

YAHWEH'S ARMY

Revelation 12:7-12

St. Michael and All Angels (Series B)

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Trinity Free Lutheran Church, Grand Forks, ND

Ny Stavanger Free Lutheran Church, Buxton, ND

The epistle lesson for the Feast of St. Michael and all Angels comes from *The Revelation of Jesus Christ*, chapter 12, verses 7 through 12. This passage gives us a glimpse of the angels and the war they fight. Please stand as you are able for God's holy Word. From Revelation 12, beginning at verse 7, we read in Jesus' name.

⁷ Now war arose in heaven, Michael and his angels fighting against the dragon. And the dragon and his angels fought back, ⁸ but he was defeated, and there was no longer any place for them in heaven. ⁹ 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. ¹⁰ 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. ¹¹ 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. ¹² Therefore, rejoice, O heavens and you who dwell in them! But 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!”

Father, these are your words. Sanctify us in the truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.

You may be seated.

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

Today we get to talk about angels. The occasion is the Feast of St. Michael and All Angels. The Church observes this festival on September 29. I don't know why that date was chosen, but that's how it is. Most years it goes by without us noticing or doing much, because it's usually in the middle of the week. But when it falls on a Sunday, it's okay for it to take the place of our regularly scheduled readings. That means that, on average, we observe it once every seven years. And since we don't really know that much about angels, that sounds about right. Of all the doctrines of Scripture, the doctrine of angels might have the highest ratio of questions compared to how much we actually know about them. We tend to be curious about these invisible beings that are apparently all around us. But Scripture doesn't tell us much about them. Most of what we know about them is picked up from passing references. That is, when Scripture does say something about angels, angels usually are not the focus of the passage. The passage is usually about something else, and it just happens to say something about angels. I suppose the reason for this is that belief in angels isn't necessary for our salvation. We should believe they exist, because Scripture reveals them to be real, but Christian doctrine wouldn't really change if we didn't know anything about them. The doctrine of angels is about as close as we get to a “nonessential doctrine.” So a sermon once every seven years is probably about right. And if there are any angels here listening, and there probably are, I think they would agree. They would prefer the focus to be on their Lord.

YAHWEH'S ARMY (Revelation 12:7-12)

Now I hope I didn't just accidentally convince you that this sermon is unimportant and you should stop listening. The least of all the doctrines of Scripture is still more important than the trivial things of this world that we give our attention to. For example, you might be really interested in some football game today. And that's okay. But that doesn't even compare to the importance of angels. We should pay attention to what Scripture reveals about angels, yes, because it's interesting, but more importantly, because their activity reveals the love of God for us.

So we're going to do two things in this sermon. First, we'll summarize the biblical teaching on angels. That will give us a broad overview of who they are. And then we'll focus on what we see them doing in this text.

So here are some fun facts about angels:

Angels are messengers. Both the Hebrew and the Greek words for angel (Hebrew: מַלְאָכִים; Greek: ἄγγελος) literally mean "messenger."

One of the things we see angels doing in the Bible is bringing messages from God. We especially see a lot of angelic visits surrounding Jesus' birth and resurrection. Those were times when God was doing some really supernatural things, and it was necessary for the angels to explain to humans what was going on. And there are a few other places in Scripture where angels are sent to bring messages from God.

But we should really be cautious about this. Just because we see angels acting as messengers in the Bible, it doesn't mean we should expect angels to bring messages to us. Angelic appearances are really quite rare, even in the Bible, and when they do appear, it's usually around significant events in the life of Jesus. And when these angels appear to biblical characters, the people are always surprised by their visit. In fact, they are usually frightened. So it's not like we should be watching and waiting for an angel to come and visit us. I've never seen an angel, at least, not that I'm aware of. There was a time in my life when I thought it would be nice to have an angel come and tell me what I should do. I don't think I seriously expected it to happen, but I thought it would be nice. It didn't happen, of course, and it was kind of silly of me to even think that it might. If an angel wants to appear to you, you don't have to be watching for it. They will make their presence known.

I've talked with a few people who say that they have seen angels. And I believe them. They're trustworthy people. They did not get any new doctrines. They just saw a glimpse into a part of our world that we usually don't see, but is no less real than everything we can see and feel. Or they heard a voice saying something that we should already know from Scripture. So instead of looking for angels to bring some special message from God, we should look for God's voice where he has promised it to be: in the Scriptures.

