

30 September 2018  
Saint Michael and All Angels

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church  
Vienna, VA

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“A Fight to the Finish”

Text: Matthew 18:1-10; Daniel 10:10-14; 12:1-3; Revelation 12:7-12

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

*Thems fightin' words!* The words we heard today. They're fighting words. Words that tell us of the angels of God fighting for us. For the church. For Christians. Against the great dragon, the ancient serpent, satan, and the angels that follow him. It is a battle, a war, that began in heaven, but has now come down to earth. So **woe to you, O earth and sea, O church and Christian.** The battle is on. Against you. For if satan cannot take down God, then he's going to try to rob Him of what is most dear to Him - and that's you. And the shorter his time gets, the closer to the end we get, the more he's going to rage and fight.

So we call the church on earth the Church Militant. The Opening Hymn we sang today sounded very militant. A good wedding of text and tune, conveying the focus of this day. For although he lost the battle in heaven and has been cast to the earth, and although Jesus stripped him of his weapons against us, defeating sin and death on the cross for us, still satan isn't going to give up. He's going to fight until the very last second, until the final horn, the last trumpet, until he and death and the grave are finally cast into the lake of fire, never to return. So we shouldn't expect peace and rest as long as we live on the battlefield. We need to be on guard, and expect to be attacked.

So how good to know that we fight not alone. That the angels of God - like the angel on the cover of the bulletin today - are fighting for us. They are able to go toe-to-toe, mano-a-mano, with satan and his minions. We cannot. We're not able. So we have protection. God's own Secret Service.

And while that's good news, we also need to know that that kind of warfare . . . that's not the only way satan fights. Warfare changes and adapts. And spiritual warfare too. There is now, for example, cyber warfare, which seeks to attack us from the inside out. And satan does too. He uses the virus of sin that is in us, to lure us into sin and away from God; away from our protection. Like click bait on our computers, he makes sin look good, or at least harmless, so that we click on it, so that we do it. Though on a short leash, though in a steely cage (as our opening hymn put it), he invites us in to his cage, to play, making himself look good, or at least harmless. Tempting us into the danger.

Think about it: what steely cages is satan tempting you into with him, making you think

them not cages that confine and imprison, but that protect you? Maybe the steely cage of pride to protect you from having to humble yourself and repent and admit you were wrong. Maybe the steely cage of anger and bitterness and resentment, to protect you from having to forgive and let someone else get away with what they did to you! Maybe the steely cage of lust - no condemnation in here, just pleasure! Or the steely cage of greed or entitlement - no rules, just right. Or maybe our favorite steely cage of all: the one where we get to be god, where we make the rules, we run the show, we don't have to answer to anybody, we don't have to obey parents, where we can make things exactly as we want them to be.

C'mon in! Make yourself comfortable. What . . . those bars? Nah, don't worry about those. They're for your protection, they're good things. Relax. Enjoy!

But before you get too comfortable in there, hear again what Jesus said in the Holy Gospel today: *whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to have a great millstone fastened around his neck and to be drowned in the depth of the sea. . . . And if your hand or your foot causes you to sin . . . and if your eye causes you to sin . . . cut them off, tear it out and throw them away. It is better for you to enter life with one hand, one foot, one eye than with [a whole body] to be thrown into the hell of fire.*

Better to be maimed than to live in one of those steely cages that maybe look good, sound good, but are really of sin and death. Better! We shouldn't think of sin so lightly . . .

So in this battle, this battle for hearts and minds, we need special weapons. Heavenly weapons on earth. And so as we heard in the reading from Revelation, against the lures and temptations of satan stands the Word of God, and against his accusations against us stands the blood of the Lamb. The Word of truth and the blood of forgiveness. The baptism, the preaching, the absolution, and the meal that are the power of God, giving us the victory over satan and his steely cages. Because in these weapons is Jesus, the very Son of God. The Jesus who came down from heaven to fight for us. Who went into the wilderness and fought for us. And then who hung on the cross with the millstone of our sin hung around His neck, and gave His hands and feet and eyes and His whole body into death for us. That He take what we deserve, and we get what's His - freedom and life. Jesus entered our steely cages of sin and death and then burst out, so that they be able to hold us no longer.

