

A Sermon by Fr. Wood

**The Solemnity of Saint Michael and All Angels**

Psalm 103:19-22

Genesis 28:10-17

Revelation 12:7-12

John 1:47-51

✠ In the Name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost. *Amen.*

I doubt that any book in the canon has occasioned more skirmishes than the Revelation to St. John. To some it's the hallucinations of an exiled madman. Others pore over it meticulously to find correlation with events in today's newspaper headlines. It piques our interest, so the *Left Behind* series sells millions of copies and they make *four* movies in *The Omen* series. One author describes the treatment of the book within the church itself: "Many simply want to treat the last book of the Bible as though it is a prophetic jigsaw puzzle, written to be solved for the terminal generation of Christians. Others dismiss it as being too veiled, too complex, and too culture bound to benefit modern believers. And still others so spiritualize the text, they render it as little more than a book of parables and allegories."<sup>1</sup>

The church where I grew up took the jigsaw puzzle approach. We'd have Sunday night guest speakers walk us through Revelation and warn us to look out for the Antichrist, whom we were assured was living secretly in Europe and plotting his takeover of the European Economic Union. No book captured my imagination more as a young Christian, but no book kept me from embracing Christianity for so long because of the bizarre focus on beasts and barcodes, Apache helicopters and Armageddon. In seminary, though, I started to learn to read the book through a different lens, one that recognized it as the peculiar literature it was. The image my professor proposed for working through Revelation was "time in the wilderness," because in Revelation and the wilderness all familiar comforts of home are stripped away. The wilderness is dangerous because snakes and scorpions and beasts live there. It disorients us; we don't completely belong there; there's a wildness to it that eludes mastery. But there is also breathtaking beauty in the wilderness, and time there can change a life. My professor said: "If you go to the book looking for the Starbucks, you'll be disappointed. You go to the book to be *transformed.*"

The first word of the book is "*Apocalypsis*," which means "revelation." But "Apocalyptic" is a specific type of literature common in the near east over the two centuries of Jewish persecution before Jesus' birth and the first century of persecution in the Christian era.<sup>2</sup> Apocalyptic books like the OT book of Daniel fired readers' imaginations with the language of metaphor and myth, language that was colorful, rich in symbolism and "elastic" enough to be accessible to people in a broad range of

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1 Scotty Smith and Michael Card, *Unveiled Hope: Eternal Encouragement from the Book of Revelation* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1997): 3.

2 George R. Beasley-Murray, "Revelation," in *New Bible Commentary: 21<sup>st</sup> Century Edition*, D. A. Carson *et al.* eds. (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1994): 142. The centuries were bracketed by the Jewish persecution under Antiochus Epiphanes (167 B.C.) and the destruction of the Jewish nation by the emperor Hadrian after the *Bar Kochba* revolt (A.D. 135).

circumstances and give them hope of an overriding cosmic purpose to life.<sup>3</sup> The Revelation to St. John is not exactly apocalyptic – it’s “apocalyptic-plus” . . . apocalypse and prophecy and epistle all in one – but remember it’s the Revelation of *Jesus Christ* to St. John (Rev. 1:1-2), and as one commentator wrote: “Whatever [Jesus] touched he transfigured, and not least the language and imagery of religious thought.”<sup>4</sup>

So how should we read it? John uses apocalyptic to show us three things in this passage: Conflict, conquest and consequences.

**Conflict** – “*There was war in heaven: Michael and his angels fought against the dragon . . .*” (Rev. 12.7) Very vivid images, but what do they mean? Michael the archangel shows up in the Book of Daniel as a “great prince” who fights on behalf of God’s people (Dan. 12.1). The dragon or the snake was sometimes a specific pagan god, but it could also symbolize the pervasive evil in the world. The battle between these forces – God and evil – is ancient, dating back to the story of the origin of the human race in the Garden of Eden. Remember the story – there’s a garden, man and woman, a tree and a snake. Rev. 12:9 says the great dragon is “that old serpent,” and the word for old can also mean “original.” The dragon Michael fights is the “original snake” from Eden, the same force of evil and chaos that wants nothing less than the enslavement of humanity to the lie that our desires are paramount over God’s word.