Next fact: Angels are glorious and terrifying. Sometimes we have a cartoonish notion of angels. On Valentine's Day, you might see a picture of angels as fat, naked toddlers with wings who shoot magical arrows to make people fall in love. Cupid is not real. And the descriptions of angels in the Bible are really kind of frightening. They are glorious creatures, but they don't seem to be very cute. Most of the time, when angels appear in the Bible, human beings are quite frightened.

Angels serve in our Lord's army. One of the words the Bible often uses to describe a group of angels is a "host." Literally, in both Hebrew and Greek, the words mean "army." And a common title for God in the Old Testament is "LORD of hosts." It's used 240 times. Literally, it means "Yahweh of armies." "Yahweh" is the personal name God identifies himself by in the Old

Testament. It means "I am." He is the God who truly is. He always has been, and he always will be. And he is the ruler of armies. He exercises authority over all the armies in heaven and on earth. But this title especially emphasizes that he is Lord over the army of heavenly angels.

Next fact: Angels are not former humans who died and got wings. When a Christian dies, their spirit goes to heaven, where it is at peace with Christ while it awaits the resurrection, when it will be reunited with the body. To be transformed into an angel would really be a demotion.

So where did the angels come from? As best as we can tell, angels were created sometime during the six days of creation. They didn't exist before creation, because there was only God, and they had to be created before the fall into sin, because Satan and his angels had to fall into rebellion sometime before the serpent deceived Eve. From this we assume the angels must have been created sometime during the six days of creation. They also don't procreate (Matt. 22:30), so all the angels that exist were probably created at the beginning.

Next fact: There are good angels and there are bad angels. When the devil rebelled against God, some of the angels fell with him. We generally don't call those that fell "angels," however. Scripture usually calls them "demons" or "evil spirits." These evil spirits are powerful, and they have the ability to do us great harm. However, they seem to be outnumbered by the good angels. There are a few passages in the Bible that make it sound as if one third of the angels fell with Satan (e.g., Rev. 12:4). And if that's the number, it means there are still twice as many angels as there are demons. We also have God on our side. Angels, both good and evil, are limited in their power and knowledge. They are not all-powerful; only God is. And they do not know everything; only God does. This limitation includes the devil too. He is not an equal power to God. He's probably more similar to Michael, the archangel, in his strength and knowledge. We have no reason to think that they know the future or that they can read our minds.

One more: Do we have guardian angels? I'm not totally sure about this one. The primary function of angels is to guard Christians, and from what Jesus says, it seems that Christian children, at least, have angels. Jesus says, "**See that you do not despise one of these little ones. For I tell you that in heaven their angels always see the face of my Father who is in heaven**" (Matt. 18:10). Jesus is talking about little ones who believe in him (Matt. 18:6), so Christian children, it seems, have angels. Who knows if adult Christians have angels too? We don't really know, but I would guess we do. It doesn't seem like God would take them away from us when we reach a certain age. But we just don't know enough to say for sure whether we all have guardian angels.

So that's about all we know, or all we think we know, about angels. If you have other questions, I can probably scratch my beard and say, "Hmm, that's a good question."

Now what do we see the angels doing in the text for this morning? The reading was from *The Revelation of Jesus Christ*. Some of what John sees in the book of Revelation is in heaven, and some of it is on earth. Here he sees a vision of the war in heaven, and it helps explain the trouble the Church has on earth. Michael and his angels were fighting against the devil and his angels.

This is one of the places where we see that the devil is not a god-like figure. Sometimes we give him too much credit by thinking of him as the evil counterpart to God. But he is not the counterpart to God. He's more like the counterpart to Michael, the archangel. But Michael is stronger than the devil. From here and the reading in Daniel (10:10-14), we see that Michael can beat up the devil. And I suppose this would make Michael the fourth most powerful being in the universe. He's the prince of angels, so he's the most powerful of all them, and he's stronger than the prince of demons, so that would make him a distant fourth behind the Father, Son, and Holy

Spirit. That means that the devil is, at best, fifth. He is certainly more powerful than you and me, but his power is limited. He is outnumbered and overmatched. But we must still be wary of him.

The devil has many names. In Revelation he's often referred to as "the dragon." But he is also called the "ancient serpent" (12:9). This reminds us of the Garden of Eden, where he appeared to Eve as a serpent and deceived her. He is also called "the devil and Satan" (12:9). Satan is a title which means "adversary" or "accuser." This is what he previously had authority in heaven to do. He used to have authority to accuse us before God, but not anymore.

