asleep in Christ whose name was Father Iakovos of the island of Ebvia in Greece. A very holy, gentle, and innocent man, he had grown very close to God indeed in his long life. Towards the end of his life, the altar servers at his church noticed something at some liturgies. He would be speaking in a low voice (besides saying the prayers) and would be making motions with his hands as if he was trying to get someone to move over. After observing this several times one of the altar servers asked the priest after the liturgy was over---“Father, who were you talking to, and motioning to, in the liturgy today?” Father Iakovos said, “Today so many angels were with us in the altar that they were crowding me. I had to ask them to move over so I had room to do the service.” (The Mountain of Silence, Kyriakos Markides, Image, 2001, pp. 109-110).

The angels are here at every liturgy even if we don’t see them like Father Iakovos did! St. Paul mentions their presence at liturgies in a different epistle---I Corinthians 11:10. And he mentions it later in the epistle to the Hebrews in chapter 12. In that passage he is describing what a great event the early Christians were coming to when they came to the liturgies in the early church (even those liturgies weren’t in a great cathedral, but in someone’s house). In verse 22, we see part of his description---“you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering.” It’s still the same today. The angels gather with us for our festal celebrations and worship of God—the Divine Liturgy.

That means they are here with us right now. How many? Who knows? St. Paul in that verse I just read used the word “innumerable”. A whole bunch!

Angels love to worship God. They worship Him in heaven. And they are here with us this morning worshipping God with us.

2. St. Paul refers to another thing angels do in today’s epistle lesson, in Hebrews 2:2---“the message declared by angels was valid.” Angels bring messages from God---valid, true messages.

The word “angel” is of Greek origin. It means “messenger”. They brought messages to many people in the Bible---and many times since. Sometimes they have taken on physical appearance when delivering a message.

But much of their messenger work is done more quietly. You have a guardian angel (more about that soon) and one of the main things he does for you is to bring you messages from God. The angel works together with your conscience and the Holy Spirit within you to instruct you as to what is right and wrong and to persuade you to do right and *not* do what is wrong. Those kind of messages from God through your angel happen a lot.

I’m sure you’ve experienced times when you have to make a decision, when you face

temptation to do wrong. You feel in your heart “a pull” to do the right thing even if you really want to do the wrong thing! That “pull”, that “little voice”, is your angel, working together with your conscience and the Holy Spirit, bringing you a message—“Obey God! Don’t sin!” A good message from a good messenger---your angel.

3. The third work of angels mentioned here by St. Paul is that they serve us. St. Paul wrote about this in Hebrews 1:14—“Are they not all ministering spirits sent forth to serve, for the sake of those who are to obtain salvation?” The angels are “ministering spirits” “sent forth to serve”. Who are they sent forth to serve? St. Paul tells us who--- -“those who are to obtain salvation.” That’s us!

They come into our world to serve us and help us on our walk to heaven. And each of us has his own specific guardian angel given to us when we were baptized. Jesus talks about guardian angels in Matthew 18:10---“Take heed that you do not despise one of these little ones, for I say to you that in heaven their angels always see the face of My Father who is in heaven.” We are given personal angels by God.

Our personal angels, our guardian angels guide us (remember what I said about messages), help us, and guard us.

Decades back there was a southern town where a very corrupt and brutal man pretty well controlled the whole town. He did it in illegal ways but no one was brave enough to stand up to him. The local Episcopal priest decided he would have to be the one to do it. So he attended the next town council and very boldly stood up against the corrupt man. The fellow was very angry and publicly said that night, “Father, you will pay for what you just did---I will get you for it!”

A few days later the priest had to stay late at the church and then walk home. It wasn’t a real long walk, but part of it was through an undeveloped isolated area. As he headed home in the dark, he wondered if he was safe---maybe the corrupt man would ambush him in the dark. But nothing happened and he made it home safe and sound.

Years later, the threatening man was sick and on his death bed. He had had a change of heart and wished to repent of his crimes and wickedness and turn back to God. He sent a message to see if the priest would come see him. The priest came and talked with the man and helped him repent and come back to God. He gave him his last sacraments and was about to leave, when the man said he had a question---“Father, you remember when you stood up to me at that meeting and I threatened you that night. I started watching you, waiting for a chance to get you alone. A few nights later, I saw you walking home in the dark alone in those trees near your house. I had a big club and hid behind a tree. I was going to jump you and beat you to death.” The priest replied, “But I never even saw you? Why didn’t you attack me?” The man said, “Oh, I really wanted to, but you had those two big, very strong men walking with you to protect you---so I didn’t dare try to kill you. But my question is—who were those two men? I had never seen them around town before.” The priest said, “I don’t know who you are talking about! There were no men, I was all alone!” Then the priest realized who his protectors must have been----2 angels sent from God to protect him. He didn’t see them, but the would-be murderer did. (*Treasures From Paul’s Letters*, Vol. 2, Father Anthony Coniaris, Light & Life Publishing, p. 23)

Our guardian angels are with us to help us, guide us, and guard us. As St. Paul wrote in verse 14----“Are they not all ministering spirits sent forth to serve, for the sake of those who are to obtain salvation?”

Why are the angels eager to serve and help us? Out of respect for the high position of our human race. You might respond by thinking---But aren't angels higher up than us? They're holier, more powerful, etc. Yes, in many ways that is true. But our race has been elevated very high by God. This elevation was not a reward for us but a gift to us from God. The gift to us was that God the Son, the Second Person of the Holy Trinity, became one of us in Jesus. Our Lord became our brother. God the Son did not become an angel. He became human.

And so the angels respect us and love us because their Lord is our brother. They see us as privileged and special because God joined us. And a second privilege we have that they don't----we get to receive the Body and Blood of the Lord in the Holy Eucharist.

So out of respect for these 2 great privileges we have-----that the Son of God became one of us; and that we receive Him into us in the Holy Eucharist---the angels are eager to serve us.

So...today from Hebrews 1 and 2, we have learned three things about the Holy Angels.

1. What they do: Mainly they worship God. And they are with us in this room right now worshipping God with us in the Divine Liturgy.
2. They are messengers from God. Sometimes they bring messages to humans very openly. More often, they work together with the Holy Spirit and our consciences to give us guidance from God, a message from God to obey Him.
3. They help us and serve us. Out of their respect for our divine brother, Jesus, they are our servants.

How apply these truths in our lives? 4 ways I will mention in closing.....

1. Venerate and respect the angels. Have icons of them in your home. Remember how great and holy they are, these glorious servants of God.
2. Listen and obey when your guardian angel tries to persuade you to do right, not wrong. When that “little voice” in your heart is pulling you in the right direction, obey it. Don't make your angel sad by ignoring his guidance and sinning.
3. Remember that you have a personal guardian angel. Talk to him each day, asking him to guide and guard you. You can do that through the formal prayers in the prayer books, or in your own simple words----or both. Guardian angels are not a fairy tale—you really do have one! He will hear you. He will help you.
4. Give thanks to God. Thank Him for creating the angels, for all the good they do for His Kingdom, and that He gave you your own guardian angel. And when your guardian angel sees you thanking God and praising God, he will be a very happy angel!

