

## ***War in heaven, war on earth***

Solemnity of Michaelmas, October 3, 2021

Church of the Ascension, Chicago

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*War broke out in heaven; Michael and his angels fought against the dragon. The dragon and his angels fought back, but they were defeated, and there was no longer any place for them in heaven. 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. Then I heard a loud voice in heaven, proclaiming,*

*"Now have come the salvation and the power  
and the kingdom of our God  
and the authority of his Messiah,  
for the accuser of our comrades has been thrown down,  
who accuses them day and night before our God.  
But they have conquered him by the blood of the Lamb  
and by the word of their testimony,  
for they did not cling to life even in the face of death.  
Rejoice then, you heavens  
and those who dwell in them!  
But woe to the earth and the sea,  
for the devil has come down to you  
with great wrath,  
because he knows that his time is short!"* Revelation 12:7-12

A fellow priest with whom I recently shared some time remarked that he did not believe in the devil. He made the comment in passing; the conversation moved on; I had no chance to hear more about his *dis*-belief. But his remark stayed with me as I have anticipated today's celebration of St. Michael the Archangel and All Angels.

St. Michael is traditionally known as a personal and communal protector, as a vanguard in battle, and as a restorer from illness to good health. But Michael is preeminently known for his defeat of Satan and all of Satan's evil cohort, at the end of time. Countless artworks, including our own shrine here at Ascension, have sought to convey the defining moment in the battle described in the text from Revelation that we heard this morning:

*War broke out in heaven; Michael and his angels fought against the dragon. The dragon and his angels fought back, but they were defeated, and there was no longer any place for them in heaven. 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. (Revelation 12:7-9)*

I wonder how convincingly that scene might be conveyed in some Hollywood blockbuster that would be seen and praised by millions. I also wonder, by way of contrast, at the many Christians I know who seem to be blasé, or disengaged or downright dismissive when it comes to notions of evil or 'the devil.' Michael's triumph over Satan at the end of time assumes a battle that is already underway, an ancient and tenacious conflict, obscure in origins and yet inseparable from our human condition. In this battle we are all implicated, as is argued by the author of the New Testament Letter to the Ephesians:

*“... our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.”* (Ephesians 6:12)

In light of this larger view of things, the first question asked of a Candidate for Baptism during the Examination is, *“Do you renounce Satan and all the spiritual forces of wickedness that rebel against God?”* (BCP p. 302)

Let me be clear that I have known plenty of Christians, including some fellow Episcopalians, who do believe in a literal devil. Some tend to see and describe the devil at work in every impure thought and every destructive, poor personal decision. We may have heard them say, *“The devil made me do it!”* The accusation often sounds less like the devil and more like a dodge of personal responsibility or a failure of critical observation.

But why should we be surprised? Consider the primal human transgression from Genesis and God’s attempt to hold Adam accountable. Adam blames his decision on Eve, his wife. She, in turn, blames the serpent. (Genesis 3:11-13) And ever since, we humans have been biting the apple and blaming the serpent, our spouses and parents and so many others.

Some Christians throughout history, particularly those who wield or aspire to power, have also been known to say, *“The devil made them do it.”* If I can make you believe that ‘they’ follow the evil one and *are* evil, I can more easily persuade you to join me in dehumanizing, marginalizing or exterminating those who differ from us or those who stand in our way. The history of religion is strewn with tragedies – and evil – that arise from our confusion between prophets and deceivers, angels and demons.

Partly due to the wiliness of the devil and partly because of the damage that can be done by our misinformation or our misunderstanding of ourselves and others, our church makes a cautious provision for those who imagine they may have encountered or may be dueling with overt evil. That provision is found in our Book of Occasional Services, a companion volume to the Book of Common Prayer. The section titled “Concerning Exorcism” is only two short paragraphs, and it reads:

*“The practice of expelling evil spirits by means of prayer and set formulas derives its authority from the Lord himself who identified these acts as signs of his messiahship. Very early in the life of the Church the development and exercise of such rites were reserved to the bishop, at whose discretion they might be delegated to selected presbyters and others deemed competent.*

*“In accordance with this established tradition, those who find themselves in need of such a ministry should make the fact known to the bishop, through their parish priest, in order that the bishop may determine whether exorcism is needed, who is to perform the rite, and what prayers or other formularies are to be used.”* (BOS 2004, p. 174)

Please know that I am not fishing for peculiar pastoral care needs here! In fact, I’ve never – yet – in my ordained ministry been party to circumstances that required me to call upon the bishop in conjunction with these provisions. But I mention them in part for the benefit of any of us who, on rare occasion, may find ourselves in frightening and unfamiliar realms and wondering where and how to seek guidance and the help of the Church.

Let me end by observing that our Catechism in the Book of Common Prayer makes no mention of the devil. Nor is Satan or the devil mentioned in the Nicene Creed that we confess each Sunday. It may be that those who gathered to debate and distill the essence of our faith determined that these realities and concepts were not essential to our faith. Or it may have been that their experiences in faith and their resulting views were so diverse they could not come to agreement.

In any case, I'm not here to convince or enlist you with regard to any particular notion or theology of evil or the devil. I do, however, wish to give any of you permission to wonder about things that likely are mostly on the margins of our awareness or experience or that we push aside because they seem unconventional or uncomfortable. I encourage your prayers for any circumstance or relationship or events that suggest the presence or activity of evil. Above all, today, I encourage your contemplation and emulation of the mission and intention of St. Michael: to pursue and to choose all good and all mercy and all justice and all love that we know in God, and to resist, perhaps even vanquish, in God's name, whatever may separate us and others from God. *Amen.*