

24 September 2023
Saint Michael and All Angels

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

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“On the Field of Battle - Victorious!”

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

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

The commemoration of Saint Michael and All Angels is a bad news/good news kind of day. For, we heard: ***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!***

The bad news: ***the devil has come down to us*** - actually, has been thrown down to us, cast down to us - ***in great wrath***. Wrath against God. Wrath against the Church of God. Wrath against Christians. Wrath against all who are in Christ Jesus. Wrath against you. That's the bad news.

The good news is: ***his time is short!*** His time of wrath is short. Not short enough for us! But the clock is ticking. Ticking until the day comes when Jesus returns and the devil who was cast down from heaven is then cast down from the earth as well - and cast into the abyss of fire. He and all his evil, demon angels with him. A day that cannot come soon enough!

But until that day, there is war on earth. Spiritual warfare. Good versus evil. We don't want that. We don't like that. But that's the way it is. And we ignore it at our own peril. Like if you were in Ukraine right now. You could deny that there is a war going on and go out and live your life as usual. You could do that . . . and a bomb may blow you up. That would be a bad move! So, too, our ignoring this war raging all around us.

All of the readings we heard today spoke of this war. But all of the readings we heard today also spoke of victory! From Daniel we heard that ***at that time your people shall*** - not maybe, not might, not perhaps - ***your people shall be delivered***. In the reading Revelation we heard that ***they have conquered him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony***. And then in the reading from Saint Luke, the disciples were excited because ***Lord, even the demons are subject to us in your name!*** So although we are in a war, we know how it is going to turn out. We know who wins! And that gives us hope. Hope to go on even when the fighting is fierce - around us and in us.

And the fighting is fierce, isn't it? All the ways the devil is fighting against God and His truth. I could go through a whole list of things going on in our world today that are

evidence of that, but maybe most telling is **how empty churches are in many places**. Great cathedrals that were once full now get only a handful of people each Sunday, while sports stadiums and concert venues are often packed, with waiting lists for tickets, and people willing to pay any price to get in. The devil has convinced people they don't need God. They're good the way they are. Or if they're not, they can fix themselves and save themselves. Science, medicine, AI, will be our Saviours. It seems like the Church, like *Jesus*, judging by appearances, is losing this war.

But don't be deceived. It looked that way before, too. On the cross. With whipped Jesus, bloody Jesus, crucified Jesus, dead Jesus. And a dead Saviour is no Saviour. How can He save you when He couldn't even save Himself? That was the accusation, the word going around when Jesus was crucified, hurled by those who didn't believe in Him.

But then, the unexpected victory: the empty tomb. By a Saviour who wasn't there just to save from the Romans, or from poverty, or from injustice or inequality, or other things people think we need saving from today - but from death. A Saviour to give not just life for a time, but *eternal* life. That's not the kind of Saviour they were looking for, and so missed Him. Wouldn't believe in Him. Thought Him a crack pot. But what they thought was losing and the evidence of His lunacy and fraud, was actually the path of victory and life.

And so it is significant, I think, that all three of the readings we heard today - **all three that spoke of victory** - we're written at times *when it looked like* the Church, like Jesus, was losing. **Daniel** comes from the time when the people of God had been conquered in war, their city and temple destroyed, and they had been taken as exiles to live in Babylon. The reading from **Luke** comes just after the Samaritans rejected Jesus, opposition among the Jews was ramping up, and Jesus was being called demon-possessed by some. And the book of **Revelation** was written when the Church was being persecuted by Rome and John was an exile on the island of Patmos. To speak of victory . . . well, seems a bit presumptuous. That is, if all you have to judge by is current events.

But that's the rut we're in these days, isn't it? What's happening now. What have you done for me lately? Who has the most likes and hits and retweets (or whatever shares on "X" are called these days!). So the challenge for us is not to believe what we see, not to make long-term judgments on short-term events, but to believe what we hear. **To believe the words and promises of God.**

One of which is about angels. Even those who don't really believe in God like to believe in angels. There's just something about these benevolent, Good Samaritan spirits hovering around to help us that people want to believe. They want to believe that when our loved ones die they become one of these angels and look down on us and protect us. And there's a whole cottage industry of books, pictures, and knick-knacks to promote this belief in angels. Angels that people have never seen, yet believe.

But what makes people think these angels want to help us? That they're kind and benevolent, not deceitful and mean? And how would we know? Sometimes people seem genuine and like they want to help us, only, we find out later, it was all a ruse - we got taken advantage of; stabbed in the back. Why not angels, too?

