

As I started to think about today’s message, it occurred to me how many of the stories that have captured our imagination have to do with big, epic battles. Whether it’s the fantasy of Tolkien’s *Lord of the Rings* or the ‘space opera’ of *Star Wars*, or the comic book universe of *The Avengers*, or one of countless based-on-a-true-story chronicles of soldiers in warfare, we can’t (and don’t seem to want to) get away from telling tales about the Big Battle; the knock-down, drag-out, bare-knuckled, no-holds-barred battle that finally settles the score. Good triumphs over evil. They all live happily after.

Why do we like these stories so much? Why do we seem to need them? They persist across time and across cultures, evil tries to destroy good; good rises up to defend itself. Now some of these stories obviously are simply based in fact; a movie might recount a pivotal battle in World War II, for example. But at a deeper level, why does this theme of good versus evil keep going and going?

This is a unique day in the church year; a special day on which we highlight the angel Michael, who made appearances in the readings from Daniel and Revelation you heard today. I don’t know how often you think about angels, or how much time you’ve spent studying them, but the fact is, they are major players in the reality the Bible describes, though their activities largely remain hidden to us. They were created by God to serve Him in a variety of roles. They are famous for being guardians and messengers, and as we will see today, they also function as warriors; soldiers under the command of the Almighty. And of course, if they are under the command of the Almighty they are good, and if they are warriors, well, they need someone to fight.

So in Revelation 12: 7 we see Michael, captain of the angel army, engaged in battle with the dragon and his hosts. The dragon at the center of this conflict is identified as “the ancient serpent, who is called the devil and Satan.” He is the enemy of humanity, our deceiver and accuser. We get a glimpse of an unimaginable clash, and in his commentary on Revelation, Dr. Louis Brighton tells us why this is happening. He writes: “As a result of Christ’s victory on the cross and his public vindication over the dragon at his ascension and exaltation, there was no longer any room in heaven for the accuser. The dragon had to be thrown out of heaven, for Christ’s [work] made Satan’s accusations false—and an offense against God’s gracious justice in Christ. Once Christ was elevated and enthroned, the slanderer was held in contempt of God’s court and thrown out, never again to appear before God’s heavenly presence.” What is truly fascinating is the realization that, for a time, Satan could take a place in the council of angels before God in heaven. We see him do this twice in the Old Testament—once to accuse Job and the other to accuse Joshua the high priest in the book of Zechariah. But when Jesus completed his saving work of dying and rising and ascending into heaven to begin ruling over all things, Satan was forever banished from God’s presence and the angel Michael was charged with giving the dragon the boot. This is so far beyond the scope of what we typically think about—but

maybe this ancient power struggle between a creator God and the servant who wants his throne is behind all of our stories of good versus evil, in one way or another.

In addition to it being a day for “St. Michael and all angels,” it is also the Sunday we have chosen to begin our annual stewardship emphasis, which may seem to some like the craziest crossover ever attempted. And maybe it is. But let me show you how I think these two things are connected, in two ways.

First: the whole concept of stewardship is very simple. It is a matter of managing what you’ve been given. A Bible-based understanding of stewardship always begins with the idea that everything you have has been given to you by God. And if you’re going really deep, you think about the gifts of God’s kingdom; a new status as a child of God; forgiveness and new life given to us by Jesus; not to mention faith itself; and how all those spiritual resources come to us as gifts of grace. But some of the time, our thoughts about stewardship have to do with more mundane stuff like money; employment; how I budget my time for God’s glory; things that are fairly easy to identify. It’s a simple matter to say, “hey, by any standards I live in a very nice house and my needs are essentially met, and thank you Lord for all that.” My point is this, and here’s where the angel Michael comes back in: God is always providing for you, and a lot of the things that He provides for you, you know about. But this reference to Michael and the dragon and a heavenly war reveals that God is always providing for you and there’s a lot of things that you will never know about. I mean, before you came to church this morning, were you reflecting on the fact that Jesus ascended and the angel Michael kicked Satan out of heaven for you? But Jesus did, and Michael did, and the result is Satan’s words accusing you can never reach the Father’s ears. God is always providing for you in ways you know about and in ways you don’t. What is an appropriate response to such providing love?

Second thing: stewardship is just a form of praise. It’s praise that is practical; praise that, in this case, issues not from an instrument or a singing mouth, but praise that flows from your wallet; praise that flows from the way you prioritize your schedule; praise that flows from making yourself available to God’s mission. The form of praise is different than singing a hymn, but the substance of praise is not. It has the same point. The point being, to make a big deal about the grace and greatness of God and all the things that Jesus has done to bring us safely home. That’s the substance of all praise. Here’s how that praise sounded in Revelation 12, after Michael throws the dragon down: “Now the salvation and the power and the kingdom of our God and the authority of his Christ have come, for the accuser of our brothers has been thrown down, who accuses them day and night before our God. And they have conquered him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony...” What practical praise do you have for the Lamb who shed His blood for you? What will your testimony be? What will you do to make a big deal about the grace and greatness of God?