

Michael and All Angels – September 29, 2024
Revelation 12:7-12, Luke 10:17-20

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Grace, mercy, and peace to you in the name of Jesus Christ.

I'm going to begin my sermon this morning by quoting two verses that don't appear in our readings this morning. But I'm going to quote them anyway because I think they are key to our celebration this morning of the minor festival of Michael and All Angels. The first is from the beginning of Paul's letter to the Romans: Paul writes, "For I am not ashamed of the gospel; it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith." (Rom. 1:16a) The second is a similar verse from the beginning of Paul's first letter to the Corinthians: "the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God." (1 Cor. 1:18) What that has to do with Michael and All Angels I hope you'll see by the time I'm finished.

I wonder what comes to mind for you when you think about angels. Do you think of tall, blond women with wings? Chubby little babies with wings? Do you imagine them standing around on clouds, playing harps? Or do you think about Clarence from the classic movie *It's a Wonderful Life*, who saves George Bailey's life and "earns his wings," gets promoted to full angel in heaven? All of these are cultural images of angels that have little to do with angels as the Bible describes them.

But maybe it's the Bible you look to when you think about angels. Maybe the first thing that comes to mind for you are the angels who announce Jesus' birth in the Luke 2 reading that we get every year at Christmas. Or Gabriel, who appeared to both Zechariah and Mary in the previous chapter to announce the pregnancy of Elizabeth and Mary. Or the angel who showed up at the empty tomb in Matthew, or the two angels inside the empty tomb in John. And maybe you even think of the six-winged seraphs of Isaiah chapter 6, or the cherubim of Ezekiel 1 and 10. From Psalm 91, which also gets quoted in the Gospels, we get the idea of guardian angels, who watch over us and keep us from harm. Martin Luther included these kinds of angels in his morning and evening prayers, which you can find on pages 1166 and 1167 in the back of the hymnal. "Let your holy angel be with me," Luther has us pray, "so that the wicked foe may have no power over me."

And then there is the Archangel Michael, who in the whole Bible appears only in Daniel and Revelation, from which our first two readings are taken – except for one mention elsewhere. In both of these books he appears in visions, one to Daniel and the other to John, as the commander of the heavenly army, who fights an epic battle against the forces of evil and ultimately defeats them. In art, both Eastern and Western, Michael is depicted as a soldier, dressed in armor and carrying a sword or spear. But I would like to suggest that because both Daniel and Revelation are books of visions intended to give hope to captive and persecuted peoples, that the images of battles and beasts and bloodshed they contain are not necessarily to be taken as literal previews of the end times. Visions are not movie trailers. They are rather symbolic and metaphorical. The Israelites in captivity for whom the book of Daniel was written, and the persecuted Christians of the early church for whom Revelation was written, would have understood this instinctively. But I think that we have lost that instinct over time, especially as we shifted from thinking of the empires of this world as the opposite of God and started thinking that God and empire could go together. Now there's a whole course in church history that we need to go through to substantiate that claim. But I think it is enough to note that the victory of

Jesus over the power of sin, death, and evil won through the cross and empty tomb is not the kind of victory that worldly armies win through slaughter and mass destruction.

So what do we do with Michael and all those Angels? We need to understand them for what they are meant to convey. First, that God is active in the world, working against all the forces that defy and work against God, everything that would separate us from God and God's love for us, and that would keep us alienated from our fellow human beings. Second, we need to look for clues in the text that the apocalyptic scenes of battles waged by God's angels point to something deeper than your typical Hollywood gore-fest. In Revelation, the great dragon who is thrown down, a.k.a. the Devil and Satan, is defeated first by the blood of the Lamb, meaning Jesus succumbing to the power of the world on the cross, and second by the "word of their testimony." This is the power of God that they possess, their weapon and shield in the battle against evil.

And what is the word of their testimony? "Glory to God and peace on earth! A savior is born for you." That's what the angels tell the shepherds in Luke 2. "He is not here. He is risen." That is their testimony at the empty tomb. "Stay in the city and receive the Holy Spirit." That is their testimony at Jesus' ascension. And "he will come again, just as you saw him go." There it is, the mystery of our faith in a nutshell, announced by angels: "Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again," all for us and our salvation.

This is also how the angels guard us. I have never had a direct encounter with angels or demons, as far as I know. But Martin Luther did. He famously threw an inkwell at what he experienced as an appearance of the Devil in his study. But it's important for us to understand how Luther understood the power of the Devil, and that was to talk us out of our faith, to convince us that we are not worthy of God's love, and that we shouldn't believe that God loves and forgives us. The gospel casts out demons by reminding us that even though we are not worthy of God's love, God loves us anyway and so makes us worthy. The gospel reminds us that, though we do not deserve it, God forgives us our sin for Jesus' sake, wipes clean our past and opens to us a better future. And so when we pray Luther's prayer, "Let your holy angel be with me, so that the wicked foe may have no power over me," we are praying for the gospel to be spoken into our lives.

Because when the gospel is spoken into people's lives, those lives change. Demons are cast out, like they were in our Gospel reading when the seventy went out into the towns and villages proclaiming the message of the angels. It was Jesus who had the vision then, of Satan falling like this morning's lightning. This is how God wages war against evil. Not by taking an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth. Not by returning evil for evil. But by countering evil with God's message of love, forgiveness, and hope.

The surprising takeaway of this festival of Michael and All Angels is that our baptism into Christ has given us the same task as them and enlisted us into their ranks. Like them we are called by our baptism to God's agents in the world, messengers and examples of God's saving good news. So, "be an angel," as the expression goes. Let us be angels to one another in this community of faith and angels to the world in our daily lives, surrounded and supported by God's angels of every time and place as we share the power of the gospel in word and deed. And as we live out that daily calling, the peace of God, which passes all understanding, will keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus unto life everlasting. Amen.