

Sermon St. Michael and All Angels 2019

September 29, 2019

Rev. 12:7-12

In the Name of Jesus. Amen.

As we celebrate a feast like we are today, we can acknowledge that it's sort of unusual for us as Lutherans. That's not to say it's something we shouldn't celebrate, or should feel awkward observing. It's just to say that this feast doesn't fit into the usual topics of things we think to celebrate as Lutherans. Sure we have our usual churchly feasts, especially those like Christmas and Easter, or the others like Pentecost or Holy Trinity—or of course the Reformation. All good, right? We even have the days where we celebrate the births or deaths of saints. Sometimes we're most comfortable with those in the Bible, but we do honor others as well from the history of the Christian Church. But then you have a day like today: St. Michael and All Angels. Did you know we celebrate a feast in honor of the angels?

Of course, there's nothing wrong with this. In fact, as we consider what the angels are, what they do, this is good. And as I say that, perhaps that's a good place to start. What are angels? Well, to be clear, they are not our loved ones who have died. When Grandpa Joe died and went to heaven it wasn't because God needed more angels. If you've ever said that, I don't say this to make you feel bad, I just say it in hopes that you would know the biblical teaching. As much as I love the movie "It's a Wonderful Life," the aspect where Clarence is seeking to make that jump from good dead guy to angel with his wings is terrible theology. But I digress.

To begin, the word angel actually just means a messenger. In fact, looking at the book of Revelation where we have our text for this sermon this morning, there are places where the angels of the churches should be understood as the pastors there. The pastors were called to those churches to preach the message of God, the message of Christ crucified, and in that role, they are angels. That said, I don't want you to think you've totally been thinking of angels incorrectly your whole life. As we think of what we commonly envision when we talk about angels this is right. I don't mean the chubby little figures that look like cupid, but I do mean the beings that are pure spirit. They are beings having been created by God—something we confess when we describe God has creating all things visible and invisible—created by God in the beginning and whom He sends with messages sometimes, like we see with Gabriel at the birth of Jesus.

Now with that in mind, we see just before this in Revelation that a third of the stars in heaven fell with the devil. That informs us that Satan was not the only angel to rebel. He was just the head of that rebellion, and now in that rebellion, there are a whole raft of

angels who seek our destruction with him. These are what we usually refer to as demons. Those that did not fall still serve God. In fact, in the letter to the Hebrews we see them described as ministering spirits. They are there to aid the saints of God in their daily work, protecting them to some extent from the attacks of the evil one. For example, this is what we have in mind when we pray Luther's Morning Prayer: "let your holy angel be with me that the evil foe may have no power over me." So that's angels.

But before I go on, I think I should take a second and come back to discussing the devil. You see as the head of the fallen angels, he has a special role; one that we see in this passage in particular. Look at what the passage tells us. **"The great dragon was thrown down, that ancient serpent, who is called the devil and Satan, the deceiver of the whole world."** So the devil is a deceiver. He comes into the world and he deceives us. He lies to us. This is just what he's done since the beginning. Think about it with Adam and Eve. And I always make this point when looking at Adam and Eve; what was the first thing the devil attacked? Think about it. What are his first words? "Did God really say?" He deceives and seeks for you to doubt God's Word. He deceives and lies and seeks your death in that.

But what else do we see in this passage? **"The accuser of our brothers has been thrown down, who accuses [the brothers] day and night before our God."** I referenced this last week with the charges against the unjust steward, that the devil likes to bring charges, accusations against you. And that's what we see here. We see this image of him accusing the brothers night and day before God. It's like I said last week. There he would stand saying, "Look! Look at this sin! Look at how horrendous it is!" Or think about Job. We really see it there. Do you remember that? God says, "Oh look at Job. He's such a faithful child of mine." And what's Satan say? "Well, yeah! Of course he's faithful. Of course he trusts in you, look at all you've done for him. Take all that away and see just how much he likes you!" That's this picture there. This accusation, this denigration. And we'll come back to that in a second, because I want to look at one more thing first.

What's the last thing we see about the devil in this passage? Look at the last statement, **"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 devil comes in great wrath here because he knows his time is short. One of my professors in seminary described the devil as being chained up now. He's limited by the death of Christ, but as he's limited he's still like a mortally wounded animal. My understanding is that when an animal knows it's mortally wounded it can actually become quite vicious. It will be inclined to ferociously attack anyone or anything that comes near it. That's the devil.

