

In our readings for this feast day, we hear about a war in heaven. Now, war is a very different thing if you're observing it from a great distance versus if you're caught up in the middle of it.

We're blessed in our country that, aside from those who have gone overseas in the armed forces, the vast majority of us have no experience of being in a war zone. We see bombed out buildings in Ukraine or the Gaza Strip, we read about villages in Nigeria being shot up and their women and children being kidnapped, or we hear of one of the several other violent conflicts taking place throughout the globe.

Perhaps we're outraged, or horrified, or saddened. Perhaps we say a prayer for those involved. But eventually, we change the channel or scroll further through our Facebook feed, and the war's gone, no longer a main concern. War is, for the vast majority of us, something that takes place far away, something that doesn't affect our day-to-day lives. And this is a blessing, to be sure.

However, this distant attitude toward war can be carried over into our understanding of spiritual warfare: it's far off, it doesn't affect my life, I can turn it off when I want. Yet the Bible makes very clear that this isn't an option, especially for us as Christians. We are in the midst of the greatest conflict ever waged, and we ignore it only at our own eternal peril.

The war we are in is a cosmic rebellion. On the one side you have the one God – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit – who always has been and always will be. The Lord God is perfect: perfect in power, perfect in righteousness, perfect in knowledge, perfect in wisdom, and perfect in love.

That love caused God to make mankind, creatures whom He could love and who could reflect His love both back to Him and to one another. The love of Adam and Eve for each other would lead other children, little boys and girls who would grow into men and women and, through love, continue the human race.

Further, so much did God love man that He placed these first parents not only into a world of perfection and peace, but the Lord even created a Garden where everything was ordered and beautiful, where all man's needs were met and much more. All we needed, all we could have rightly desired, was there, formed by God's wisdom, upheld by His power, given freely by His love.

Yet there was one who saw this perfection, this love, and resented it. One of the great angels, those mighty spirits whom God had created to serve Him and do His will, one of them chose to go against God's design. This angel, whom we now know of as the devil and Satan, rebelled against God.

Why? Perhaps he thought he should be the crown of creation, not man. Perhaps he thought that God's act of freely giving such gifts to man was undeserved and wrong. Perhaps he thought that, because he wasn't created in God's image, then no one should be. The Scriptures don't tell us the exact reason for Satan's fall, just that it happened and had horrible consequences.

The devil rose up against the Lord, seeking to rule the universe himself, and he convinced a sizable minority of the other angels to join him in rebellion. Yet as mighty as Satan imagined himself, his power was nothing compared to the Most High God. The devil and his followers, now demons,

were hurled from heaven by the power of God and the angelic armies of heaven. Jesus described that event to His disciples, telling how He saw Satan fall from heaven like lightning.

Yet having crashed to earth, the devil wasted no time in attacking that which is most precious to God: mankind. He disguised himself as a serpent and headed to Eden to start his attack. Now, Satan could not use force, because man was still in his innocence. Free from sin, man could not die, or be hurt, or even experience pain. Had Adam so chose, he could have simply grabbed the serpent, tied it in a knot, and carried it over to God for judgment.

No, there was only one way Satan could attack: with deception. He had to tempt, get man to join his rebellion of man's own free will. And so the serpent found Eve and fed her the lies he had concocted: God was being dishonest. God was keeping good from her and Adam. God was afraid of what man could become if he threw off God's limits. Satan fed the lie which he himself had pridefully embraced: "You will be like God."

Though it was in their power to resist, both Adam and Eve gave into the lie, and in so doing fell from perfection, as Satan had before them. The Lord had made a world full of peace and love and life, and Satan had brought in strife and hatred and death. The casualties of this war are without number, including every single person who has ever suffered, who has ever died, for as the Scriptures tell us, "The wages of sin is death."

Now we might all at first agree that the war between the Lord God and Satan is a truly monumental conflict, even the greatest one the world has ever seen. But we might also look at the first words from our reading from Revelation 12 and become dismissive. "Now war arose in heaven..."

We hear that and think, "Oh, okay, it's somewhere far off, not an immediate problem." It becomes like the conflicts in North Africa, or the civil war in Sudan. It might fascinate or horrify us for a little bit, but then we can move on, not worry about it, get on with our lives.

This idea is one that the devil strives hard to promote. If he can get us to think that his rebellion against God doesn't personally and immediately involve us, then he's already got a significant advantage.

Because we aren't living in an active war zone, we don't worry about things like knowing where the closest bomb shelter is, or having our pantries stocked in case supply lines get shut down by fighting, or teaching our children how to recognize a gun battle and where to go for safety. If we don't think we're in a spiritual war zone, then we won't worry about keeping the Scriptures fresh in our minds, or regularly attending the Divine Service to be forgiven and fed by the Lord, or prioritizing the instruction of our children in the Christian faith and then modeling it for them in our own lives. No sense spending more time and effort than necessary, especially when we could spend it on things we enjoy doing.

Such things are absolutely necessary, however, because that war in heaven is not far away. It's here and now. It rages all around us. St. Paul, writing in Ephesians 6, tells Christians, "For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers

over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.” Did you catch that? Our battle as the Church on earth is against evil in the heavenly places. We are fighting in that war in heaven, even right now.