Unless they aren't just free agent spirits, hovering around, but part of a bigger picture, a bigger spiritual reality . . . Unless there is **a commander** of this angel army, and using them to fight for us. That would make a big difference.

So when Jesus is called the Lord God Sabaoth, the Lord of hosts, the commander of the army of angels, that's significant. **Because though we have not seen the angels, their commander has been seen.** And we know what *He's* like; we know what He's done. He healed the sick, He raised the dead, He cleansed lepers, He cast out demons, He forgave sinners, He provided for those in need, He showed mercy and compassion, *and* He laid down His life for the life of the world. He took away the sin of the world by putting that sin upon Himself and dying with it, dying for it, in our place. The angels could have stopped that. As Jesus said, when Peter was trying to defend Him from arrest with his sword, *Do you think that I cannot appeal to my Father, and he will at once send me more than twelve legions of angels* (Matthew 26:53) in His defense? But Jesus would not make such an appeal. He would die so you could live.

And now risen from the dead, this same loving, compassionate, lay-down-His-life-for-you Jesus, is commanding His angel army to do the same. To serve you, to protect you. **For if that's what Jesus came and did for you, why would He send His angels to do anything different?** So they do what they are commanded, and what they are commanded is good. And though we do not see them, and do not know all they are doing, as many stories in Scripture teach us, it is far more than we think or imagine. And it is frightening to think what this world would be like if they didn't.

For there is still war going on. The devil still hates God and His Church and all who are in Christ Jesus. He still wants to drag you down to hell with him - not forcibly, but with unbelief. To make you doubt God, doubt His goodness and love, doubt His words and promises, doubt His forgiveness. That He's not really helping you. So you have to save yourself. This world and life is all there is and all you have, so hold on tight! With all your might!

But against *this* word is the Word of God you have heard. The Word of truth. The Word which was made flesh and shed His blood for you. This Word that saves.

For as we heard in the reading from Revelation, of those in heaven, *they have conquered him* - the devil, the accuser - how? *by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony.*

And in the reading from Luke, it was the proclamation of the name of Jesus by which the demons were subject to the apostles. But, Jesus says, as great as that may be, ***do not rejoice in this, that the spirits are subject to you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven.*** That is, rejoice in the greatest word you could ever hear, the word of your Saviour which says *I forgive you all your sins*. For that is the Word the devil never wants you to hear. He wants your sins on you, not on Jesus. He wants your sins on you to crush you with guilt and shame. He wants your sins on you to disqualify you from heaven and eternal life. He wants your sins on you as an anchor down to hell. **And so all his wrath and rage is against those words.** To empty out churches, that you not hear them, or if you do, that you not believe them. Because they are the words that conquer him. They are the words which give life. Think of all the wars started because those words would not be spoken! Wars between friends, family, spouses, neighbors. Wars that the angels cannot fight - battles that are fought only by the Word and Spirit of God.

And He does. Fighting through the Word spoken to you here. The Word of Absolution, the proclamation of the Gospel, the Word in Baptism, and the Word of the Supper. The Word which, Scripture also tells us, is a sharp, two-edged sword (Hebrews 4:12)! So that every time you hear those words of grace and forgiveness, ***satan is falling***. He is being conquered ***by the blood of the Lamb and the word of their testimony***.

So where Jesus is, where His Word is, there His angels are. So in the liturgy, we hear of *the angels and archangels and all the company of heaven* who join us around the altar of the Lord's Supper. We join their song of "*Holy, holy, holy*" in the Sanctus. We join the hymn of praise they sang at the birth of Jesus when we sing the *Gloria*. And then as we leave this place of such hidden glory, we go home with their protection, at the command of Jesus, who has here forgiven us, fed us, and freed us. Until one day we will leave this place for a new heavens and a new earth, with no more sin, no more evil, no more devil. Only peace and joy. Only victory.

That's the good news in what is, perhaps, a bad news world. The devil is fighting, but his time is short. Our weapons may look weak, but are strong. And a cross which looks like losing really gives life. So do not despair, do not lose hope. What John saw you will soon see. And Jesus' joy will soon be your joy. For your names are written in heaven. Written in blood. And not for a short time, but for eternity. So sing loudly, please, at the end of the service today!

*Sing, my tongue, the glorious battle; Sing the ending of the fray.
Now above the cross, the trophy, Sound the loud triumphant lay;
Tell how Christ, the world's redeemer, As a victim won the day (LSB #454 v.1)!*

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.