In fact, one of the most common questions I get as a pastor is how come it looks so much like the devil is winning so often. This is why. He's been cast down to earth—

something we're going to also talk about in second—and he's down here knowing that he's done. His time is short. Thus, in spite he's trying to take down everything and everyone he can with him. And how can he do this? Because in our sin, we've given him the authority to do it. We've put our stamp of approval on this work. Adam had the authority over the world in the beginning and now it's given to the devil in sin—you can even see the glimpse of that as there's this celebration that the authority of Christ has come. So there's the devil.

So now having said all of that, what about this feast? Why are we celebrating the feast of St. Michael and All Angels? Well, look at this reading from Revelation. Here there's this glimpse into heaven and what's happening? **Now war arose in heaven, Michael and his angels fighting against the dragon. And the dragon and his angels fought back, but he was defeated, and there was no longer any place for them in heaven. And 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.** So there's this interesting picture of a war. There's a battle; a battle between Michael and the good angels, and the devil and his angels. And what happens? The devil loses and he's cast out of heaven. He's thrown out, thrown down to the earth. That's what we're celebrating here. There's this victory of Michael as this apparent archangel and his role in beating down Satan and like a bouncer at club—or maybe more appropriately, a bailiff in a court—he knocks the devil out of that realm.

Now, two things I think are worth noting in this—and these are connected. First, is the timing. When I first began studying this passage at the beginning of this week I thought this must be the devil being kicked out when he rebelled at the beginning. That's not it. This is why he's allowed up there to have this conversation we talked about with Job. He's not kicked out right away. No, apparently in some sort of merciful forbearance, just like with our sin, God doesn't banish him right away. No, this timing is at the time of Christ and His work. And that's the second part of this. See we're celebrating the angels, we're celebrating Michael's victory, but this is still about Jesus.

Look at how the victory is won. Sure Michael gets to be the one fighting and winning this war in heaven, but how does it really happen? **And I heard a loud voice in heaven, saying, "Now the salvation and the power and the kingdom of our God and the authority of his Christ have come, for the accuser of our brothers has been thrown down, who accuses them day and night before our God. And they have conquered him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony, for they loved not their lives even unto death.** What actually does the conquering? The blood of the Lamb. The blood of the God who came in the flesh of man, shed on the cross. There the rebellion and the terror of this devil loses all of its power. He has power in this accusation. He has power in this bondage

to death as sin brings it, but the blood of the Lamb took the blow of death and death couldn't handle it. That blood shed was innocent and conquered sin, conquered death, conquered this devil himself.

But look at what else it says: by the word of their testimony. Did you catch that in the Gospel Lesson? That's what's going on there: Jesus sent out the disciples, they go out and they preach. And by the word of their testimony the devil falls. Did you realize that? That's what preaching does? When this seemingly lowly word goes out, the devil is crushed in it. When you hear this jar of clay stand up in this pulpit and preach God's Word to you, it's crushing that serpent underfoot once more.

And you see, that's the import for you. Sure it's easy to hear all of this and think that this is just some story about what happened in heaven at the time of Jesus, and sure it's great, but there's still the here and now to think about, but this is what it has to do with you. The devil has been kicked out of heaven so that, sure he's still prowling here, looking for those he can devour, but his power is gone. His power is overcome in preaching. His power is dismissed when you hear "I forgive you your sins in the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit." This victory won in heaven is now yours as God's Kingdom is at hand, as Jesus is at hand here overcoming by His blood. That blood squashed the accuser then, and it squashes him even as he accuses you now.

In fact, I love how Luther so often speaks about this. Hear what he says: *"then it is useful to set yourself against Satan and to say: 'What is it to you? After all, I did not sin against you, but against my God. I am not your sinner, so what right do you have over me? Therefore if I have sinned and what you are accusing me of is truly a sin—for Satan often terrifies the mind with imaginary sins—then I have sinned against the God who is merciful and patient. I have not sinned against you, nor against the Law, nor against my conscience, nor against any man, nor against any angel; but against God alone. But God is not a devil; He is not a devourer or a carnivore, as you are, terrifying and threatening with death. He is merciful to sinners, perfect and incorruptible, faithful and righteous.'"*

I love that. There's the power of this work of Michael and the Angels. They kicked the devil out of heaven by the power of the blood of Christ, under the authority of Christ, and in that now the devil can't accuse us before God. Now we can stand up to him and say, "yes I've sinned, but I have the promise of the blood of Christ for that sin." What a blessed thing that is to say, and to know who the God who forgives us is. That He is the One who sent Jesus, who loves us, who forgives us, and who even sends His angels to attend and help us. Amen!