

The Spirits Associated with Us

A sermon by Rev. Michael Gladish
Mitchellville, MD, September 10th, 2017

“And [Jacob] dreamed, and behold, a ladder was set up on the earth, and its top reached to heaven; and there the angels of God were ascending and descending on it.” ~ Genesis 28:12

Nothing could be more common in the Word than the appearance of or reference to angels. They are everywhere, from the creation story where God said, “Let us make man in our image,” to the book of Revelation, from the story of Balaam’s donkey in the book of Numbers to the angels appearing at the announcement of the Lord’s birth and again at His resurrection.

Evil spirits are also mentioned again and again, from the one plaguing Saul (requiring David to soothe him with his music), to the many that the Lord cast out of people suffering in the stories of the Gospels. There, one in particular is especially notable in that he said “My name is Legion, for we are many!” (Mark 5:9). This incident powerfully illustrates a principle taught in the revelation for the New Church, namely, that all the angels and spirits who are with us are agents or emissaries bringing the influence of many others from the spiritual realms into our lives through their presence. THEY don’t necessarily think of themselves in that way; they act as if of themselves. But in fact they are the subjects of many influences, just as WE are the subjects of *their* influence. You can almost think of the whole system as a big funnel channeling either love and wisdom, or evil and falsity from the spiritual world right down into our personal lives.

This influence, or influx, as we call it, provides the basis for all our thoughts and feelings, and yet it is never forced upon us; it comes to us as a result of our free choices. It can be likened to the radio waves that pervade the atmosphere around us, but that only affect us when we “tune in” to them with an appropriate receiver. So the signals are received according to the form of the receiver, only in this case we as receivers “tune” *ourselves* by the decisions we make and the actions we take. To illustrate, if you make a decision to drink too much alcohol or use a psychedelic drug you can be pretty sure that you are inviting the influence of destructive spirits. But even if you simply allow yourself to make an unkind remark, that, too, is a decision that invites a bad influence from the world of spirits that can poison the atmosphere all around you.

But let’s step back a moment and think about the angels ascending and descending Jacob’s ladder. On one hand this is a picture, an *illustration* of the connection and communication between heaven and earth. On the other hand it was and is a real thing: there really are angels ascending to heaven from the populations on earth every day, and then again descending to be present with us in our joys and sorrows. They inspire and encourage us; they give us hope; indeed they stimulate our very thoughts, which otherwise would rest like data points on a silicon chip without a flow of energy through the circuit board to light them up.

Sadly, evil spirits also send their corrupting influences throughout the world, and these, too, can “light up” the information stored in our minds and cause us to think about and even feel their evils and falsities as if they were our own. So we face the challenge of temptations, not just because something disorderly is put before us but because that disorderly thing, whatever it is, provides a basis for really evil spirits to identify with it and take advantage of us. So what can we do? Simple; not easy but simple: shun the disorder as a sin against the Lord, thereby inviting the power of HIS stronger influence to overcome it.

The whole topic of spiritual influences in our lives is fraught with difficulties and yet at the same time – potentially at least – powerfully helpful. It is fraught because it is so easily abused and misunderstood: excuses like “the devil made me do it,” may seem comical, but they’re actually quite common, and then again the practice of ritualistic exorcisms to try to cast out the devil can do even more harm. On the other hand there is something tremendously liberating about knowing that the evil we think, will and do is not only of our own making, but is inspired by “principalities and powers” outside of ourselves, principalities and powers that *we can control with the Lord’s help*.

Here’s how it works.

The organization of the spiritual world is such that all the people whose ruling loves are good, that is, generous and kind, are in heaven, and all whose ruling loves are evil, that is, essentially selfish, are in hell. But to the extent that good and evil loves are tangled up together in a person he or she cannot go either to heaven or to hell without being torn apart. The same applies to a person in whom truth and falsity are tangled up together. Like the wheat and tares growing together in the Lord’s parable, they have to be separated. But in our world of such confusion about what is good or evil, true or false, it is often extremely difficult, if not impossible, to sort these things out until we enter the other life where our internal states and a lot of other realities are plainly revealed. And even then it takes time – or rather a process – to get this clarity. So there is a sort of middle world of the spirit – actually called “the world of spirits” – in between heaven and hell where this sorting out takes place. We’ll focus in on this next week. Meanwhile, this, being the spiritual realm most closely connected to life and experience in the natural world, is the “funnel” through which the angels of heaven and the devils in hell pour their influence into us.

In broad, general terms the doctrines refer to two angels and two evil spirits with everyone; one angel applies himself or herself to the understanding based on our knowledge of the truth, and the other to our will of what is good. Likewise one evil spirit applies himself or herself to our reasoning based on the presence of falsity in our minds, and the other to our affection for evil. But in reality each of these four agents acts through or by means of the spirits in that intermediate world *because they don’t compel, they simply provide for and stimulate the thoughts and affections those spirits choose*. And the spirits in turn provide for and stimulate the thoughts and affection *we* choose.

The spirits associated with us therefore vary from day to day, even from moment to moment depending on our free will and determination. They don’t consciously *choose us* to be the subjects of their influence, they are simply drawn to what resonates with their states *in us*, almost like magnetic attraction or water filling a basin. In fact, even though all angels and spirits have memories of natural things carried over from life in this world (memories that to some extent define their character), those memories are put to sleep and made completely dormant in the other life, lest, as one writer put it, “confusion should result in [the human] mind by their communicating *their* memories to him.”¹ So in place of their own conscious natural memories spirits rely on the stuff in *OUR* memories as a basis for their mental life, and this even to the extent that they may believe they are us – acting out their loves or fantasies in perfect freedom through us.

