

Holy Trinity Lutheran Church Des Moines, WA December 7, 2014

The Surpassing Christ

- 1. Angels are great**
- 2. But Christ is greater**

Hymns: "Where the Promise Shines" –
16 – Distribution: 8, 3 – Closing: 5 (vv. 1-4)

All Scripture quotations from NIV 1984

Hebrews 1:4-14 –

He became as much superior to the angels as the name he has inherited is superior to theirs. For to which of the angels did God ever say, "You are my Son; today I have become your Father" ? Or again, "I will be his Father, and he will be my Son"? And again, when God brings his firstborn into the world, he says, "Let all God's angels worship him." In speaking of the angels he says, "He makes his angels winds, his servants flames of fire."

But about the Son he says, "Your throne, O God, will last for ever and ever, and righteousness will be the scepter of your kingdom. You have loved righteousness and hated wickedness; therefore God, your God, has set you above your companions by anointing you with the oil of joy."

He also says, "In the beginning, O Lord, you laid the foundations of the earth, and the heavens are the work of your hands. They will perish, but you remain; they will all wear out like a garment. You will roll them up like a robe; like a garment they will be changed. But you remain the same, and your years will never end."

To which of the angels did God ever say, "Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet"? Are not all angels ministering spirits sent to serve those who will inherit salvation?

"Helpless."

When you think about the word "helpless" in regard to the Christmas account, whom do you think of?

If you look at Christmas carols that describe the Christmas account in song, the one who is often pictured as helpless is the baby born that night long ago. One of the more beloved Christmas hymns of recent times is "Where Shepherds Lately Kneled" (hymn 54). Verse two of that song says:

**In that unlikely place I find him as they said:
Sweet newborn Babe, how frail! And in a manger bed:**

**A still, small voice to cry one day for me,
A still, small voice to cry one day for me.**

An older Christmas song from the turn of the 1900's called "O Little Babe in Beth'lem Born" had a verse that stated:

**O helpless Babe! Thou knowest not
What gifts those wise men bring,
Their gold, and myrrh, and frankincense
Presenting to their King.**

We don't really think about Mary and Joseph as being the helpless ones, but rather as the protectors of the newborn baby. We don't think about the shepherds as being helpless as they enter the manger scene, or the wise men still coming from afar as being helpless. And we certainly don't picture the angels that are appearing all over the scene as being helpless!

Ah yes, angels. There are many angels that we see at the time when Christ was born. Our Wednesday series on "**Angelic Announcements**" covers three of them: The angel that appeared to Zechariah, the angel that appeared to Mary, and the angel that appeared to Joseph in a dream. Angels helpless? No, we'd view these angelic creatures as being some powerful participants in the account!

As we continue our Sunday sermon series called "**The Surpassing Christ**," based on readings from the book of Hebrews, our focus today falls on Christ as compared to the angels. Let's explore this concept as we read today from Hebrews 1:4-14.

1. Angels are great

Before we get into the account from Hebrews, though, let's think about God's angels and their power and glory. You probably

remember that last week's sermon reflected on how Christ is greater than the prophets (Hebrews 1:1-3). As we begin our look at Christ and the angels, we'd have to say that angels are greater than prophets. We see this in some of their characteristics.

The Bible gives us quite an interesting array of facts concerning the holy angels. One interesting fact is that Scripture introduces them without any attempt at explaining where they came from or when God created them. Their origin is a mystery to us. Therefore, many people have been intrigued by angels and are fascinated to read the Bible's accounts about them and imagine what they can about where they came from.

The Bible tells us that they are spirits by nature: *"Are not all angels ministering spirits sent to serve those who will inherit salvation?" (Heb. 1:14)* Although they took on human form at times in Scripture, such as when the three visitors came to Abraham in Genesis, they are not physical by nature. Jesus also taught in Matthew 22 that they neither marry or are given in marriage.

Another important characteristic of God's angels is that they are holy. Jesus says in Luke 9, *"Whoever is ashamed of me and my words, the Son of Man will be ashamed of them when he comes in his glory and in the glory of the Father and of the holy angels."* Originally, since the devil and his angels fell away at the beginning of time, they had free will to follow their Creator or rebel against him, but now they have been confirmed in their holy state.