Remember also Jesus’ several proclamations during His earthly ministry that the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand, as well as the conflicts of Jesus and His disciples casting our demons and driving back the kingdom of the devil.

In Revelation, St. John is shown that the devil has been thrown down to the earth and is full of wrath. This is why St. Peter warns the Church: “Be sober-minded; be watchful. Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour.” The devil isn’t far off; he roams this earth, seeking out people to devour their souls and bring them down to hell with him.

This war is not being fought in some far away, invisible place that we can ignore. Anywhere God’s truth is challenged, anywhere the question of “Did God really say” is raised, anywhere the deceiver would lead people to think that certain areas are off-limits to the Lord of Creation and His Word, there is the war. The war in heaven takes place in church buildings, in classrooms, in legislative assemblies, in board meetings, around dinner tables. It is ultimately fought in the hearts of all men.

Satan’s constant lies are put forward both to drive the Spirit of Truth from the hearts of believers as well as to solidify his hold over those in whose hearts his spirit dwells. Again, the devil does this because he desires to lead as many people as possible in rebellion against God, that they might have to endure the eternal torment that he knows is coming to him. Satan works tirelessly at destroying souls, for as we read, “he knows his time is short.”

Since we are in this conflict and cannot escape it or turn it off while we’re in this life, what then should we do? How do we fight in a heavenly war?

The first thing to know, something that gives us great comfort and confidence, is that the main battle has already been fought and won by God. When Jesus, God in human flesh, offered Himself upon the cross, Satan’s doom was sealed. The serpent had managed to bruise Christ’s heel, but in so doing his head was crushed. The nails may have gone into Jesus, but the blood that was shed was like a deadly poison to the prince of demons.

This was God’s divine plan from the beginning. During Jesus’ last week in Jerusalem, He spoke of His coming Passion and declared: “Now is the judgment of this world; now will the ruler of this world be cast out.” This event, the crucifixion, is where the devil is cast down, his power broken. He had fallen like lightning when he first rebelled, but at the cross he is crushed.

This is what we hear of in our reading from Revelation, where a loud voice from heaven proclaims, “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.” Not only was the devil crushed at the cross, but his greatest weapon – the accusations against the sins of God’s people – was taken from him. Every accusation has been answered by the righteousness of Christ. Satan has no legitimate weapon against God’s people.

Robbed of this weapon and mortally wounded, Satan now rages against the people of God. Again, he and his demons strive to bring as many of those made in God's image down to hell with them as they can.

But they do not do this unopposed. As we hear in our readings, our Lord sends forth His holy angels to defend His Church. These heavenly spirits serve God as His agents of protection for His people. Where God sends His angel armies, the forces of the evil one cannot stand, for the Lord's angels fight with the Lord's own strength. Thus today, we give thanks to God for sending His holy angels to be with us, that the evil foe may have no power over us.

We are not merely spectators in this war, either. Our Lord has equipped us His Church with the great weapons of spiritual warfare, weapons that the demons cannot stand against.

Speaking of the Church joined to her Lord's victory at the cross, the voice in Revelation declares: "And they have conquered him (the devil) by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony, for they loved not their lives even unto death." The Church conquers the devil by the blood of Christ and by the Word – Word and Sacrament!

Where the devil raises up lies, they are cut down by the Word of Truth. Where the accuser slings the filth of false accusations at the people of God, they are washed away by the blood given and shed for them. Where Satan would try to bring darkness so that people might stumble into his traps, these are revealed by the Word, which is the lamp to our feet and the light to our path. When the constant pressure of the world, led by its wicked prince, wears us down, God comes to us in His holy Supper, giving His body and blood to strengthen us on our way.

It is true that, as the hymn puts it, "the fight is fierce, the warfare long." Those spoken of by the heavenly voice did not love their lives even unto death. Many Christians were, and still are, martyred for the sake of Jesus' name. And many more endure suffering and persecution for proclaiming the truths of God's Word in the world, lifting up His banner in territory held by the devil.

It's a great temptation to try to tune out this war as we do other wars, thinking that we can live our lives without regard to its dangers or consequences. Yet if we do this, we play right into the devil's hand. Remember, he couldn't take Adam and Eve out of paradise by force; he had to get them to do it themselves by ignoring God's Word. Satan cannot pull you out of God's hand; you have to give into his temptations and push God's hand away yourself for Satan to claim you.

But keeping the Word in your heart, and with the legions of heaven protecting you, Satan cannot overcome you.

Therefore, live as soldiers of Christ in the heavenly war. Put on the armor of God. Take up the Sword of the Spirit, which is the Word of God, and practice with it. Call out to God with your prayers and know that, even when you can't find the words, God the Holy Spirit prays on your behalf. When you are intimidated by the world, remember who has already overcome the world.

Your Lord sends His holy angels to guard and keep you, even as He watches over you Himself. You are in a war, but take courage, for the victory is already yours in Christ.

To Him be glory now and forever. Amen.