

Sermon on Sunday of the Angel Michael and other Angels Revelation 12, 7-12



*7 Then war broke out in heaven. Michael and his angels fought against the dragon, and the dragon and his angels fought back. 8 But he was not strong enough, and they lost their place in heaven. 9 The great dragon was hurled down—that ancient serpent called the devil, or Satan, who leads the whole world astray. He was hurled to the earth, and his angels with him. 10 Then I heard a loud voice in heaven say: "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 brothers and sisters, who accuses them before our God day and night, has been hurled down. 11 They triumphed over him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony; they did not love their lives so much as to shrink from death. 12 Therefore rejoice, you heavens and you who dwell in them! But woe to the earth and the sea,*

*because the devil has gone down to you! He is filled with fury, because he knows that his time is short."*

When our St. Luke's Church was being renovated, it was especially interesting to watch how the artists painted the beautiful mosaic patterns by hand, right here in this chancel. A large scaffold had to be put up, and lying on their backs, the artists painstakingly painted the mosaic pieces all the way up to the highest point of the apse. One day, while they were busy up there, something unexpected happened. Suddenly someone called down: "Stop! Wait! There's a different pattern here under the old paint!" The artists gathered around this particular spot in the vault of the apse, and what they found there brought the whole project to a standstill. For beneath the old paint, barely visible, they could make out the outlines of two angels that had been hidden there. After much deliberation, the artists restored these old angels, so that today they can be seen clearly once again.

The discovery of these angels is much like our own experience of the world of angels. Angels are mostly hidden. We cannot see them or grasp them with our senses. And yet they are there. Now and then we can make out, very faintly, the outlines of their work, just as the artists in our church did. And sometimes their work is so obvious that it cannot be denied. Usually in such a way that we say, a little puzzled and amazed: "There must have been angels involved in that."

On this Sunday, St. Michael's Sunday, we want to focus especially on the subject of angels. Perhaps we too will suddenly recognize a pattern in the outlines of our lives that is different from our ordinary routine – a pattern in which someone else is at work.

John, who wrote the Book of Revelation, had a similar experience. In the visible world there was nothing but terrible things to report. The emperor Domitian had built great temples to himself. He called himself "Lord and God and Savior." Everyone was required to worship him, and so, of course, he came into conflict with the church. Christians were to be stamped out and destroyed. That was the pattern of the time of the early church. Everything suggested that the church stood no chance against the powers of the world.

But John was able to recognize another pattern. It was a pattern behind the scenes. He saw the battle of the angels, and the archangel Michael triumphing over evil. Satan was hurled from heaven together with all his angels.

This idea of angels fighting against evil is somewhat foreign to us modern people. Perhaps that is why, just like the artists in our church, we need to rediscover the outlines of their work – not least because from the beginning to the end of the Bible, the work of these angels is mentioned again and again.

The first thing we must say about angels is that we cannot turn them into objects of observation. We cannot say: "Look, that's where the angels live, and this is what they look like." What we can see and sense is that things happen in our world that cannot be explained.

For example, we stand bewildered before the things people do and ask ourselves how it is possible that a person can deliberately want nothing but evil. How can people kill and destroy so ruthlessly, even though in the end they themselves will be destroyed too? And how is it possible that politicians – some of them advanced in years and, humanly speaking, close to death – cause so much harm? In the Second World War, it was completely clear about two years before the end that Germany would be defeated. And yet millions were senselessly slaughtered. One might ask how all of this can happen. How can it be that God gives evil so much room at all, and why did God not prevent evil from the very beginning? How can it be that evil even had the power to wage war in heaven, as John describes in Revelation? We can ask the same about our own world: Why is there so much war and so much cruelty among us?

The mystery lies in the person. Both human beings and angels are persons, and it belongs to being a person that one can freely choose either good or evil. A machine cannot sin; it does what it has to do. Our world does not work like such a machine, even though we sometimes wish it did. Our world is under the influence of many different persons.

In John's world, the church experienced physical power through the hand of the emperor Domitian. And John explains that there is something else besides the emperor: an evil power that stands behind him. But in the same way we also see the power of good at work in the background, in outline. God granted John a look behind the scenes. Much like the artists in St. Luke's Church, he was able to discover that something else was at work. And he saw a battle taking place beyond our horizon. It was a battle between the good and the evil angels, in which the archangel Michael finally prevailed and evil was hurled down from heaven.

John is given a glimpse into heaven and sees that Satan's activity is really only a symptom of the fact that he has already been defeated in heaven. His loud raging and his activity on earth are actually only proof that his final defeat has already been sealed. And out of his frustration, of course, he takes a special interest in the children of God. There is nothing he wants more than to snatch these children of God for himself. John's vision shows us that life for Christians here on earth will not become easier, but rather harder. John gives us no reason to hope that things will keep getting better and better here on earth – rather the opposite.

At the same time, John sees very clear outlines that connect the life of the church here – in the midst of battle – with the church that is in heaven. For the angels in heaven proclaim and confirm that we are their brothers and sisters.

John's vision also gives us an important clue as to how Satan fights against us and what we need in order to overcome him. He is called the accuser. At this point it becomes clear that Satan has a lever he can use against us. That lever is our sin and our guilt. The evil one has built his entire power on it. From beginning to end, his power rests on our turning away from God. Adam and Eve were the first to fall into this chain of guilt, and all of us dance to its tune – in family crises, in quarrels at work, and in the terrible calamities that constantly accompany us in this world. He accuses us before God because of the many great and small sins that separate us from God. Our weak spots make us vulnerable, so that because of them we are drawn ever deeper into the undertow and become ever more guilty.

But this is what John shows us: the accuser has been put out of action. John's vision shows us that heaven has finished with Satan. And in the same way, we too will be finished with him. Heaven has brought Satan down by the blood of the Lamb. Jesus has stepped in for us. Through him we have become invulnerable – whatever the accuser may bring forward has long since been settled. That is the foundation of our freedom.

Up front in the chancel we see Christ in the center of the beautiful rose window, as the one victorious over sin, death, and hell. He stands in the center, and around the exalted Christ are the words of Psalm 91:11: *[Insert NIV text of Psalm 91:11 here]*

This verse wonderfully expresses what the artists discovered in the vault of the apse. Up there are the angels, mostly invisible above us. All of us – the congregation up there and we down here – gather around the exalted Christ. When we come to the Lord's Supper here on Sundays, we are united with this whole congregation, including the angels. And so we go out into our everyday lives accompanied by these angels, knowing that we are protected by God's angels. Amen.