

OPENING PRAYER

Creator God, sender of angels, we pray for your Spirit to accompany us in this Bible study. Open our eyes to the beauties and possibilities of the immense universe around us. Open our ears to the rustling of angels in the Scriptures. Open our hearts and hands to gladly respond to your Word made flesh, Lord of the angels, our Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

SUGGESTED HYMN

- “Angels from the Realms of Glory” (ELW 275, verses 1 and 4)

FOCUS VERSE

“Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth ... when the morning stars sang together and all the heavenly beings shouted for joy?” (Job 38:4a, 7)

MATERIALS NEEDED

- Contrasting examples of “Christmas angels” from current culture, perhaps from recent Christmas cards, decorations or advertisements
- Bibles (NRSV for reading aloud, plus a few other translations)
- *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* (ELW)
- Paper, pencils and pens for taking notes or marking Bibles
- Whiteboard or paper for group responses, colored markers (or if meeting via an online platform, simply use the chat function)

Journeys with angels

Session one Looking up

BY CHRISTA VON ZYCHLIN

INTRODUCTION (10 minutes)

“There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy.” (William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, Act I, Scene 5)

Do you believe in angels?

Perhaps it depends on what I mean by angels. White, gauzy Christmas-tree angels? The chubby cherubs in the cemetery? Or the not-sure-what-they-will-do-next, costumed angels that have graced our annual Christmas pageants over the years? I definitely believe in those!

Or do I mean *biblical* angels, those strange creatures that show up on a wide array of missions and might be wielding a sword (Genesis 3:24), rescuing a child (Genesis 22:11-12) or singing in a mass choir, “Glory to God in the highest heaven” (Luke 2:13-14)? Do you believe in *those* angels? Do such angels still journey among us today?

Angels are not a major focus of Scripture, nor are they ever mentioned in our Christian creeds. Yet they show up with frequency at pivotal moments in both the Old and New Testaments. Angels legitimately captivate our attention, call forth our imagination and elicit our wonder.

Church reformer Martin Luther once said: “If you picture the Bible to be a mighty tree and every word a little branch, I have shaken every one of these branches because I wanted to know what it was and what it meant” (“Table Talks, 1532,” in

Luther’s Works, American Edition, 55 vols.; ed. Jaroslav Pelikan and Helmut T. Lehmann; vol. 54, p. 165). Over the next four months, as we explore “journeys with angels,” we’ll gather to shake those biblical branches, watch for angels and listen for God’s calls to action.

This first session, “Looking up,” introduces us to some initial glimpses of angels in the Old and New Testaments and the meaning of various words used in the Bible to describe angels. We will also challenge ourselves to look for angels who inspire us to honor God’s awesome works throughout nature.

Share aloud or reflect:

1. What immediately comes to mind when you hear the word “angel”?
2. Take turns to briefly share the various angel pictures people have brought. Take note of whether they have wings or haloes, how they are dressed, whether they are depicted as male or female and whether they represent a diversity of ages, skin tones or ethnic features. What do you notice, admire or question about these depictions of angels? Do they seem biblical?
3. (Optional, if time allows): Set a timer for 3 minutes and make a list (alone or in small groups) of as many examples of angels in the Bible as you can. Which group can come up with the most? Ask for a volunteer to read these aloud. Did other groups or people think of any angels that weren’t on that list?

LOOKING FOR ANGELS (10 MINUTES)

Angels are so numerous in the Bible that once we begin to pay attention, we practically trip over them.

A simple word search of the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) at biblegateway.com reveals 329 appearances of the English word “angel.”

Angels are not a uniform bunch, however. They are creatures that move between heaven and earth, sometimes with wings and sometimes with words and sometimes with ethereal ladders (Genesis 28:12). What many consider generic “angels” actually go by an assortment of names in the Bible. They show up in astonishing variations. More often than not, wings seem entirely optional!

The most well-worn, usual words for angels, *malakh* (Hebrew, used in the Old Testament) and *ángelos* (Greek, used in the New Testament), don’t refer to wings at all. Both words can be translated simply as “messenger.” Biblically speaking, angels are known for their work of carrying messages from God to humans. By their very existence, angels also tell us something about the immensity of God, the universe God has created, and our own human place and potential in relationship to God’s cosmos.

