

25 September 2011
St. Michael and All Angels (observed)

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

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“The Victory of the Cross in the Fog of the War”

Text: Daniel 10:1-14; 12:1-3; Revelation 12:7-12; Luke 10:17-20

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

Now war arose in heaven.

We know of wars. It seems as if there's always a war in our world, someplace, all the time. How destructive and divisive they are. Hurting people of all kinds - not just those who fight, but the collateral damage to the bystanders, and to women and children, and not just for the time of war, but a great time after. Wars leave losses that are not easily filled, and scars that do not quickly heal.

Now war arose in heaven.

How strange this sounds to us who know of wars! For how can there be war *there - in heaven?* *What does that mean?*

Even if we cannot understand it, this idea dispels the widely held, modern day fantasy of angels as feminine and gentle creatures, as chubby-cheeked cherubs, as “love makers.” Not at all! ***War arose in heaven and Michael and his angels fought against the dragon.*** Angels are warriors. Angels are powerful, fearsome beings who fight for God; who fight for us.

And their fighting for us . . . I don't know if we can really understand or fully realize all the protection and fighting the angels do for us. For how do you measure what *doesn't* happen to you? The dangers that are kept away from you that you never even knew were there. The attacks that were thwarted and turned away by the angels at your heavenly father's command.

Luther thought about that a bit, including in both his morning and evening prayers: *Let your holy angel be with me, that the evil foe have no power over me.* How good to pray these words and remember the goodness of our Lord in providing and sending angels to protect us. Powerful and fearsome angels. Warriors.

Now war arose in heaven.

We heard from Daniel this morning also about Michael and his angels and their fighting and work for us. And Daniel and the people at his time knew something about war, too - they, in fact, were prisoners of war in Babylon. The Babylonians armies had come in and routed them in battle, and now they were forced to live in a strange country with strange people, a strange language, and a strange culture, far from home.

But to Daniel, and through Daniel to His people, God sends these words that we heard today; words of a promised restoration. They would not be prisoners forever. They were not forgotten. And though the nation had been vanquished, God was not. He would rescue them. His angels would fight for them. He would fight for them. At the proper time. ***In the latter days.***

That happened, first of all, when the Babylonians were themselves defeated by the Persians and the people of Israel were permitted to return to their homes. But the real promise, the real victory that Daniel is talking about here, is the battle God Himself would come and fight and win - when not an angel, but God's own Son, came and fought for us on the cross, and won.

For the ***war [that] arose in heaven*** was then also fought on earth. For, as we heard, ***the great dragon was thrown down, that ancient serpent, who is called the devil and Satan, the deceiver of the whole world - he was thrown down to the earth, and his angels were thrown down with him.*** And so the war begun in heaven now rages here on earth. Therefore, ***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 with this, we see just what this war is all about. It is about sin and death - sin to separate us from God *now*, and death to separate us from God *forever*. Satan wants no part of God, and having lost the war in heaven and having been thrown down to the earth, he now fights against those who belong to God, with his weapons of sin and death.

And if St. Michael and his angels are powerful and fearsome warriors, know that satan and his angels are, too. They are not to be trifled with, or belittled.

But here we see, too, that in this battle, conventional weapons of war are of no use. Satan's weapons of sin and death must be defeated differently, with the strange and unusual weapon of the cross. For there, Jesus, Son of God and son of man, fought for us and won. On the cross, He stripped satan of his power and his weapons, atoning for the sin of the world with His suffering and death in our place, and then breaking the grip of death in His resurrection. And we, held as prisoners of war, are set free in the forgiveness of our sins and the promise of a resurrection to eternal life. And so by the cross, satan is once again thrown down in defeat.

That victory was given to you in Holy Baptism, when in those waters you were joined to Jesus in His death and resurrection; when you were given the forgiveness of all of your sins and the promise of eternal life. There, Jesus' victory became your victory. Sin and death now have no power over you. You have His Word and promise and so you can be sure.

And yet . . . still there are battles. And not just out there, in the world, but in here, in our lives, in our churches, in our homes, between spouses, families, and friends. There are scars and hurts and division. But these things are not evidence that Jesus has failed, or that His victory is not real. No, they are evidence of our weakness and the sin that - though forgiven - still lives in us.

Which is why Jesus didn't leave us on our own, now, in this world, in this battle, against the raging of satan. And we aren't to be in bunker mentality, always on the defensive and retreating from the world. No! Rather, Christ has given us His weapons of war to fight satan and his minions. We see this in the account of the 72 who returned to Jesus and said to Him: ***Lord, even the demons are subject to us in your name!*** And we also heard of this in Revelation today as well - those who ***have conquered*** [the accuser, satan] - how? ***By the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony.***

Or in other words, just as Jesus ***saw satan fall like lightning from heaven***, so *satan is still falling in defeat* whenever the weapons of Christ are used in His name. When His Word is preached, when His forgiveness is given, when the Body and Blood of the cross are the food for your weak and weary body and soul. If we try to fight satan on our own, with our own strength and weapons, it is we who fall and fail. But against these unconventional weapons - of Jesus' love and forgiveness and mercy - against these weapons that look so weak, satan cannot stand. He is still being thrown down. And though he still snarl and rage and spit the venom of his hatred and wrath at us, he cannot win.

And so this is the answer to the wars and battles that rage in us and around us - not to retreat! but to go on the offensive with the forgiveness and love and mercy of Christ. Of course, that won't be easy. It is far easier to retreat than to engage in the battle with these weapons. But that is why you're here - not for a pep rally, but to receive again the victory of Christ, His forgiveness and life and mercy, that strengthened in Christ and by His Spirit, you may live and give these same gifts in the heat of the battle.

For to you, too, as the priesthood of the baptized, Jesus has given the ***authority to tread on serpents and scorpions, and over all the power of the enemy, and nothing shall hurt you.*** But it is not in this power that we rejoice, but in what this power

means - life eternal in our Lord, ***rejoicing that our names are written in heaven.***

Which is the very thing we do as we gather around this altar each week . . . and with who? *The angels and archangels and all the company of heaven*, our liturgy tells us. We gather with those fearsome and powerful warrior angels, and with all who have gone before us, who did not die in defeat, but in victory, and who now rest with their Saviour. And we rejoice that as they join us here around the Lamb of God in this Supper, so will we one day join them around the throne of the Lamb in heaven, in the feast which has no end.

Until then, we fight. Yes, fight. For if you think living in forgiveness, love, and mercy in this world isn't a fight . . . well, you haven't been paying attention! And you know that it is. But with the power of the angels protecting us, and the power of the Word and forgiveness of our Saviour as our weapon, fear not! fight on! and rejoice!
The victory of the cross shines through the fog of the war.

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

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