And here, too, in this fight, the fight for our hearts and minds, the angels are helping us. For they are not only fighters, but also messengers and worshippers. The angels, too, speak the Word of God when they are instructed so to do. Speaking to Mary, to Joseph, to the shepherds, and more. Proclaiming, preaching the forgiveness, peace, life, and freedom that the Son of God has come to provide.

But they are worshipers, too. And they help us to worship, to receive the gifts and weapons of God. The Scriptures tell us that they worship God night and day, crying out *Holy, Holy, Holy* (Isaiah 6). And they join us here in our worship, as you hear each Sunday, that we are not alone, but *with angels, and archangels, and all the company of heaven* we gather. And we sing the song of the angels, joining our voices to theirs when we sing *Holy, Holy, Holy*. And the Word proclaimed here, the forgiveness given here, the blood poured into you here, is fighting for you. Is Jesus fighting for you. Driving away the evil one and bringing you out of the steely cage you crawled back into this week. Freeing you to live.

For really, this is the protection you need. The bars of the steely cage are not the protection you need, but the prison you don't. The Word of God and the blood of the Lamb are true weapons and the power of God. They may not look like much, and satan certainly wants you to think they aren't much, but don't fall for his lies and deception. Satan cannot win a shoot out with God. The only way he can win is for these weapons to stay holstered. For your eyes and ears and mouths and hearts to be closed to the Word of God and the blood of the Lamb.

So it is good, too, that we not only have the angels fighting for us and helping us, but that we have each other. The church. That we speak to each other the Word of truth. That we encourage one another, confess to one another, forgive one another, and warn one another. That we point out the steely cages for what they are, and join together to receive the Word of God and the blood of the Lamb. We need that. We need each other. Because satan's not going to give up, and his time is short. But we need not fear him. For the victory belongs to us. For as we heard from Daniel: ***And those who are wise shall shine like the brightness of the sky above; and those who turn many to righteousness, like the stars forever and ever.***

So parents, teach your children, especially model repentance and forgiveness for them, and know that you are children too, of God. And children, obey your parents, and forgive them, too. Christians, speak the Word of God to one another, and pray for one another. Be there for others and receive their help. Don't keep the weapons of God holstered! Fill the world with His Word, with His forgiveness, with His love.

It won't be easy. You will get attacked. There will be scars. As we also heard from Daniel: ***there shall be a time of trouble, such as never has been since there was a nation till that time. But at that time your people shall be delivered.*** The wounds you receive will be healed. They will not lead to death but to life. For that is the promise of Jesus' scars - the scars on His once-dead-but-now-living hands and feet and side. That He is victorious. That your sins are forgiven. That you will rise from death. That you will live forever. That's what Jesus promises. What can your steely cage give you?

So today, we thank God for His angels. Those fighters, messengers, and worshipers God

sends to help us. But don't thank them for their service - they don't want your thanks. They want you only to thank the one who created them and you, and who, as we prayed earlier: *ordained and constituted the service of angels and men in a wonderful order.* Thank and praise the one who came and fought for you on the cross and died for you, that you who die might live forever. The angels are the Secret Service and want to stay that way. For it is Jesus who saves you, not them. It is Jesus who died for you, not them. And so it is Jesus they proclaim and want proclaimed, not them.

So we will. We'll now gather around the altar with the angels, we'll join their hymn of praise, and we'll receive the body and blood of Jesus, and His victory over the steely cages of sin and death.

And then on the Last Day, when Jesus comes again with all these same angels, we'll rejoice with them then as we do now. Only then what we cannot now see will be revealed. And the Church Militant will be the Church Triumphant, finally at rest and peace, forever.

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