- **Read:** Psalm 8

Share aloud or reflect:

4. Where do you see or hear angels in this passage?

This gorgeous creation psalm contains a translation puzzle that scholars have debated for centuries. If you have time now, read verse 5 in the NRSV translation, and then again in a variety of Bible translations.

Many people who grew up with the old King James Version of the Bible remember Psalm 8 as stating that humans are created “a little lower than the angels.” The Complete Jewish Bible and the New International Version (NIV) also refer to humanity’s status in relationship to “angels.” Yet the actual Hebrew word used here is not *malakh* (messenger

or angel) but *elohim* (gods). The NRSV translators settled on the word for “God,” but offer a footnote indicating that one can also legitimately use the word “angels” or “divine beings.” Adding yet another dimension to this puzzle, the Hebrew word *Elohim*, while plural, is used extensively throughout the Old Testament to refer to the One God.

It seems to me that Psalm 8 invites us to exercise our spiritual muscles. It calls upon our capacity to behold the mysteries of the universe. It paints a grand, multisensory, panoramic portrait of creation, asking us to first raise our eyes to the heavens (v. 1), then attune our ears to the cry of an earth-bound baby (v. 2), then again gaze upward to the stars of the night sky (v. 3), before planting our human feet firmly among the creatures of earth and sea in the psalm’s second half (vv. 6–8). In the middle (v. 5) is the fulcrum: a dance of humans with angels. For now, on this side of eternity, we earthlings are situated a little lower than those angels. On earth, it is our mission to glorify God. In heaven, it’s the mysterious “divine beings” or “angels,” the *elohim*, whose joy it is to honor God. In both cases, God is of another order of being altogether.

Share aloud or reflect:

5. Have you ever noticed the angels in Psalm 8? In the absence of any specific description of their appearance here, what do you imagine they look like?
6. What differences and similarities do you see between these “divine beings” and “human beings”?

OUR PLACE AMONG THE ANGELS (15 minutes)

Throughout the ages, scholars have debated hierarchies of angels and the place of human beings in such a hierarchy. The Bible itself gives contrasting descriptions of the human-angelic relationship.

■ **Read:** Matthew 13:39b-43, 47-50

Share aloud or reflect:

7. What is the role of the angels (*ángeles*) in each of these passages? Does that role surprise you? Why or why not?
8. Does this portrait of angels correspond with any of the contemporary pictures of angels you looked at earlier?

■ **Read:** 1 Corinthians 6:3

Share aloud or reflect:

9. What is the relationship of humans to angels (*ángeles*) here? How do you relate the previous passages from Matthew 13 with this 1 Corinthians text from St. Paul?

In the past, pastors and Bible teachers often tried to squeeze the Bible into one unified voice, without contradiction. In more recent decades, scholars have come to realize that the Bible speaks more like a choir or a jazz ensemble, with differing voices contributing to a rich, complex whole. In the process, we, as students of the Bible, are learning humility. Perhaps God long ago created not only human beings but also heavenly beings to be in creative, collaborative, not totally predictable relationships. Well before we humans began to use phrases like “mutual accountability,” God readied us for awe, whimsy and wonder by creating the angels. If we look and listen for angels, the spirits of God’s heavens have much to teach us.

ANGELS AND QUASARS (15 MINUTES)

■ **Read:** Job 38:1-7

Share aloud or reflect:

10. Read the Job passage aloud. Where do you see or hear the presence of angels?

The context of this darkly beautiful and demanding poem is the suffering of Job. Some have interpreted this speech from God as putting Job in his place. Note, however, that God honors Job by speaking directly to him—no angel intermediaries are employed—and yet God demands that Job pay attention to the angels. Did you find that reference? Having studied Psalm 8, and leaning on the Reformation principle of “Scripture interprets Scripture,” we have already seen that humans are placed cosmically *lower* than the angels, at least for now. In Job 38, God reminds the long-suffering Job that human beings are cosmically *younger* than the angels and have much to learn about human purpose and destiny in the broad context of time and eternity.