**Conquest** – “*The great dragon was cast out, that old serpent, called the Devil, and Satan, which deceiveth the whole world . . .*” (Rev. 12.9) Inside this sanctuary, there are at least two images of a serpent that I’ve been able to find. One is in a window on the epistle side of the sanctuary, but could you tell me where the other is? In the Lady Chapel, there is a statue of the Virgin Mary treading on a serpent with what I suppose is an apple in its mouth. Where in the Bible is there anything about Mary stepping on a snake? The statue conflates different parts of the Bible to piece together a larger truth, and unless we know Genesis 3:15, it doesn’t make sense. In Genesis 3.15, the so-called the “proto-gospel,” a mere nine verses after Adam and Eve defied God and ate forbidden fruit, God tells the serpent who had tempted Adam and Eve: “I will put enmity between you and the woman and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel.” The statue is Our Lady, the Mother of the Church and Mother of Our Lord, and representative of the whole people of God, fulfilling the prophecy from Gen. 3:15. Jesus defeated the devil by suffering a killing bite on the cross, and the victory of Mary and Church, as well as Michael’s victory in heaven, flow inexorably from Jesus crushing the serpent’s head. “Michael’s victory is simply the heavenly and symbolic counterpart of the earthly reality of the Cross.”<sup>5</sup>

The past two weeks of the Christian calendar throw this into sharp relief. Last week on Holy Cross Sunday we sang an ancient hymn over a thousand years old: *Sing, my tongue, the glorious battle / sing the winning of the fray; now above the cross, the trophy, sound the high triumphal lay: Tell how Christ, the world’s redeemer, as a victim won that day.* Today, on the Feast of St. Michael and All Angels, that victory Jesus won on the cross reverberates through heaven where Michael routs the Dragon.

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3 Stephen L. Cook, *The Apocalyptic Literature* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2003): 20.

4 G. B. Caird, *The Revelation of Saint John*, BLACK’S NEW TESTAMENT CMT. (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1999): 11.

5 Caird, 154.

**Consequence** – “Therefore rejoice, ye heavens, and ye that dwell in them. Woe to the inhabitants of the earth and of the sea, for the devil is come down unto you, having great wrath, because he knoweth that he hath but a short time.” (Rev. 12.12) G. K. Beale, one of the foremost modern commentators on Revelation, follows up on this idea of reverberation and writes “the decisive redemptive-historical victory of Christ on earth (vv 5, 10), and of Michael in heaven (vv 7-9) is identified as the basis of the victory that suffering Christians on earth win over the serpent throughout history.”<sup>6</sup> In short, the consequence of Jesus’ and Michael’s conquest is that we fight against an enemy that is defeated, which makes us joyful, but who is still dangerous, which keeps us vigilant.

Jesus told us to expect trouble in this world, great trouble . . . . Until the end Satan will spew a river of evil at us, but God will protect and provide for us. He will never leave or forsake us. How different this perspective is from much of what I see among Christians in our American culture. On the one hand I see so much doubt, fear, suspicion, sensationalism, and uncertainty, one wonders if the news ever reached us that Jesus has already won the victory over Satan. That first great promise of the gospel in Genesis 3:15 has been realized. Satan is a real but a defeated foe. We overcome him now by the blood of the Lamb, by the once-finished work of the Lord Jesus upon his cross. We overcome him by the word of our testimony. When the gospel is believed and lived out every day until we are in heaven. We prevail because Jesus has prevailed. This truth is meant to sink deep into our souls.

But as many Christians err on the side of unbelief and fear so many others err on the side of naïveté and presumption. To affirm that Satan is our defeated foe is not to say that he is no longer a mighty adversary. He has been dethroned, not annihilated; conquered, not eradicated.<sup>7</sup>

The Book of Revelation has been the source of much fear for Christians and non-Christians alike, but the point wasn’t to instill fear but to encourage perseverance, to give hope to the fledgling first century church and our church twenty centuries later, hope as we fought our own “spiritual war” against an enemy that was dethroned but not annihilated. John Stott says we don’t need “a detailed forecast of future events which has to be laboriously deciphered, but (rather) a vision of Jesus Christ, to cheer the faint and encourage the weary. John’s desire is not to satisfy our curiosity about the future but to stimulate our faithfulness in the present.”<sup>8</sup> We wage war, ironically, by making peace, and by submitting to God’s sanctifying grace and living in light of the gospel; through perseverance, faithfulness, love, forgiveness, obedience and giving up our lives for others. That’s how we advance the kingdom of God in our families, communities, neighborhoods, this church, and that’s how Christ’s victory reverberates and crescendos until our enemy *is* annihilated.

Isaac Watts wrote this hymn:

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6 G. K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, NEW INT’L GREEK TESTAMENT CMT (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1999): 663.

7 Smith and Card, 154.

8 John Stott, *Men with a Message* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1994): 151 (quoted in Smith and Card, 26).

*Now let my soul arise, and tread the tempter down;  
My Captain leads me forth to conquest and a crown:  
A feeble saint shall win the day,  
Though death and hell obstruct the way.<sup>9</sup>*

In another book attributed to a man named John, Jesus said: “In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world.” (John 16:33) We are, all of us, feeble saints, but we take heart because our captain has already won.

✠ In the Name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost. *Amen.*

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<sup>9</sup>Lyrics by Isaac Watts (<http://www.fullbooks.com/Hymns-and-Spiritual-Songs3.html>) (last visited 22 Sept. 2007).