I say, "used to," because the expulsion of Satan from heaven is not a future event. Sometimes we might wrongly assume that everything in Revelation is far off in the future. And certainly some of it is still in the future. But the purpose of the book was to reveal Jesus Christ to Christians in the First Century and give them hope to persevere through their tribulations. So some of the material (probably a lot of it) is either in the past, or it is something that has been ongoing since the First Century through the present day. One event that is in the past is the expulsion of Satan from heaven.

We read about that in Luke 10, and it fits very well with what John records in Revelation 12. Jesus sent out seventy-two disciples to heal the sick and proclaim the arrival of the Kingdom of God (Luke 10:9). And as they were out preaching, Jesus saw "Satan fall like lightning from heaven" (Luke 10:18). Jesus didn't even go with them, except through his Word. And as they preached the Gospel on earth, Satan was cast out of heaven. The forgiveness of sins is proclaimed in Jesus' Name, Satan loses his authority to accuse us before God, and Michael—he's like the bailiff in all this—he body slams the devil out of heaven. And the devil's angels are thrown down with him.

Then a loud voice from heaven says, "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" (12:10-11). This is a great comfort for us Christians. "By the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony"—that is, by the preaching of the Gospel—our accuser loses all authority to accuse. This is good news, for sure. It means Jesus' blood speaks the final word in the heavenly court. But there is also a warning. "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" (12:12).

The devil has no place in heaven, so he focuses all his energy on earth and how he might destroy you here. And so he is also called "the deceiver of the whole world" (12:9). This is what he does. He is the "father of lies" (John 8:44). He can't lie before God anymore, so he utters his lies on earth.

The battle is still ongoing; it's just moved down to earth. But God has not left us alone. Remember, at the start, Michael and his angels were fighting against the devil and his angels. They still do this. And this seems to be the primary work of the angels. God created them to protect us from evil. I suspect we would be quite amazed if we could see everything they protect us from. It may be some kind of accident or some temptation to sin that we would almost certainly give in to. God created the angels to protect his saints from evil. And in this way the ministry of angels testifies of the love of God for us. God sends angels as an act of love.

But this made me wonder, *Why does God need angels?* God is infinite. He doesn't need them. They could all fall, and he would still overpower them. But I suppose they exist for the same reason most things exist. God works through means. When he created the world he sent forth his Word. He uses the sun to give us light. He uses clouds to send us rain. He uses the earth

to bring forth plants. He uses parents to raise us and protect us. When he accomplished our redemption he took on human flesh and saved us by means of his blood. He uses the waters of Baptism to unite us in Christ Jesus. He comes to us in the forms of bread and wine to deliver forgiveness to us physically. The Holy Spirit uses the Word to create and strengthen our faith. When Jesus healed people and performed miracles, he always used means. Sometimes it was something as simple as his Word. Sometimes it was his hands, or spit-mud, or the corner of his garment. He used water to make wine, and he used a little bit of bread and fish to make a lot of bread and fish.

God never just thinks something into existence; he doesn't just will things to be. He always uses some kind of means. I suppose this makes his work more recognizable. People remembered the words Jesus spoke to heal them. They remembered his touch or the spit-mud. The servants remembered the six stone water jars. The young boy remembered his five loaves and two fish. You hear the words of Scripture. You see and feel the waters of Baptism. You touch and taste the bread and wine.

God works through means, and this helps us recognize his work. And when we see that God loves us through the things he has created, we see the manifold nature of his love. And his angels are his means of protecting us. Even if we don't see them, except on rare occasions, God has told us about them. John has written here about how they fought against the devil and his demons. It's the difference between saying, "God will protect you," or saying, "God will send his angels to protect you." Both are true, but the second is more specific, and it gives us a way of visualizing God's protection.

"For he will command his angels concerning you
to guard you in all your ways.
On their hands they will bear you up,
lest you strike your foot against a stone." (Ps. 91:11-12)

So why are there angels? Because God loves you. He protects you. And he wants you to know that he protects you. We cannot even comprehend how much evil God protects us from. But he has revealed the work of angels so that we might begin to imagine just how much evil he spares us from. They fight for you, because they always do the will of our Father, and our Father has called you his child in Jesus Christ. Amen.

Now may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus (Phil. 4:7). Amen.