If time allows, reread Job 38:7 using different translations of the Bible. Do any other translations use the word “angels” in verse 7? Once again, this allusion to celestial beings does not use the typical Hebrew word for angel (*malakh*, meaning “messenger”). Instead, the literal translation is “sons of God” (*bene-elohim*). Perhaps this alternative name for angels is used because in this glimpse of heaven, at the moment of the earth’s creation, the angels aren’t exercising their role as *malakh*, or messengers. After all, human beings have yet to be created. This is God’s point, of course. Job is much younger than the universe or its angels and can’t yet understand it.

■ **Read:** Job 38:4-7; Genesis 1:1

Let’s reread Job 38:4-7, which harkens back to those first words of Genesis: “In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth...” The angels act like a celestial audience applauding

the new and fantastic additions to God’s creation—the flora and fauna of the earth! Can you imagine Genesis 1:1 as a word sculpture? The angels, having just been created (perhaps a cosmos-moment earlier, as God spoke the word “heavens”), stand tippy-toed on the words “and the,” clapping wings and hands with delight as they see how God structures the foundation of what will soon become our human home: Earth.

But wait—there’s more we can learn about the angels from Job 38. God’s whole “whirlwind speech” is written using a unique Hebrew poetry pattern called parallelism. That is, many of the verses interpret or expand on each other. Look at verse 5:

*Who determined [the earth’s] measurements...
Or who stretched the [measuring] line upon it?*

Each half of the verse reinforces the other. Similarly, in verse 6:

*On what were its bases sunk,
or who laid its cornerstone*

See how the first and second parts of the verse say almost the same thing? Now consider verse 7:

*when the morning stars sang together
and all the heavenly beings shouted for joy?*

Do the terms “morning stars” and “heavenly beings” (angels) describe each other? This won’t be the last time the Bible pairs angels with stars. In the first chapter of the book of Revelation, John has a vision of the risen Christ holding seven stars in his right hand.

■ **Read:** Revelation 1:16a, 20

Each star represents an angel.
In *The Physics of Angels: Exploring the Realm*

Where Science and Spirit Meet (Monkfish Book Publishing, 2014), theologian Matthew Fox and biologist Rupert Sheldrake write about the remarkable parallels between the new discoveries of modern science and the traditional theological exploration of the roles of angels.

We now have a vastly expanded view of the heavens, with countless galaxies, quasars, pulsars, black holes, and 15 billion years of cosmic history.... I think one of the things we need to do is recover a sense of the life of the heavens so that when we actually look at the stars [and] at the sky, we become aware of this divine presence in the sky and of the intelligences and the life within it (p. 17).

Share aloud or reflect:

11. What do you think of the relationship between stars and angels? Are they one and the same? Are they different ways of experiencing God's cosmic energies? Or are they something like first cousins, closely related but belonging to different celestial households?

(OPTIONAL) SWORDS AND FLAMES (10 minutes)

The first angels to appear in the Bible are not cute or cuddly. They bring no good tidings. They sing no songs. Stark and stern, these angels arrive to mark a loss and a boundary: Eden has been sold for the price of one taste of forbidden fruit. Adam and Eve have lost their home. (Read Genesis 2:15-17; 3:22-24 for context.)

Cherubim (the English word is a transliteration of the plural Hebrew word) can be seen as the markers and guardians of God's holiness and holy-otherness. In Eden, God walks and talks with human beings. But now Adam and Eve have broken that intimate bond with God. Some see the banishment from Eden as being for their own protection. Would

they really want to eat from the tree of eternal life and gain an eternity of separation from God? The cherubim, stationed with a flaming sword, guard Adam and Eve from such a forever-far-from-God hell.

Strangely, or maybe appropriately, the next time we hear about cherubim is when God's people receive the detailed instructions for making the Ark of the Covenant. From the Ark, God will again speak to and journey with human beings.

■ **Read:** Exodus 25:17-22 & 26:1; 2 Chronicles 3:10-14

Here we see cherubim marking the presence of God. God does not abandon human beings. At the same time, God's holiness and otherness are accentuated by the presence of these members of the heavenly court, formed from costly gold and as other-worldly creatures with wings. These themes are repeated when Solomon builds the first Temple, the House of the Lord, where the depiction of cherubim was again a prominent feature.

