



SAINT THOMAS CHURCH FIFTH AVENUE
in the City of New York
The Reverend Canon Carl F. Turner, Rector
www.SaintThomasChurch.org

Sunday, September 29, 2019
The Feast of Saint Michael and All Angels

Festal Eucharist
at 11:00 a.m.

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A Sermon by
The Reverend Adam Spencer, *Associate for Pastoral Care*
on
Revelation 12:7-12
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Take Courage

“Hell is real.”

A billboard stands beside the interstate highway in Ohio, partway between Columbus and Cincinnati - pronouncing in its tall red and white letters on a stark black background an equally stark message: “Hell is real.”

I think of that billboard fondly now. Yes, fondly. It reminds me of the strangeness and the stakes of all this. Of faith, of church. We get a similar reminder in today’s reading from the Book of Revelation for the Feast of Saint Michael and All Angels.

“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.”

It is useful sometimes to consider the larger story we find ourselves in. Ours is a love story of a loving God pursuing his Creation. And ours is also a war story, a story of good opposed by evil, as the Book of Revelation tells us, like Harry Potter or Lord of the Rings. God has won the ultimate victory in Christ, of course. But we’re not out of the woods just yet. The Enemy has been thrown down here among us, weakened maybe but ticked off. “Hell is real” indeed.

All this talk of Good and Evil, demons and angels and spiritual battle might have some of you squirming in your seats. It is strange. It is spooky. Not the kind of thing you regularly discuss in polite society. But it is, like the Resurrection of the Body or the miracles of Jesus, an inescapable part of our Scriptural and theological tradition. Even if it makes us rational, scientific modern people uneasy. It’s right there in Gospels - Jesus tempted in the desert by Satan and ministered to by angels. And it’s right there the Creed - “all things visible and invisible.”

A helpful way into all of this, for us, can be found, I think, in the writings of Saint Ignatius Loyola. St. Ignatius, writing in the language of his time, was a practical and sensitive thinker about the complexities of human nature and the spiritual life. Ignatius’s writings reveal that he understood well the struggles and difficulties and imperfections of life and what we must contend with as we strive to follow Jesus and grow

closer to God. He was well aware of the voices within us that inspire us to greater things or which tempt us towards darkness and fear, selfishness and despair.

Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, fierce critic of the Soviet Union and its system of gulag prisons, wrote that “the line separating good and evil passes not through states, nor between classes, nor between political parties either—but right through every human heart—and through all human hearts. This line shifts,” he wrote. “Inside us, it oscillates with the years. And even within hearts overwhelmed by evil, one small bridgehead of good is retained. And even in the best of all hearts, there remains ... an un-uprooted small corner of evil.”

The battle between Good and Evil is fought right in here. In our hearts. Across the terrain of our daily lives and trials, struggles and stresses.

Saint Ignatius teaches, in his Spiritual Exercises, that we must strive faithfully to discern the movement of these spirits of good and evil within us. The good spirit (that of Jesus, of the angels) and the evil spirit (that of the Enemy) seek to draw us, they whisper to us. Like the cartoon devil and angel on our shoulder. Ignatius drew his understanding of “the discernment of spirits” from Scripture and from his prayerful observation of his own interior life. He noticed that some of his thoughts, actions, desires moved him closer to God and others pushed him further away. Ignatius described the interior movements that brought him closer to God as originating from “the good spirit” and those which took him further from God as coming from “the evil spirit.” The good spirit moves us into freedom from attachments, into love of God and others, into humility and service. The evil spirit draws us into ourselves, into selfish attachments, into a desire for wealth and power and prestige, into fear and shame, despair and bitterness. Our daily struggle is, when we think a thought or feel a desire or contemplate an action, to test which spirit it might be coming from. “You shall know them by their fruits,” Jesus said.

If all of this language of spirits still makes you uneasy, know that it is fundamentally about following Jesus. Discerning whether a thought or desire or action accords with him or opposes him. Asking, “Am I on the right road or am I heading off of it?” However way one characterizes it - these interior spiritual movements require our discerning attention in the light of faith.

Helping people with this sort of discernment - in making good and faithful decisions, in leading a holy life, was central to St. Gregory the Great’s understanding of pastoral care. Those two words, pastoral care, which make up half my job title were the focus of his Book of Pastoral Care. Pastors were to be, in Gregory’s words, “physicians of the heart.” Not only helping to counsel folks out of sin but seeking to strengthen them for more and more faithful and holy living.

That’s not the main image many of us have of pastoral care though. I think many of us envision something more like a chaplain at a sick person’s bedside. And that is certainly central to the ministry of pastoral care. I do a lot of this - visiting the sick, the lonely. And on this Feast of St. Michael and All Angels it calls to mind the ministry of the angels to Jesus after his own battle with Satan who sought to tempt him in the desert. When life beats us down, when we are afflicted with pain or illness, sorrow or grief, the good pastor comes into that desert place to be alongside, to care and comfort, as the angels did for our Lord.

I visited one such person last Lent. She was dying and she knew it. But she was unsure of what to do with her remaining days, her health care decisions, she was unsure what death meant or could mean. So a friend of hers, a member of this congregation, asked if I might go see her. My visits with her encapsulated both dimensions of pastoral care - both counsel and comfort. In our first visit, we discussed her medical options, how she was feeling about them, how she intended to live as she died. I helped her sort the various voices, spirits, moving in her inner life. Helped her discern which voices were truthful and which were deceptive. Ultimately, prayerfully, she emerged from a place of confusion and no small amount of fear into a confident stance towards her remaining days - a stance of joy and faith, courage and even hope. The second time I saw her was two days before she died. Her body was failing her fast. She felt weak. And this time I was not there

to counsel her or to help her discern the spirits, I was there to help her die. To comfort her. To hold her hand, to sit at her bedside, to anoint her head with oil. To offer her the care and love of God and to be there at her side. Ministering to her in the desert of her last days. Surrounded by a legion of angels.

As our reading from the Book of Revelation says, “Now have come the salvation and the power and the kingdom of our God and the authority of his Messiah...”

They have come into emergency rooms and funeral receptions, into couples’ counselling sessions and difficult decisions about careers and families, into hearts broken and wearied and depressed and afraid. “The salvation and the power, and the kingdom of our God” have come into the good, daily fight that Saint Paul urges us to fight. Into all these places, and a thousand more, the angel’s message that came upon that midnight clear is brought in pastoral care again and again, “Fear not.” No matter what you have to face, today, tomorrow or in the days to come: “Fear not.”

Or, as the Rev. Wayne Arnason once said,

“Take courage friends.

The way is often hard, the path is never clear,
and the stakes are very high.

Take courage.

For deep down, there is another truth:
you are not alone.”