

War

Revelation 12:7-12, Luke 10:17-20

*Living God, let the words of my mouth, and the meditation of all our hearts, be acceptable in your sight,
O Lord, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.*

War is upon us dear friends. “War broke out in heaven; Michael and his angels fought against the dragon. The dragon and his angels fought back...” Our readings today are full of evocative images of war and violence. Today we commemorate Michael and All Angels, recalling Michael’s defense of Israel and leading the angelic forces in cosmic battle against Satan and all forces of evil. Michael’s story reminds us that there is war all around us, and perhaps on this festival day it is right to gird ourselves for a fight! War is here! Forces of evil lie outside our very doors... who is ready to march with me?!

I don’t know... that doesn’t seem right.

This is weird day in the life of the church! I was feeling a little stumped this week pouring over these texts and trying to make some sense of the archangel Michael. So much violence, so much war, so much cosmic conflict on scales unimaginable... These are the stories around Michael. These aren’t the happier stories of Gabriel announcing the birth of Christ, or the angel by the tomb proclaiming the good news that Christ has risen! Michael is the defender, the soldier, the one who fights the dragon/serpent/deceiver of the whole world/the Devil/Satan himself. If I’m being honest, I struggle with Michael and All Angels... because, I’ve seen The Avengers movies and Star Wars, but I’ve never *really* seen cosmic battles between good and evil. I’ve never seen Michael fighting the dragon. On some level I find the parables of Jesus to be relatable, but these accounts of angels seem to exist outside of the human witness and reside instead in the spiritual realm of which we have no basis for understanding .

But it begs the question, If war between good and evil is all around us, are we being called to fight? Are we being called to take up the sword and destroy that which opposes the reign of God? I have a hard time reconciling this violent imagery within the stories of Michael and the faithful call to arms with Jesus—the prince of peace, the messiah, the savior, the one who forgave his murderers from the cross. I have a hard time hearing the drumbeats of war from the same one who proclaimed “*The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.*”¹ Yeah, Something’s off...

A thought wouldn’t leave me alone as I struggled with this festival day this week. I remembered the closing lines of one of my favorite poems entitled, “Who Am I?” It was written by the German Theologian and Martyr Dietrich Bonhoeffer from prison shortly before he died. The poem struggles with Bonhoeffer’s own self doubts at odds with the favor others seemed to show him. Bonhoeffer concludes his poem, asking, “***Or is something within me still like a beaten army Fleeing in disorder from victory***

¹ Luke 4:18-19

already achieved? *Who am I? They mock me, these lonely questions of mine. Whoever I am, Thou knowest, O God, I am thine!"*²

...Is something within me still like a beaten army, fleeing in disorder from a victory already achieved? This line stuck with me all week. In the midst of this violent imagery, over and over again I kept coming back to this! Like a good Lutheran Theologian, Bonhoeffer heard my struggle with Michael and pointed us first back to Christ, the perfecter of the faith. When we read the bible, we as Lutherans look first to Christ, even when today's attention seems to be on Michael!

In our Gospel lesson today, Christ indeed acknowledges that we are in the midst of forces well beyond our realm of understanding. There is a cosmic struggle between good and evil. And the disciples are winning! The angels are on their side and the demons submit to them! Jesus says that they have extraordinary powers over all that is evil and that Christ himself witnessed Satan, the accuser and tempter, fall from heaven. But he concludes, "do not rejoice at this, that the spirits submit to you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven."

Do not rejoice in power... rejoice in grace.

And our violent lesson from Revelation reminds us "But [Michael and All Angels] have conquered [Satan] by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony." The blood of the lamb—the death of Christ on the cross—was the victory stroke. Revelation was a letter written to those under the yoke of Roman oppression with the promise that victory over their oppressors would not be won by them, but had already been won by Christ! Salvation was won here on earth, evil has been broken, and the battle has already been won!

We are not being called to march to war dear church, but we are being called to join Michael in the victory parade! We may hear the drums of war in our lessons today, we may hear that the accuser has fallen to earth to engage in spiritual struggle with each of us. This is true. But what is also true, what is forever true, is that God is already victorious. We are already victorious. The battle is over. Satan has no power over us!

This is not to say that there is no evil in the world. This is not to say that we won't find ourselves struggling with sin and that which is counter to the reign of God. Rather, we are called to embrace victory, remembering that powers of sin cannot prevail. How often do we find ourselves like Bonhoeffer, fleeing like a beaten army from a victory already won? We are not called to retreat in defeat, we are not called to fight for our own salvation, we are called to embrace Christ's victory and resist fear with the angel's song of salvation on our lips.

We are sent as God's people to resist systems of evil and injustice not with a wish that we may win in the end, but in the promise that life has already triumphed over all that would sow death in this world! When gather as one body to engage in the work of liberation for our siblings, we know that even when

² "Who Am I?" by Dietrich Bonhoeffer, <http://www.dbonhoeffer.org/who-was-db2.htm>

the odds of justice seem long, and the hope of saving transformation appears dim, God who is the worker of resurrection is already arcing toward victory, hope, salvation, and peace for all people!

Throughout the biblical witness, whenever we see angels, they are not meant to be the main focus. They may capture our attention because they are spiritual beings outside our understanding, but angels are always pointing us to God. Angels are messengers, worshippers, and defenders. As we observe this festival celebration of Michael and All Angels, let us allow the angels to serve their purpose—pointing us to God's faithfulness and God's abundant goodness.

Whenever we find ourselves in the midst of struggle with sin, injustice, and evil, and we are relying too much upon our own power to save us, let us remember Michael who stands by our side. Let the angels guide our hearts and minds back to the victory that is already at hand. Let us gather around the table, singing songs of praise with the angelic chorus. These are not songs that hope for victory some day, but proclaim the Christ's triumph here and now. Evil, sin, injustice, and fear have no hold over the heart that is liberated by God's grace! Do not rejoice in this power over evil friends, but rejoice that our names are already written in heaven!

Where there is a war, dear church, it is won. Where there is doubt, dear church, it is assuaged. Where there is evil, dear church, it holds no power over us. Michael and all his angels proclaim this promise, and bid us join the victory parade.

Amen.