■ **Read:** Ezekiel 1:5-14; 10:15-20

The third major time we meet cherubim in the Bible, we do so in a vivid, downright weird vision given to the prophet Ezekiel. Once again God's people had been distracted and drawn away from God's path by worshipping creatures instead of the Creator. God's cherubim (signs of God's presence) are here revealed as fiery, four-faced, flashing creatures. Scholars believe much of the symbolism of these descriptions is simply lost to us. Maybe that's the point—they are strange enough to make us realize that we aren't in relationship with a tame God, a God our human minds can comprehend. These bizarre cherubim awaken us to awe and wonder.

■ **Read:** Isaiah 6:1-8

This familiar passage (and the basis for more than one beloved hymn) includes the only mention of angels known as "seraphs" (or seraphim) in the Bible. They accompany God in the dramatic call for Isaiah to become a prophet. They are notable for having not one, not two, but three pairs of wings, and they perform a dramatic, burning cleansing to prepare Isaiah for his new role.

Share aloud or reflect:

12. Have you ever experienced an overwhelming sense of God's strange, even bizarre otherness?

FIERCE, FRIGHTENING, GOOD NEWS ANGELS (5 minutes)

Most of us who will participate in this Bible study have just celebrated Christmas. Did you see or hear any angels, maybe as part of a nativity play? Biblical angels probably looked very different than what we may have seen at church. For one thing, biblical angels strike fear into people's hearts!

■ **Read:** Luke 1:11-12

The first angel on the scene of the New Testament is Gabriel. (Gabriel, who first appears in Daniel 8:16, is one of only two angels mentioned by name in the Bible. The only other named angel is Michael, who appears three times, all in the book of Daniel.) We are not given any description of him beyond the fact that when people first meet Gabriel, they are terrified.

There are no biblical references to Gabriel having wings, a halo or a white robe. We only know a couple of things about him. The name Gabriel means "God is my strength." He fulfills his angelic role admirably (remember, *ángelos* means "messenger") as he delivers stunning news, first to the old priest Zechariah, and then to young Mary in

Bethlehem. In a tender scene, Gabriel assures Mary that God is her strength, and that her impossible pregnancy will result in the gift of a Savior for the whole world. What a message!

■ **Read:** Luke 2:8-11

We don't know if it's Gabriel or another angel who, nine months or so later, terrifies a group of earthy shepherds, perhaps both men and women (like biblical matriarch Rachel in Genesis 29:6), with earthbound eyes ever on the lookout to protect their sheep (and themselves) against snakes, mountain lions and thieves. And then this angel arrives. Shining and terrifying, he delivers the most beautiful news in the world:

"To you is born this day ... a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord." (Luke 2:11)

CONCLUSION (5 minutes)

While the world around us often paints sentimental, superficial pictures of angels, the Bible itself introduces us to a much stranger and more startling array of heavenly beings. With this first session, we have begun the spiritual exercise of looking for angels above us (Psalm 8), beyond us (Job) and among us (Luke 2). Next month, we will come up against angels who *confront* us.

Share aloud or reflect:

13. Angels often carry a message of God's immensity and majesty. Describe a specific place, a work of art or music, or an aspect of nature that has most recently evoked something of God's immensity for you.

CLOSING HYMN

"Joyful, Joyful We Adore Thee" (*ELW* 836, verse 2) 🌿

Journeys with angels

Session one Looking up

BY CHRISTA VON ZYCHLIN

INTRODUCTION

For the next four months, we will go on an adventure of noticing and learning from God's heavenly messengers. We will likely encounter a wide range of attitudes about angels among both participants and leaders—everything from a total dismissal of angels as superstitious fluff to honest questions about angels or (possibly) a desire for deep sharing of personal experiences of these messengers. Yet this is one of many reasons Bible study is so relevant and important for Christian communities: We hike together along the pathways of God's word, and become attentive to each other's unique insights and experiences, getting stronger every step of the way.

