

9.29.2024 St. Michael and All Angels (Revelation 12:7-12)

When you think of an angel, what image comes to mind? A cherub on a cloud, or perhaps a cartoon image of a little angel on one shoulder who's desperately trying to keep you from listening to the devil on the other, or maybe you picture one of these angels: Roma Downey as Monica in *Touched by an Angel*, Michael Landon as Jonathan in *Highway to Heaven*, or even Henry Travers who played Clarence Odbody, the guardian angel who showed George Bailey that life is worth living in the movie, *It's a Wonderful Life*.

Popular images of angels are everywhere, but the feast we celebrate this morning has nothing to do with chubby cherubs on clouds, cartoon images of angels, or the vast majority of other way angels are so often portrayed in films or on television. This feast is not a celebration of what one might imagine an angel to be, but rather, the Feast of St. Michael and All Angels is a celebration of the truth revealed in Holy Scripture about "Angels and Archangels, and all the company of heaven."

The truth concerning angels is found throughout the Bible, and we would do well to consider the sharp contrast that exists between a fictional cherub on a cloud, and the cherubim that guarded the entrance to the garden of Eden next to a flaming sword (Genesis 3:24), or the cherubim that Ezekiel saw which took on a dazzling, terrifying form, full of wings and faces and eyes, a form that roared and spewed forth bolts of lightning (Ezekiel 1:4-25, 10:1-22). We might also consider the difference between the cartoon image of an angel, and the biblical reference to St. Michael and his angels found in today's Epistle reading, a passage that describes a great war between "*the kingdom of our God,*" and the forces of "*that old serpent, called the Devil, and Satan, which deceives the whole world...*" No cartoon imagery here, but rather, in this war, a victory that comes to those who, according to the text, did not love their lives so much as to shy away from death, those who were, and are, victors "*by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony*" (Revelation 12:7-11).

Popular images of angels are everywhere, and while we can't help but be drawn to such endearing images, we must recognize that these fictional, sentimental portrayals fail to communicate the truth revealed in Holy

Scripture. For example, in a familiar passage St. Paul tells Christians that “*we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places. Wherefore take unto you the whole armor of God, that ye may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand*” (Ephesians 6:12-13). These verses echo the description of spiritual warfare found in the Epistle reading, and in these words we recognize that it’s not only St. Michael and his angels that battle against the enemy, but we who wrestle “*against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places.*”

There is a great, yet unseen war, raging in our midst. The war in the heavens is the war on this earth, and ultimately, it is the war in us - the great conflict between good and evil. It may not be our role in this war to contend with the enemy in the same way that St. Michael and his angels are portrayed as fighting against the dragon, and yet our individual, daily struggle against sin and evil, the numerous and varied ways we engage in this fight against the world, the flesh, and the devil are all part of this universal war between “*the kingdom of our God,*” and the forces of the enemy, and in every battle of this great war we are all on either one side or the other.

Every day we confront temptation, in every decision we choose whom we will serve (Joshua 24:15), and one of the most effective strategies used by our enemy to blur the lines of this battlefield is his ability to lead us into thinking that there is such a thing as private sin - a sin that no one will ever know about, or small sin, a sin that will cause no harm, a sin that we can commit without any consequence, but as we all know, many of the most devastating fires start with a single spark, and the cancer that so often kills those we love begins as a single cell among the 30 trillion cells in the body.

Small sins don’t stay small, and private sins don’t remain private. This is the reason Jesus so carefully warned us in the Sermon on the Mount about entertaining what people might consider to be small, private thoughts of anger and lust. Our Lord warned us so carefully, because God knows that murder begins with anger, and adultery is sparked by lust (Matthew 5:21-30). As adults, we don’t play with fire, and we’d never consider allowing a small cancer to enter our body. This line of thinking points to the reason why St.

Paul exhorts mature Christians to “*take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ*” (2 Corinthians 10:5). On this battlefield we take captive every thought because we know that with every thought our soul is aligning itself with one or the other of the two armies in this great conflict. We pray, in the Collect for Purity, that God would “cleanse the thoughts of our hearts by the inspiration of thy Holy Spirit,” for we know that every thought we consciously allow to take root in our heart is either one more victory or one more defeat in the war between “*the kingdom of our God,*” and the forces of the enemy.

The war in the heavens is the war on this earth, and ultimately it is the war in us, and therefore our battlefield in this great war is right here - in this church, in our homes around the kitchen table, at work or school. The battlefield is found in every thought, in every word, in every deed. Day by day and hour by hour what appear to be the ordinary moments of life are actually moments of victory and defeat, and if that thought seems to place a great challenge before us, that’s because it does, for the way to victory, the path to holiness is not a smooth, easy climb, it is instead a steep, rugged grade littered with dangerous obstacles. As Jesus said, “*narrow is the gate and difficult is the way which leads to life, and there are few who find it*” (Matthew 7:14).

*Difficult is the way which leads to life*, but we don’t lose heart, for though we confront evil on this battlefield every day, and the final victory we long to realize seems slow to come, we know it will come at last. We live with such blessed assurance, and, isn’t it remarkable that in this world, by God’s Providence, the daily victory in a very real sense depends on you and I, by the grace of God, just doing the best we can to resist temptation and overcome evil.

As we celebrate St. Michael and All Angels, we recognize that it’s not only the heavenly host that war against that *old serpent, called the Devil*, but you and I who wrestle *against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places*. The war in the heavens is the war on this earth, and ultimately it is the war in every one of us. By the grace of God, may victory come to us all by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of our testimony.