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And Deliver Us From Evil: St. Michael and All Angels

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Text: Revelation 12:7-12

Among the 179 cantatas Johann Sebastian Bach composed for Sundays and festivals of the Christian Year, four of them were prepared for the Feast of St. Michael and All Angels, which we celebrate today. All four of those cantatas focus on today's Second Reading, from the book of Revelation, which tells of a great war in heaven, with St. Michael and all his angels fighting against the dragon. The music of all four cantatas is strident and intense, reflecting the fierceness of war; but it is also triumphant, reflecting the biblical claim that God's angels have defeated their adversary, the devil.

These cantatas were composed nearly 250 years ago, in the early decades of the eighteenth century. Since then, the explosive growth of scientific curiosity and technical innovation has left us a skeptical and questioning people. If we can't see something, if we cannot touch and measure it, we are inclined to conclude it is not real. As a result, unlike old J.S. Bach we may find it difficult to take seriously the scriptural references to principalities and powers, to the battles between the invisible forces of good and evil – battles which the Bible suggests have a direct effect on our individual and national life. In addition, we have been so tainted by the rhetoric of fiery preachers announcing the end of the world, and so bewildered by those who try to correlate the graphic events in Revelation with the occurrences of our own times, that we may be inclined to give up on this book altogether. As we hear today's Second Reading we may be prone to envision it as a bad nightmare, as the stuff of fantasy, or as the plot of some high budget film, rather than as the Word of God.

But it would be really unfortunate if we were to do that, if we were simply to dismiss the strange visions and images in the book of Revelation. For while this book is indeed very difficult to unlock and understand, and while even Luther questioned whether it was a

legitimate or helpful part of the canon of Holy Scripture, the fact remains that, for many people in many generations, the Revelation to St. John has been a book inspiring great hope and faith.

But if we wish to see it as such, we need first to understand the perspective from which the book of Revelation speaks. Only then can we begin to read and understand it for what it really is.

As all of you are aware, there are many different kinds of books contained within the Bible. There are books of history and books of poetry, books of stories and songs, and collections of letters, all giving witness, all pointing in one way or another, to the marvelous workings of God in the midst of life and in the midst of God's people.

Now among the collection of books which make up the Bible, there is – in both the Old and New Testaments – a group of books, and even chapters in larger books, which are known as *apocalyptic*, a word coming from the Greek words *apo* and *kalupto*, which mean to uncover, to reveal, to make known. What the apocalyptic books attempt to reveal is the hidden and mysterious way in which God is at work in the midst of human life, in the midst of human suffering, and in the unfolding events of history itself.

Please take note, here, that I said that it is the hidden and mysterious workings of God that are being revealed. And the writers are attempting to do that not so much by pointing to particular events as by graphically depicting the kinds of ways in which God's mysterious efforts are concealed within the events of our own lives, no less than in the unfolding of history itself.

However, even as the apocalyptic writings of the Bible attempt to do that, they undertake to do this task from a particular perspective.

All of the apocalyptic writings were made during times of great distress and turmoil, at times when it appeared as though God's faithful people would be destroyed, overwhelmed by the forces of evil and ungodliness. The book of Revelation was written during the brutal persecutions suffered by the early Christians, when the faithful were ushered into arenas to be torn apart by wild animals, or painted in pitch and set aflame to illuminate the Emperor Nero's garden parties.

These early Christians knew the power of evil in the world and in their lives, and they knew what it meant to take evil seriously. These vulnerable people, who were helpless to resist the onslaught of evil, knew they could not trust in their own power or resources to change

their situation. Their only hope was in God, and in God's direct and cataclysmic intervention in history: God would pick up the battle which they could not fight on their own behalf, and overthrow the evil which threatened to undo them.

This is just what we see in the apocalyptic text of our Second Reading. The writer attempts to express to a dispirited people how they are not alone nor forsaken, for the hosts of God are fighting on their behalf!

War broke out in heaven, Michael and his angels fought against the dragon. The dragon and his angels fought back, but were defeated, so that there was no longer a 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.

You see, in apocalyptic writings the author is not necessarily seeking to record specific events, but to depict in vivid and graphic images the ageless and cosmic battle between good and evil, between that which is of God and that which is against God. And in so doing, the writer takes the reality and power of evil very seriously.

We would be wise to do the same, for while evil seldom comes in the form of the demons and devils used to depict it in medieval woodcarvings, it is a powerful reality in our world. We have seen it in the massacres of Rwanda and Burundi, in the bombing of innocent civilians, in the despair of Palestinian and other refugee camps, in corporations which reap enormous profits and citizens who demand ever more tax cuts while the homeless fill our streets and children – far too many children – grow up in crushing poverty. And evil is real in our own lives as well, in the struggles which break apart friendships and marriages and families, in the greed and self-will which fail to see that we are all in need of forgiveness, in our constant chasing after pleasure and things rather than relationships and lives of service, in the anger and hatred which result in domestic violence and sexual abuse.

Oh, yes! Evil is very real! In fact, sometimes it appears as though it will win the day.

But not so! That is the point being made by the author of Revelation, and by other apocalyptic writers. God not only *will* enable good to win over evil; God has already done so! Through the death and resurrection of Christ God has already broken the power of

evil, and although evil continues to rage in the world, the war is already won, the outcome is already decided. Which is why Christ is depicted in Revelation, not as the suffering servant, but as the exalted and ruling Lord who is in control of history whether it appears that way or not.

And we who live in this time, between Christ's victory over death and the final victory which is yet to be, we are called to live as people of hope and faith, no matter what may befall. For we trust, not only that our lives but the final outcome of history itself, are in God's hands. We are also assured that, now, in the meantime, here and now, St. Michael and all the angels – the very hosts of God – fight on our behalf.

As Martin Luther wrote in the closing words of his evening prayer: "Let your holy angels have charge of us, that the wicked one may have no power over us."

Yes! May it be so. Amen.