

29 September 2002
St. Michael and All Angels

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Alexandria, VA

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“War and Peace”

Text: Luke 10:17-20; Revelation 12:7-12

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

“Now war arose in heaven, Michael and his angels fighting against the dragon. And the dragon and his angels fought back.”

This is a strange and unusual verse, and it is hard to imagine. It's hard to imagine there being war in heaven, because we picture heaven as a place of rest and peace, not a place of war. And yet we read, ***“war arose in heaven.”*** . . . And what kind of war was it? Hand to hand combat, with swords and weapons? That's how we usually think of wars and fighting. Or was this a different kind of fighting, like a “war of words?” . . . And why should we care anyway? A war in heaven really doesn't concern us, that angels are fighting amongst themselves. . . . But this war does concern us, for this battle is because of us and on account of us. This is a war not over territory, but over us. And we should be concerned because as we read at the end of the Epistle this evening, ***“But woe to you, O earth and sea, for the devil has come down to you in great wrath, because he knows that his time is short.”*** And if a wild animal trapped in a corner is doubly dangerous, how much more dangerous is the devil, knowing that his time is short?

And so this day in the Church to commemorate and remember St. Michael and All Angels is a good day for us, to remind us of the battle that continues around us, and to focus us on the truth about angels, in the midst of a world of half truths and fairy tales about angels. Because for many people today, what they call their “spirituality” really focuses on angels in an idolatrous way. On TV, in books, and on talk shows, angels become the focus of things spiritual, instead of Christ. Angels are prayed to and called on. Angels are looked to as guides and are relied upon. Angels are even what some people aspire to become. . . . But while angels are indeed a wonderful part of creation and a blessing from God, even as we consider them they are not to be the focus of our attention – even on a day such as today. Our focus is and must remain on Christ and what He has done for us. For while we thank Him for the ministry of the angels, He is the Lord God Sabaoth – the Lord of the Heavenly host of angels..

And that is indeed what we see in our readings for today. For while we heard of angels

both good and evil, and of the war that arose in heaven, it is Christ who conquered, Christ who won the victory over Satan and his minions, and Christ who is still our power and authority over the forces of evil on earth still today. For notice that in the reading from Revelation, we read that **“war arose in heaven”** . . . and that **“the great dragon was thrown down”** . . . but how did that happen? Was it because the good angels were stronger than Satan and his evil angels? Was it because there were more good than evil angels? No, it is **“the blood of the Lamb and the Word of testimony”** that defeats and throws down Satan and his angels. It is the blood and the Word that made the martyrs in Heaven victorious, it is the blood and the Word that made the 72 in the Gospel victorious, and it is the blood and the Word – or, if you like, the Word and the Sacraments – that makes the Church victorious today. Against these Satan cannot stand. Against these Satan is powerless. Against these, Satan is thrown down and defeated. Or, as Luther said, *“One little word can fell him.”*

Because, as I suggested earlier, the battle against Satan is a war, not of strength or might or weapons, but of words. For the Sword of the Spirit is the Word of God. And consider: how is Satan described in the Scriptures? He is called deceiver, accuser, and liar. All things dealing with words. And so when Satan wanted to lure Adam and Eve into sin, it was with words. When Satan wanted to challenge Jesus in the wilderness and lead Him into sin, it was with words. And when Satan challenges us today, it is with words. Words of doubt, words of half-truths to lead us away from God, words of deception and promises which are nothing but lies. Now, knowing that should not lead us into any false sense of security, and into thinking that Satan is not dangerous – for he is! He is very dangerous. And so we heard in Revelation, **“Woe to you, O earth and sea”**; and we read in First Peter that the devil is **“a roaring lion, looking for whom he can devour.”** But Satan cannot *force* us to do anything. He cannot force us to sin. That he does through words, by making sin look and sound so good; by appealing to our sinful human nature; by convincing us that we’d be better off following him and his wisdom and his ways, than following God and His Word. And we often follow. And its not his fault, its our fault.

And so give the devil his due, but don’t give him too much credit! Remember that Satan is an angel, a part of creation. And so while angels are powerful, they are not all-powerful – only God is that. And while angels have knowledge that far surpasses our knowledge, they are not all-knowing – only God is that. And while angels are spirit-beings and therefore very fast and quick and able to be in many places, they are not all-present – only God is that. All angels, including Satan, are a part of creation and therefore subject to the omnipotent, omniscient, and omnipresent authority of God. And so when Satan wanted to test and challenge Job, what did he have to do first? He had to ask God for permission. And even then he could do only what God allowed him to do.

And so yes, Satan is real, and yes, Satan is dangerous. But he is not equal to God.