Since they are holy, they have a special communion with God. Matthew 18:10 has an interesting thought. Jesus said, *"See that you do not look down on one of these little ones. For I tell you that their angels in heaven always see the face of my Father in heaven."* They have a special privilege that sinful mortals do not have! Because of this, believers were often frightened when an angel appeared to them. Not only would that have been a startling event, but the glory and holiness of the angel rightly struck fear into the sinful mortals who saw them.

The Bible also teaches us that angels are endowed with wisdom. I think about how the angel Gabriel appeared to Daniel in the Old Testament and revealed staggering visions of what the future would hold, and Daniel was blown away by these deep mysteries he was hearing about.

Scripture also speaks of angels as having great power, as Psalm 103 refers to them as God's "mighty ones." What the Bible reveals is that there is a vast number of these wonderful beings. In a picture of the throne of God in Revelation 5 it says, *"I looked and heard the voice of many angels, numbering thousands upon thousands, and ten thousand times ten thousand."* Their numbers do not increase or decrease, for they are neither born, nor do they die.

What do angels occupy themselves with? A variety of things:

- Some angels simply praise God around his throne. The classic account from Isaiah 6 reveals the angels who are there shaking the doorposts and thresholds with their praise as they shout: "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord Almighty; the whole earth is full of his glory!"
- Angels also simply stand ready to do God's bidding. Psalm 103 referred to this, with the "mighty ones who do his bidding."
- Angels also are well known for delivering messages to God's people. Especially at Christmastime we hear about famous messages that we are recounting on Wednesdays, messages to Zechariah, Mary, and Joseph.
- Protection – Psalm 91 is a beloved, comforting verse to us: *"He will command his angels concerning you to guard you in all your ways; they will lift you up in their hands, so that you will not strike your foot against a stone."*

If you think to yourself and remember some accounts from Scripture that include angels, we see all these characteristics and duties in action:

- The Garden of Eden, when Adam and Eve were banished from its perfection and prevented from re-entering by the angels posted guard.
- The tenth plague in Egypt, the death of the firstborn, when the Angel of Death came across the land and carried out the terrible plague because of Pharaoh's hardness of heart.
- The account of Daniel in the lion's den, when Daniel told the king the next morning that God had sent his angel to shut the mouths of the lions.
- The angels that ministered to Jesus after he was tempted by the devil in the wilderness and the angel who strengthened him in the Garden of Gethsemane as he prayed.
- The visions in Revelation where angels put the plans and judgments of God into motion, and where the angel armies fight against the devil and his demons when there is war in heaven.
- The Easter account, when the women wonder who could roll the stone away from the entrance to the tomb. And an angel took care of that detail, and also delivered the first Easter proclamation.

The result for us when we hear all these things is awe and wonder. These accounts and others leave us saying, "Wow! What amazing creatures these are and what amazing, powerful things God accomplishes through them! **But Christ is greater.**

2. Christ is greater

Let's turn to Hebrews 1 to see how this is true: *"(Christ) became as much superior to the angels as the name he has inherited is superior to theirs. For to which of the angels did God ever say, 'You are my Son; today I have become your Father'? Or again, 'I will be his Father, and he will be my Son'? And again, when God brings his firstborn into the world, he says, 'Let all God's angels worship him.' In speaking of the angels he says, 'He makes his angels winds, his servants flames of fire.'*

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To which of the angels did God ever say, 'Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet'? Are not all angels ministering spirits sent to serve those who will inherit salvation?"

The superiority of Christ over all created things, including the most perfect of all creatures, the angels, is brought out at great length here. **There are no fewer than seven quotes from the Old Testament that the writer uses to pound his point home emphatically!**

Let's note a few ways that the writer says this is so:

1. vv. 4-5 said, *"He became as much superior to the angels as the name he has inherited is superior to theirs. For to which of the angels did God ever say, 'You are my Son; today I have become your Father'? Or again, 'I will be his Father, and he will be my Son'?"*

Christ is superior to the angels in regard to his name and status. By virtue of his being the Son of God, he is the heir. He did not receive that name by virtue of adoption, but by inheritance.

