

Revelation 12:7-12a.

One of the most impressive sights in the city of Hamburg in Germany is the “Michel,” the church of St Michaels. What makes this trip so remarkable is not only its construction, but especially the giant copper work of art outside above the entrance, a statue of a huge winged warrior wearing battle armour, with spread-out wings and a spear in his hand. With one leg he is standing on the neck of an abominable creature writhing below him – pointed ears, long fingernails, dragon wings, and an evil leer – obviously a representation of the devil. But though the devil fights, he loses, and with terrible intensity the mighty angel stands above him, about to stab his spear through the head of the evil one. An impressive image! This warrior angel is meant to be the Archangel Michael, from whom the impressive church has its name.

This angel figure, you must admit, is rather different to the angels usually presented to us in the unholy alliance of comics, movies, and literature! More on that later. For now, we take note where this strange picture comes from: No, not from the sick fantasy of a troubled mind or an over-active imagination, but rather from Scripture. We do well to let God’s holy Word inform our conception of the angels. Now we need to know that our reading is only the middle part of a story, a story that not even JRR Tolkien could have invented, an ancient story that we will try to recap today in order to get the picture so to speak. I asked you to bear with me as I do so.

A large image appears in the heavens, the image of a woman dressed with the glory of the sun. The moon is lying at her feet. She controls the moon. On the head: A crown with 12 stars. A glorious image! Besides our Lord Christ no human being is portrayed like this in the entire Bible. Another woman is very pregnant, her labor begins, she cries out, she is in great pain: She is giving birth. Beside her, a 2nd image appears in the heavens: A large red dragon with 7 heads, 10 horns, and on the heads 7 crowns. The dragon rises up, with his tail he sweeps a third of the stars of the heavens to the earth. But now – look! The dragon steps in front of the women. He looks at her greedily, as she is in the throes of labor, he lies in wait – waiting for the birth, for the child: He wants to seize it and devour it. Terrible! And? And she gives birth to a child. It is a boy, a prince predestined to rule the nations. One King to lead them all, one king to bind them, one king to bring them all and as a shepherd guide them, yes, the world’s one savior for eternity. He is born, the dragon pounces, but there is an

intervention; just in time, the baby is snatched away from the dragon claws, safe with God at his holy throne. But still she stands there – the woman, before her the rapacious dragon. Instantly, she turns and runs, fleeing into the desert, to find a hiding place that God prepared for her. She takes cover, and God cares for her.

And now we look back to the heavens, back to the dragon. He is held back from chasing her because he is engaged in battle. A cosmic battle ensues between the mighty angels of God, led by Michael, and the dragon and his powerful angel warriors. The battle rages – in the heavens! But Michael beats back the dragon, and now Michael and the angels of God cast out the dragon with his wicked angels, and now we find out who this is: The dragon is none other than the devil himself, cast down to earth with his angels, and now a great voice sounds from heaven, a proclamation of victory: [10-12]. The dragon is down, but not out. In his frustration and anger he twists and turns his wrath against the only target he can find. The child was snatched from his grasp, so now he sets his sights on the woman. He hunts her down, and again she flees, and now she is given eagles' wings, and they bear her away. The dragon rages! Serpentine he rises up, sending a flood of water after the woman to drown her, but the earth opens up, the water drains, the dragon cannot harm the woman. So he takes the only option he has: In his rage he goes after the woman's other children. He declares war on them. Here Rev. 12 stops. The language of Rev is the symbolism of Scripture. To decipher it, Scripture must provide the key. Here is what the dramatic story means: The woman in the heavens is the people of God. She stands before God's face with her feet on earth. God's people clothed with the splendor of Christ. The people of God has power, she exercises a commission here on earth in His name. Her crown shows that she is loved by God. She is His most precious treasure, His pride, His joy. But she has an enemy, an enemy who accuses her before God. And rightly so. For God's people is a people of sinners. And God is a God of justice. This gives Satan power to accuse God's people. She is guilty! She has sinned against you! Look at her, God! See her guilt! Be just, judge her, condemn her!

Ah, but God's people is pregnant. One is born from this people, a Son of man, destined by God to be the Shepherd of the world: the Messiah. Fiercely the dragon falls on him, kills all the babies in Bethlehem, but God himself snatches the baby from his claws and sends it under angel guard to Egypt into the desert. Rev just summarises the events of salvation. But

you know the story – the baby grows to manhood, the Messiah strives against the devil and – wins. And though the serpent sinks his jaws deep into his heel of the cross, in death the Messiah crushes the serpent's head and is raised to life in the resurrection. God's justice is satisfied. Jesus ascends to heaven in glory. And now God refuses to hear the accuser's voice any longer, for an advocate has come to plead for the baptized, Jesus himself. And there is war. The word of death warring with the word of life. And the word of life – wins.

This is God's last word, leaving the dragon with nothing to say. In his anger, he turns against the people on the earth, especially against the church. He roars, runs after her, does her harm. She cries out! And her God hears. Through baptism he saves her from the flood like Noah in the ark. Still the dragon rages, and war comes to earth. If the devil cannot destroy the church, he will go after its members. He fights with his evil angels against those who keep the commandments of God and their faith in Jesus. (Rev 14:12) Here the story ends – for now. Do you see? This is your story. You belong by baptism and faith to the people of God. But your life is contested. You live in battle, and you, your life, and your eternal existence is at stake. You live in the desert, so to speak – and God's enemy is looking for you, hunting you. He hurls his accusations at you with all his might: You sinner! You deserve death! And you know this. There is the battle. Between Law and Gospel, the word of death that cuts you to the quick and gets your conscience to condemn you, and the word of life, the word of the tested, tried, crucified, risen and glorified one, the word of the blood of the Lamb of God that covers you and roars back at the accuser: Who shall bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. (Rom 8:33) And so this fantastic word of Rev is ultimately about your life on earth, the struggle. You're tempted to despair by the apparent hopelessness of it all, of the desert and the danger, of the sword and persecution, the accusation and the hot breath of death. But by your baptism you are a partaker of the death and life of Christ. Clothed in the splendor of Jesus, the blood of the Lamb. The dragon can war against you, can strike you down, but he cannot conquer you as long as you should shelter in the wounds of Christ and conquer by the word of witness and do not love your life unto death. Hear the glorious word of St Michaels: You do not fight your battle alone. Do you hear it? The war has been decided. Stronger than he who wars against you is he who has won, the male child who is to rule all the nations with a rod of iron, with his powerful angel prince Michael and the angel host whom God keeps sending out to protect his saints.

One last thought. Is it not strange that almost every time a child of God meets an angel in the Scriptures, the angel says: Fear not! Why should that be? If the angels are little, fluttering, fat babies shooting arrows of love with naked bums, surely no one would be afraid of them? If the angels are slender, willowy women figures with folded hands and eyes closed in meditation, surely no one would be afraid of them? No! No, the Bible indicates here that God's good angels are powerful, mighty, fearsome warriors. That is why the Scripture says, God makes his angels winds, and his ministers a flame of fire (Heb 1:7), but at the same time: Are they not all ministering spirits sent out to serve for the sake of those who are to inherit salvation? (Heb 1:14) Take heart, dear saints, you are not to fear the mighty angels. But the dragon and his angels – they fear God's mighty angels all the more. And that is why our dear father Luther teaches us to pray: "Let your holy angel be with me, that the evil foe may have no power over me." And this prayer your Father loves to answer. Our church might not have the statue of St Michael conquering the dragon. But we do have the real thing in Christ. Thanks be to God. Amen.

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