Consider making this an intergenerational, intercultural, interpolitical Bible study. Before the day of your study, encourage every participant to invite a new neighbor or someone of a different age, political persuasion or cultural group than their own to join in. If you are meeting via online video-conferencing (Zoom, Skype, Google Meets, etc.), make sure the number of participants is allowed by the particular service. Remind participants to invite new members or nonmembers. Participants don't have to be Lutheran or even Christian! If we are prepared to practice genuine hospitality and openness, we might consider asking a group from a neighboring church of a different denomination or ethnic background to journey with us.

PREPARE

1. Make public invitations well in advance. Consider making a short invitational video for your website. Break out the angel costumes! Have fun with this!
2. Also in advance of your meeting, invite potential participants to collect contemporary pictures of angels from advertisements or Christmas publications to bring with them to the first session (or share with others by email or during a video call if you are meeting by phone or video chat).
3. Read through the study and decide if you will do the optional activities. Remember, you will almost surely need more than an hour if you choose to do these—except for the snacks; there's always time for snacks!
4. Have on hand Bibles (NRSV and at least two or three other translations), copies of the *ELW*, paper and pencils, and a whiteboard and dry-erase markers—or practice using the “screen share” feature on your video-conferencing window.

STUDY

Always begin with a warm welcome, thanking people for their participation. There are a hundred other things they could be doing, but they are choosing to spend time together with the Bible, each other and you! This is worth celebrating, no matter how large or small the group.

This study uses a variation of a Bible study method called “contextual Bible study.” As such, the introduction is a bit longer, because we take some time to check in with participants about their thoughts on the topic of angels. What ideas do they already have?

1. Don't allow this part to go on too long. The question is “What immediately comes to mind when you hear the word ‘angel’?” This is not the time for

long explanations or theological treatises. But let us listen well to each other.

2. Please don't skip this part: Bring two or three angel picture examples of your own to share. Tell participants that all of us come to the topic of angels from a particular context, and we recognize the role our everyday lives and cultures play in our understandings (and often *misunderstandings*) of spiritual matters. We will revisit the question of angels in art and culture in the coming months.

OUR PLACE AMONG THE ANGELS

Note that the study asks us to “share aloud or reflect.” Encourage a moment of quiet after the questions. Alternatively, you could ask people to share their responses to some questions aloud and reflect about others on their own. You won't have time to go in-depth with every question. Be gentle with yourself and the participants. There's always time to revisit questions and reflections outside of the group's gathering time.

OPTIONAL ACTIVITIES

Angels and quasars: You may want to mention the International Dark Sky Movement (www.darksky.org). Have any of the participants gone to a dark-sky park or sanctuary? How might a darker sky help us to be more spiritually aware?

Snacks: If you're meeting in person, ask participants to bring angel-related snacks to share.

Meeting online? Consider assembling and delivering “Gather angel bags” with premade, pre-packaged snacks (if you can safely do so) or simply include recipes and shelf-stable ingredients (ones they might not have at home) for making snacks such as this angel munchie recipe:

Angel munchies, Pretzels for wings, Bugle-shaped corn-chip snacks for the robe, Oyster crackers for the head (or experiment with small cherry

tomatoes, olives or tiny cheese squares), O-shaped cereal for the halo.

Assemble with your choice of sweet or savory cream cheese dip.

Angel game: Prepare papers with numbered lines for this month's “Name the angels in the Bible” game. Consider giving out small angel-related prizes, if you like. Appoint someone to set a 3-minute timer.

Fierce angels: Cherubim and seraphim Conduct image searches for “cherubim,” “seraphim” and the “Ark of the Covenant” to share with participants. Be honest: Do these images point to the holiness of God? Or do they no longer have much relevance to today's culture?

CONCLUSION (2 MINUTES)

What actions regarding creation might this study prompt in us? Could some of us become angels for creation (carrying good news for creation as we care for it)? Check out the ELCA partnership resource “Lutherans Restoring Creation” at <https://lutheransrestoringcreation.org>.

After you sing the closing hymn (“Joyful, Joyful We Adore Thee,” *ELW* 836, verse 2), consider going outside and looking up at the night sky for a moment of silence. (Or if it's not dark yet, challenge the group to gaze at the night sky later this week.) Can you hear the angels? 🌿