Despite the lowly scenes of Christmas, it is truly so. We see the same concept in cultures of the world and boy kings. Perhaps you have read or seen shows about boy kings or pharaohs who were very young, yet were a powerful force in their nation because of their status. Perhaps they were only the prince and their father

was still reigning on the throne. And maybe powerful men – heads of state, military leaders – worked hard with their father in leadership positions. But when the son came into the room? Honor and prestige were owed him simply because of his status and name. In the same way, Christ's status and name far overshadow the status of the holy angels.

2. vv. 7-9,14 – *"In speaking of the angels he says, 'He makes his angels winds, his servants flames of fire.' But about the Son he says, 'Your throne, O God, will last for ever and ever, and righteousness will be the scepter of your kingdom.'"*

Christ is also superior to the holy angels because of the power that he wields. Look at the words that clearly teach us this. Christ has a "throne," a "scepter," and a "kingdom." These expressions refer to the majesty and power of Christ as the true Son of God. Again, we might think of past cultures where boy princes actually became the kings as a boy, and where their orders – despite being impetuous and immature at times – had to be carried out. They had the power!

3. vv. 10-12 – *"He also says, 'In the beginning, O Lord, you laid the foundations of the earth, and the heavens are the work of your hands. They will perish, but you remain; they will all wear out like a garment. You will roll them up like a robe; like a garment they will be changed. But you remain the same, and your years will never end.'"*

Christ is superior to the angels in his works and his legacy. They are created beings; he is the Creator! Christ was present from eternity and active in the creating process. And because he is the Creator and not created, he is above the effects that occur in creation. Christ is unchanging. He is not subject

to aging or wearing out. Created things will perish. We were reminded of that fact this week when our computer network here at church and school crashed. When things are brand new or are going smoothly, we feel that there are even created things that are secure and can be counted on. But it is not true!

4. We see a fourth point of comparison in vv. 13, 9, and 6 – *"You have loved righteousness and hated wickedness; therefore God, your God, has set you above your companions by anointing you with the oil of joy'... To which of the angels did God ever say, 'Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet'... When God brings his firstborn into the world, he says, 'Let all God's angels worship him.'"*

Finally, we see that Christ is superior to the angels because of the honor that is due him. This is symbolized in the "anointing" that God the Father gave him, a ceremony only reserved for those who would fulfill a special office. We don't hear of any angels being anointed for service in what they did. They are referred to as "ministering spirits" who serve believers. This is also symbolized in the honor he has over his enemies. God the Father would exalt Jesus over all things, including his enemies after Christ would suffer and die on the cross to win our salvation. And in his relationship with the angels, the writer refers to the Father commanding that the angels worship him. This is reminiscent in the Christmas account where the angels recite a heavenly poem in the sky above the shepherds: "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men on whom his favor rests!"

Christ is greater than the angels!

As we recognize all these things today about Christ and the angels, we could ask, "Why is this important to know during Advent?" There are a couple reasons:

1. First, it's good to regularly be reminded of the mercy of God that caused him to create the holy angels and have them serve us. We don't hear about this often in sermon texts, and we would not want to forget that fact in the end times that we live in. As we await Christ's second advent, the angels preserve and protect us.
2. Another reason it's good for us to learn this today is that there are many Christians – preachers included – who emphasize what a great man Jesus was. A teacher, a friend, a compassionate healer, a provider of food, one who loved others. And the message of some during the month of December is that this individual born at Bethlehem is merely an example for us to follow – To "do our best" and live like that great man did. However, if that is the entire thrust of the message at Christmastime, we have forgotten the primary reason the Son of God came into the world, to serve as a SAVIOR for us sinful mortals when we could not save ourselves, to serve as our Redeemer when we could not pay the price of our sins.

A message like that strikes home when we realize that no mere angel could ever have served us in this way. No angel could have died for our sins and won our place in heaven. And that is the most comforting thing of all in these verses!

So the next time you see that angel in the Christmas decoration or the next time you hear a Christmas account that has one of those angels appearing, don't forget. Yes, you can marvel at their appearance and their effect on sinful mortals, but don't forget who the superior One is. It's the One who appears helpless in the manger. It's the One who looks like he is frail, weak, and inferior. **But it's the**

One you need, who will powerfully serve as your Savior! Amen.