

Sermon by The Rev. George Arceneaux, Deacon and Curate
Church of the Ascension, Chicago, IL
Sunday, October 4, 2020 (*St Michael and All Angels*, observed)

I remember when I was a child, I was fascinated by the book of revelation. I was enamored by the imagery of the seven seals, the beast whose number is 666. I remember thinking how real and tangible these images of Revelation HAD to be, and I in part blame the movie Ghostbusters, with Ernie Hudson as Winston Zedmore and Dan Akroyd as Ray Stantz, who quotes Revelation 6:12, "And I looked, and he opened the sixth seal, and behold, there was a great earthquake. And the sun became as black as sack cloth, and the moon became as blood. And the seas boiled and skies fell." I remember thinking to the mythical imagery of St. Michael the archangel and all the heavenly host doing battle with the dragon, Satan, and all his armies for the fate of heaven and indeed humanity. As a child this felt so real to me because the imagery is so fantastical and terrifying, so stark from my understanding of the rest of the New Testament.

And I am grateful for that visceral fear and wonder I felt in the reading of Revelation, because I do believe it is not so horribly different from the fear I have felt all my life, or even different from the fear I feel today.

I am afraid. I am afraid for our country and my place in it after the presidential debate from last Tuesday and after hearing the news of the President's contracting the coronavirus. I am afraid for the sake of black bodies abused by systemically imposed poverty and violence. I am afraid because of the common place hurt against women and people of color and those in the LGBTQ community and fearful of my unintentional promulgating of that hurt, not to mention I am afraid because of the pandemic.

Even beyond these fears that are beyond me, I find myself subject to the fear of loneliness in my life, of failure in my relationships and in my responsibilities. And I see the fears of my friends, who are so often beset by the struggles of depression and anxiety, of health and isolation.

Such fears feel so similar to that fear I felt as I read Revelation when I was little, those beasts and battles and horrors visited upon the world of St. John of Patmos' vision. My fears of today feel as vast as the armies of the dragon.

So it is that I fear, yet fear is not the book of Revelation's true purpose. No; I believe Revelation's true aim is the aim of victory. Because though terror is surely evoked in the visions of the blood soaked moon and the boiling sea, destruction and calamity are not the fate of God's people. Because in the midst of such horrors from this story rushes winged St. Michael. Like Superman arriving at the last second to battle Brainiac, or Luke Skywalker to combat Darth Vader, like the heroes that enamored me ever since I was child, Michael erupts into the story of revelation in the battle for the sake of heaven which will have immense consequences for the sake of earth,

and meets combat with “that ancient serpent, who is called the Devil and Satan, the deceiver of the whole world.” And unequivocally, viciously is the representation of that fear I felt and indeed I still still do fear thrown down and defeated.

And in the serpent’s defeat I am inspired to belief; to know that we can win.

I am inspired to believe that the fears of our lives can be defeated; not simply abated or waylaid, but to truly be cast out of ourselves as Satan was cast out of heaven. I’m inspired by Michael’s defeat of the dragon because the simplicity of this story and its imagery is provoked by the very real and very historical events of St. John of Patmos’ time.

John wrote not just out of the promise of God’s continual victory over evil in some general sense, but so too through the lens of a man beset by particular and oppressive times. To quote one historian, Professor Helmut Koester of Harvard, “The revelation of John is directly focused upon the events and problems of its own time and can only be understood once it is realized how closely it is tied to its particular situation”, i.e., the rule of and chaos surrounding the Roman Empire and its ruler at the time, Emperor Nero: his persecution of Christians and the cult of the emperor.

And I draw attention to the historical elements of the Book of Revelation not to isolate this chapter of the Bible’s impact to that time, but to MAGNIFY in our time and in all time. Because St. Michael’s eruption into the story signaled for John and his audience at the time that the evils of the Roman Empire would not be victorious over the Christians of the day who feared death and persecution and oppression. And the story of Revelation is a reminder for us that just as there was hope for victory over the evils of that day, there is hope for us too. Here. Now. Today. We can defeat our nation’s toxic polarization, we can affect a better and more just society for all persons regardless of their skin, or socio-economic status, or sexual orientation or gender identity. We can fight through the pandemic. We can stand victorious in the face of our personal fears of failure, or doubt, or isolation.

We too can slay dragons as did St. Michael, and when we feel ourselves frail and inadequate, I believe we can trust that those around us may embody that victorious spirit of the angel who cast the ancient serpent out of heaven.

Christianity, our faith; it is a faith of struggle, and pain, and loss and grief. Yet it is a faith of victory: embodied in the stories and saints of our religion like that of St. Michael. Embodied in the common table, the memorial of our redemption which we celebrate each week in spite of this terrible plague we endure.

So, in the face of whatever may frighten you, take heart. Look to the stories of the past, the meaning of the rituals in which we participate, the community about you, and St. Michael and all the heroes who inspire us. Because despite how fearful the world may be, we can win. Amen.