¹ Rev. Dr. Hugo Odhner, in *Spirits and Men*, Academy Book Room, 1958, page 51. Of course this does happen occasionally, despite the general rule, and the result is what we sometimes call *déjà vu*, or belief in reincarnation. But this can interfere with our freedom, and so the Lord guards against it as much as possible.

It's a neat "trick," if you will, to provide for and sustain the connection between the two worlds: we get what is spiritual from them – or rather from the Lord through them, and they get what is natural from us, even though both sides are given the appearance that we are independent from each other. Still, the *interdependence* is absolute and critical since, as they say, nothing comes from nothing; rather all of creation comes from God in steps and stages from what is infinite down to the finite, finally resting in what *seems* hard and solid in or of itself.

Now of course all this is rather philosophical, but there are important practical applications in our daily lives. For instance, when we understand this we can understand the lasting harm or benefit of particular *experiences* in our lives. We may not realize it consciously, but everything we see or watch, everything we hear or listen to, everything we taste, smell, touch or feel leaves a permanent impression in our memories, and so, even if we don't recall it, a foundation is laid for the influx of good or evil spirits who will be drawn to us because of it. This is particularly true of experiences we seek out or enjoy, and not so much of those that are imposed upon us, but even if they are imposed, we know that the effects can be profound. The lesson: - be especially careful of what you allow yourself to watch or listen to. Consider what might be within or behind it, and what sort of influences might be attracted to it.

We do this intuitively for our children, hoping to protect their innocence. Why don't we do it for ourselves? If we assume we have the maturity to handle it we may be neglecting the unseen influences that can not only affect our spiritual lives, but really do so in confusing, covert ways.

Looking on the bright side, though, despite the challenging stories that are often told in it we know that the Lord's Word especially provides a Divinely organized arrangement of experiences that is uniquely open to *heavenly* influx (see AC 1461). So when we read and reflect on the Word, even if we don't fully understand it, angels, through the spirits who are with us, can derive great pleasure from its inner meaning, and at the same time inspire us through their presence.

To take another example, understanding the role of spirits in our lives we can appreciate that even our physical environments and especially the things we DO invite specific influences from the other world. The attraction is instantaneous and automatic, and can be repeated whenever a given memory is stirred. So again, we need to be careful about these things.

And again, looking on the bright side, we can know that the good things we do deliberately, with forethought, like habits of cleanliness, chastity, charity, decorum, and general self-discipline go a long way towards inviting heavenly influences into our lives. Religious practices in particular, like church services and rituals drawn directly from the Word, and especially the things we do repeatedly, like prayer and the holy supper, can have a powerful, growing and lasting, positive effect as they help us to establish more and more permanent relationships with whole communities of heaven through heavenly-minded spirits, until one day, when we "graduate" from this world we find ourselves visibly and tangibly among them, in a place we have made our own through acclimation and practice.

This is the first in a series of sermons that will continue next week on the spiritual world. For now, though, as we conclude our service with the holy supper, let's remind ourselves of the power of association not only with the spirits and angels who delight in what we are about to do, but in the power *through them* of connecting with the Lord Himself on account of the inherent correspondence of all the elements of this sacrament with His Divine love and wisdom.

Specifically, the unleavened bread corresponds to the pure, unpretentious Divine love that the Lord offers to all who wish to receive it. The wine, which *has been* fermented, corresponds to the purified, Divine truth that the Lord presents to everyone as a result of His victories in temptation (which are represented by that fermentation). And the eating and drinking of course correspond to our interior reception of these things. The taste and smell of these things and the act of receiving them, simply put, makes a permanent impression on the mind and so provides a physical basis for the positive influx we seek. However if anyone who has some difficulty either with the bread or with the wine would like to participate, just consider accepting what you can, coming forward to affirm and establish what you would do if you could, and this simple act along with the humble acknowledgment it represents will itself create much the same effect.

Finally, in case you're not ready to participate at this time, the sacrament will be offered again on December 3rd.

Amen.

Lessons: *Genesis 28:10-22*
 Children's Talk on the angels and spirits with us

 Mark 5:1-20 & Heaven & Hell #432-433 & 438

2 prayers for this service

1

O Lord, the power of Your love and wisdom is all around us and within us, so even though we ourselves are weak and flawed we know that You can give us everything we need to enjoy a truly happy life in heaven.

Send Your angels to encourage us, we pray, and give us the determination we need to remove all the selfish and worldly distractions that stand in the way of their presence with us.

Inspire us today through Your Word and through a heartfelt appreciation of its teaching about our spiritual world, that we may be led in peace and confidence through every challenge to eternal life. Amen.

2 (for the children)

O Lord Jesus Christ, help us to be grateful and thankful that You ARE with us every moment of every day in the ministry of angels who can guide and protect us. Help us, we pray, to welcome and encourage these angels by making good decisions and doing the good things that keep them near us.

O Lord, open our spiritual eyes to understand the real quality of the things we may want to see or do, and how important it is for us to choose well so that we are not fighting against the heavenly influence of Your love and guidance.

Lead us and comfort us, we pray, and teach us through all that we may do that we can be with You and Your angels with us any time we co-operate with You. Amen.