

Malcolm Clemens Young  
Grace Cathedral, San Francisco, CA W36  
Michaelmas 11:00 a.m. Eucharist, 3 p.m. Evensong  
Sunday 25 September 2016

Gen. 28:10-17  
Ps. 103:19-22  
Rev. 12:7-12  
John 1:47-51

### **The Struggle Is Real**

*“War broke out in heaven; Michael and his angels fought against the dragon” (Rev. 12).*

How do you prepare to go into battle? How do you get ready to talk to a friend about his addiction, or steel yourself to face the bigot who hates you? I do not even know what your struggle is – but you do. Maybe it is a difficult conversation that could save a friendship. It might have to do with conflict at work. It could be your health or a family member. Perhaps it lies in the fear that you might lose your job, spouse, home – your nation or your soul.

Some of our most cherished traditions at this Cathedral happen backstage. People here probably think it is odd that I sometimes describe the vestry as “the locker room,” but that’s what it is. When I played football we would enter the locker room dressed in our street clothes thinking about our romances, jobs, homework and being cool. As we put those pads on, we also prepared for battle, for an activity that demands all of you, and is dangerous to yourself and others. We put on our game face. We thought about what we had to do.

This very same thing happens in the vestry each Sunday as we prepare for worship. Initially we are chatting with each other about our week as we get our microphones and robes on. Finally, we quiet down to hear our assignments from the precentor and then gather for prayer. We say together Psalm 43. The people who have done this for years know it by heart.

It starts with these words. “Give judgment for me, O God, and defend my cause against an ungodly people; / deliver me from the deceitful and the wicked. / For you are the God of my strength?” Then in silence we form our procession to enter this magnificent Cathedral.

Around here a question comes up surprisingly often. Why do we repeat such a glum psalm every week.<sup>1</sup> People especially ask me this, because I am fundamentally a joyful person. I absolutely love to worship here. It is one of my favorite things to do in the world. And the answer is this. Psalm 43 reminds us that there are forces in the world that work actively against the kingdom of God, that seek to enslave and degrade and destroy the children of God. We might like to forget it but this is the truth.

In his book *War Is a Force that Gives Us Meaning* Chris Hedges writes, “There are always people willing to commit unspeakable human atrocity in exchange for a little power and privilege.”<sup>2</sup> The struggle is not even just against individual adversaries but structures and institutions and culture, against greed, violence, ego, fear and injustice.

Since the very beginning Christians have wondered how, in the face of all this, we can be brought back home to God. We have debated various theories of the atonement. A thousand years ago St. Anselm of Canterbury (1033-1109) proposed that because God is

by definition just, God could not merely dispense with our sins but required Jesus to suffer instead of us. A different much more ancient theory of the atonement called Christus Victor holds instead that Christ's death set into motion the defeat of all evil and that we are still in the midst of struggle as this victory is worked out.

This second picture of atonement is the theology of Michaelmas, the Feast of Saint Michael and All Angels, which we celebrate this morning. Michaelmas falls at the Autumnal Equinox, this precarious time of temporary balance between light and darkness. It reminds us how close the battle between good and evil is.

Most times when an angel appears in the Bible, the first thing we hear, is "Do not be afraid." This is because the natural response to the power of God embodied in an angel is sheer terror. In the Book of Revelation Michael and the angels win a provisional victory casting out Satan into this world.

John records the conclusion of this battle in his dream saying, "Rejoice then, you heavens and those who dwell in them! But woe to the earth and the sea, for the devil has come down to you with great wrath, because he knows his time is short" (Rev. 12)!

Young people today have an expression I appreciate. When you suggest that they might be complaining too much, they say, "the struggle is real." I have no idea what effect it has on others but it leads me to reappraise my original judgment and to appreciate that another person's challenges are different than my own. So this morning I say, "Woe to the earth" "the struggle is real."

We are struggling these days in America. Two more African American men were killed by police this week. A terrorist set up bombs in New York and New Jersey. One hundred people were here for our Forum on homelessness this morning. Tuesday night we will be talking about the power of confining and destructive images regarding masculinity in our culture.

Perhaps the most obvious struggle that we share in common now has to do with our politics. Arlie Russell Hochschild points out that for the first time in history a significant number of Americans choose where they will live on the basis of the political views of their neighbors. She lives in Berkeley which she describes as one subnation but wanted to write about a radically different subnation. In the last election 39% of white people voted for Obama, 28% of the white people in the south voted for him and 11% of the white voters in Louisiana did.<sup>3</sup>

Hochschild ended up spending five years with them. They have become Donald Trump's biggest supporters. Louisiana is the third poorest state and ranks last in overall health. In 2013 twenty percent of 16-24 year olds there were neither in school nor work. Perhaps as a result of "Cancer Alley" pollution they have the second highest incidence of cancer for men.

Globalization has fundamentally changed what workers can expect in America today. The plentiful manufacturing jobs that used to exist are gone. Many find their prospects and standard of living are worse than that of their parents. Among the poor the institution of marriage has collapsed. Poor people have significantly lower levels of

participation in churches and a high percentage of children growing up in households with only one adult. They are far less likely to say that they trust their neighbors or that they are happy. Rates of suicide and drug addiction in this demographic are appalling.

There is a fundamental crisis now in our society about the meaning of work.<sup>4</sup> One of the women interviewed said, "You've done everything right and you are slipping back." From her perspective President Obama's federal government merely pulls down the hard-working rich and struggling middle class in order to lift up the idle poor.

Hochschild writes that one can dismiss these voters with statistics like the one that says 66% of Trump supporters think that Obama is a Muslim. But this doesn't get to the deep story. She says that the deep story is about shame, need, unfairness, anxiety and downward mobility. She writes that it "feels" true to nearly white every person she met in Louisiana.

Hochschild proposes a picture to help us understand this deep story. Imagine standing in the middle of a long line stretching beyond the horizon to where the American dream waits. People keep cutting ahead of you and it is President Barak Hussein Obama with your tax money who is helping them. They say, "it's not our government anymore it's his." This may not at all be your vision of reality. But whoever gets elected, this is the world our neighbors live in. The struggle is real.

At Michaelmas, the feast of the struggle between good and all that threatens it, I want to propose two images for this Cathedral as our home. The first comes from story of Michael and the Angels. This home is the fortress where we prepare for the battle which is our life.

Another image comes from the book of Genesis. As Jacob travels he stops to sleep. "Taking one of the stones of the place, he put it under his head... And he dreamed that there was a ladder set up on the earth, the top reaching toward heaven; and the angels of God ascending and descending on it" (Gen. 28). Bishop Marc Andrus asks, "Where does this ladder lead but to your heart?" This Cathedral home is also a refuge where we draw inward and experience the connection between heaven and earth.

Today is the beginning of our stewardship season when we make financial pledges to support our Cathedral. Our theme is "Home Is Where the Heart Is." A pledge differs from every other way that we use money and corresponds to the two images of our Cathedral as home. First, we give to support the needs of this church, so that society will always have a place for exploring the full depths of our humanity, where our lives can be made whole through a connection to Christ.

But we also give for ourselves, for our spiritual wellbeing, as part of our own inward journey in faith. This happens for the simple reason that making a gift changes the relation we have with money. Giving alters the control that money has over us. In this way giving makes us more free. Giving helps us to move beyond having money as our god toward the freedom of experiencing the real God as our god. I know that this is not easy. It's harder for some than for others. The struggle is real.

I began by asking how you prepare to go into battle. In these days when it is hard even to remain a hopeful person we all have our different ways of putting on our game face. But my desire is that you find strength in prayer. Allow yourself to rely on the one who has loved you even from before you were born, the one who has walked with you to this day, the one who will hold you up to the end.

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<sup>1</sup> One of the lines is, "why are you so full of heaviness, O my soul? and why are you so disquieted within me?"

<sup>2</sup> Chris Hedges, *War Is a Force that Gives Us Meaning* (NY: Anchor Books, 2002) 88.

<sup>3</sup> Arlie Hochschild, "I Spent Five Years with Some of Trump's Biggest Fans, Here's What They Won't Tell You," *Mother Jones*, September / October 2016.

<sup>4</sup> A large portion of the population in Louisiana depends on federal disability payments just to survive. Many of these people are open with their other neighbors about how they lie to cheat the system.