Now at this point, many people – including maybe yourselves – wonder why Satan then exists at all! If everything God created was created good, how did Satan become evil? If Satan is subject to God’s authority, how come God allows him to do so much so that there is so much evil in our world? Why didn’t God just annihilate him and be done with it? Those are good questions, but questions that God has not revealed the answers to. That is not for us to know, and when we try to figure God out and figure out the answers to those questions, as smart as we may think we are, we get in trouble. We get it wrong. Because God’s not holding out on us! He didn’t withhold the answers just so He’d know something that we don’t! He knew we couldn’t handle it. He knew that our limited and sinful minds couldn’t understand. . . . But He did tell us what we need to know. And He did tell us what is most important to know: that yes, Satan is real, and yes, he is dangerous. But that he has been defeated, that he has been thrown down from heaven, and that his time is short. And Jesus has also told us this: that ***“I have given you authority to tread on serpents and scorpions, and over all the power of the enemy, and nothing shall hurt you.”*** Or in other words, the war has already been won, and we have been given the victory!

And that’s what Jesus was saying in the Holy Gospel that we heard earlier. He had sent the 72 disciples out into all the surrounding towns and villages with His Word and His authority. And armed only with that Word and authority, they come back and report, ***“Lord, even the demons are subject to us in your name!”*** And while they may be surprised at this, Jesus is not. And He then goes onto explain to them the power of this Word and authority with this statement about treading on serpents and scorpions. And while some fanatics take this statement literally, in context, in referring to serpents and scorpions Jesus is referring to Satan and his minions, whose bite and sting injects the venom of sin into mankind. That is the serpent who lured Adam and Eve into sin in the Garden of Eden, and then also the serpent whose head Jesus crushed on the cross! And through His death and resurrection, Jesus has not only defeated Satan, but also silenced him! And the mouth of the accuser, in this war of words, has been closed once and for all! For the blood of Jesus has atoned for the sin of the world, and so ***“there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.”*** And so by virtue of His perfect birth and life, by His death, resurrection, and ascension, the one who stands before the throne of God and represents us is not Satan, but Christ. And He stands not as accuser, but as forgiver. And so with our sins having been taken away by Jesus, Satan now has no place in heaven. He has nothing to accuse us with. This war of words is over.

But even though the war is over, there are battles raging on. ***“But woe to you, O earth and sea, for the devil has come down to you in great wrath, because he knows that his***

time is short!” Because even though Satan cannot accuse us any longer before God, he is still active, and he is still accusing, with the same powerful deceit and cunning and lies as before. Only now his energy is directed at us. And so if he cannot accuse us of our sin before God, he now accuses our hearts. And he hisses into our ears that we are not worthy of God because of our sin. He accused us of being traitors to God. And as if that weren’t enough, he then accuses God before us! Accusing God of being unfair, accusing God of being evil, accusing God for not delivering on His promises to us, and of being untrustworthy. And through the power of his word, he seeks to turn us away from God; to cause us to doubt; to believe him and follow him.

But his accusations don’t stand up! And so even in the midst of this battle, we have reason to rejoice! Because our ***“names are written in heaven.”*** And how and why are our names written in heaven? ***“By the blood of the Lamb and His Word.”*** For while the poison of sin may indeed infect us as we daily sin much and have the venom of sin running through our veins, the blood of Jesus that we drink is greater, and ***“cleanses us from all unrighteousness.”*** And while the deceitful and deceptive words of Satan may be powerful and alluring, the Word of God the we read and hear is more powerful, and ***“keeps our hearts and minds through faith in Christ Jesus our Lord.”*** And while the accusations of Satan of our unworthiness and sinfulness may indeed be true, the Word of God in the water of Holy Baptism has washed us clean of all of our sinfulness and unworthiness and made us worthy and holy, a kingdom of godly priests and a holy people. . . . And by this blood and Word, we are victorious. We, like the martyrs and the 72, conquer and ***“tread on serpents and scorpions, and over all the power of the enemy.”*** And so even in the midst of the battle and the accusations, we have cause for rejoicing . . . but not in the fact that this power and authority has been given to us, but because this power and authority has given us life – and not just life here, but life eternal, for ***“our names are written in Heaven.”***

And so with our future and eternity secure, the holy angels of God now serve us in this life. And so in the Scriptures we read that ***“angels encamp around those who fear God,”*** and we are given their protection. Guardian angels, you may call them. We are told that they pray for us, and join their prayers to ours. They arouse us from our spiritual sleeping and laziness to follow God and His commandments. And there is much more. But they do not desire our worship or replace the blood and the Word of Christ. They too battle against Satan, on our behalf. They are warriors for us, more than we’ll ever know or realize, and we thank God for them. . . . And then one day, when the end of our days on earth comes, it is the angels who will come and carry our souls to Heaven, to the side of our Saviour. And just as we have here joined ***“with the angels and archangels and all the company of heaven”*** around our Saviour’s Table here on earth, so we will join them around our Saviour’s Table in Heaven, in the feast that has no end.

**For this, now and in days to be, Our praise shall rise, O Lord, to Thee,
Whom all the angel hosts adore With grateful songs forevermore.**

In the Name of the Father, and of the (+) Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

The peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, keep your hearts and minds
through faith in Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen.