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September 29th: Revelation 12:7-12 & James 3

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War in heaven. The untamable tongue.

Reflections upon the readings from the ACNA Book of Common Prayer (<http://bcp2019.anglicanchurch.net/>).

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Transcript

Revelation 12, verses 7-12 and saying, Now the salvation, and the power, and the kingdom of our God, and the authority of his Christ have come. For the accuser of the 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.

For they love not their lives even unto death. Therefore rejoice, O heavens, and you who dwell in them. But woe to you, O earth and sea! For the devil has come down to you in great wrath, because he knows that his time is short.

Revelation chapter 12 describes a heavenly war. It occurs after the male child who was born of the heavenly woman is caught up to God and to his throne. This describes events that are similar to those that are spoken of by Christ in John chapter 12, verses 31-32.

Now is the judgment of this world. Now will the ruler of this world be cast out. And I,

when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.

It's easy to forget the cosmic and heavenly dimensions of the gospel. And in this passage we see something behind the scenes of what takes place in heaven. The identity of Michael is a key part of interpreting this passage.

The meaning of the name Michael is who is like God, or he who is like God perhaps. The first reference that we find to Michael is in the book of Daniel chapter 10, in verses 4-14. And I, Daniel, alone saw the vision, for the men who were with me did not see the vision.

But a great trembling fell upon them, and they fled to hide themselves. So I was left alone and saw this great vision, and no strength was left in me. My radiant appearance was fearfully changed, and I retained no strength.

Then I heard the sound of his words, and as I heard the sound of his words, I fell on my face in deep sleep with my face to the ground. And behold, a hand touched me and set me trembling on my hands and knees. And he said to me, O Daniel, man greatly loved, understand the words that I speak to you and stand upright, for now I have been sent to you.

And when he had spoken this word to me, I stood up trembling. Then he said to me, Fear not, Daniel, for from the first day that you set your heart to understand and humbled yourself before your God, your words have been heard, and I have come because of your words. The prince of the kingdom of Persia withstood me twenty-one days, but Michael, one of the chief princes, came to help me, for I was left there with the kings of Persia and came to make you understand what is to happen to your people in the latter days, for the vision is for days yet to come.

Michael is mentioned again at the end of that passage in Daniel chapter 10 verse 21, but I will tell you what is inscribed in the book of truth. There is none who contends by my side against these except Michael, your prince. And then in Daniel chapter 12 verse 1, at that time shall arise Michael, the great prince who has charge of your people, and there shall be a time of trouble such as never has been since there was a nation till that time, but at that time your people shall be delivered, everyone whose name shall be found written in the book.

Michael as he appears then in the book of Daniel seems to be a sort of angelic guardian of Israel, a figure who will play a critical role in the latter days. A further reference to Michael, this time in the New Testament, is found in Jude verse 9, but when the archangel Michael, contending with the devil, was disputing about the body of Moses, he did not presume to pronounce a blasphemous judgment, but said, the Lord rebuke you. This passage seems to recall Zechariah chapter 3, where it is the angel of the Lord rebuking Satan.

Consequently, and I think with good reason, many have identified Michael with the angel of the Lord, and with Christ himself. Others have regarded Michael merely as a great archangel, or perhaps as a powerful angel who is personally associated with the Son, a personal assistant to the Son, perhaps in much the same way as Joshua is to Moses. We might interpret the man of Beryl in Daniel chapter 10 verses 5-6 as a description of Michael.

I lifted up my eyes and looked, and behold, a man clothed in linen, with a belt of fine gold from Euphaz around his waist. His body was like Beryl, his face like the appearance of lightning, his eyes like flaming torches, his arms and legs like the gleam of burnished bronze, and the sound of his words like the sound of a multitude. Reading Daniel 10 in light of this, the vision would be of Michael, and the one who touches Daniel is not the man of Beryl, but the one who is called Michael, who is the man of Beryl, to his aid.

In Revelation chapter 1 verses 12-15, we have a description of Christ that should remind us of the man of Beryl, and, if I'm correct in my identification, with the figure of Michael. Then I turned to see the voice that was speaking to me, and on turning I saw seven golden lampstands, and in the midst of the lampstands one like a son of man, clothed with a long robe and with a golden sash around his chest, the hairs of his head were white, like white wool, like snow, his eyes were like a flame of fire, his feet were like burnished bronze, refined in a furnace, and his voice was like the roar of many waters. Making a sense of identification of Michael with Christ still leaves us with some questions.

There is the problem, for instance, of the shift from the child, who is born of the woman, to Michael. There is a shift of perspective here, but shifts of perspective and imagery are not uncommon within the book of Revelation. For instance, we have a shift from the child to the lamb.

The kingdom of the male child is contested, and Michael and the angels have to fight against the dragon to secure it. The dragon is situated in heaven. As a dragon he is a particularly powerful form of serpent.

He has power over the nations. This is suggested by his offering of the nations to Christ in his temptation of Christ in the wilderness. The nations are under his dominion and sway.

His power over the nations has a number of different forms. He is the destroyer. He is the one who ruins God's creation and brings death upon it.

He is the one who is the deceiver. He misleads and outwits and holds people in darkness. He is the accuser.

His power comes from the law and the condemnation that he can bring. He is the

adversary, who opposes people as the great enemy. And as this figure he has been active from the beginning.

He holds people under his sway through temptation, through fear of death, through deception, and through his power of accusation. The victory over him is won by the blood of the lamb, and it is won as the sacrifice of Christ overcomes his work. The sacrifice of Christ opens up a living way to God, an eternal life in fellowship with God, which defeats the power of death and the fear of death that Satan wields.

It is won also as the truth of Christ is spread abroad by the illumination of his spirit and the witness of his servants. This overcomes the deception and the darkness formed by the serpent. It is also won as Christ's intercession as our eternal high priest overcomes the accuser's condemnation.

This justifies God's people and provides them good standing before God. It is also won as one stronger than the adversary arises and binds his power and his tyranny. The victory in heaven is also attributed to the martyrs, who defeated the dragon with the blood of the lamb and their faithful testimony until death.

The victory in heaven has to be played out on earth too. The devil is cast down to earth with a limited period of time. He has lost the definitive battle, but he can still inflict considerable damage, both personally and through the forces of his minions.

The time will come when he is sealed in the bottomless pit, but for now, while not in heaven, he has great power that he can still wield upon earth. A question to consider. How does the heavenly vantage point offered by Revelation chapter 12 change the way that we consider the work of Christ? James chapter 3. Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness.

For we all stumble in many ways, and if anyone does not stumble in what he says, he is a perfect man, able also to bridle his whole body. If we put bits into the mouths of horses so that they obey us, we guide their whole bodies as well. Look at ships also.

Though they are so large and are driven by strong winds, they are guided by a very small rudder wherever the will of the pilot directs. So also the tongue is a small member, yet it boasts of great things. How great a forest is set ablaze by such a small fire! And the tongue is a fire, a world of unrighteousness.

The tongue is set among our members, staining the whole body, setting on fire the entire course of life, and set on fire by hell. For every kind of beast and bird, of reptile and sea creature, can be tamed, and has been tamed by mankind. But no human being can tame the tongue.

It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison. With it we bless our Lord and Father, and with it

we curse people who are made in the likeness of God. From the same mouth come blessing and cursing.

My brothers, these things ought not to be so. Does a spring pour forth from the same opening both fresh and salt water? Can a fig tree, my brothers, bear olives? Or a grapevine produce figs? Neither can a salt pond yield fresh water. Who is wise and understanding among you? By his good conduct let him show his works in the meekness of wisdom.

But if you have bitter jealousy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast and be false to the truth. This is not the wisdom that comes down from above, but is earthly, unspiritual, demonic. For where jealousy and selfish ambition exist, there will be disorder and every vile practice.

But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, impartial and sincere. And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace. Concern for speech and the tongue is pervasive in the wisdom material in scripture, and unsurprisingly for a book that works so much within that tradition it is discussed by James at length in chapter 3. This concern for the tongue is already present in James 1 verses 19-20.

Know this, my beloved brothers, let every person be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger. For the anger of man does not produce the righteousness of God. And again in verse 26 of that chapter.

If anyone thinks he is religious and does not bridle his tongue, but deceives his heart, this person's religion is worthless. He begins the chapter with a warning against desiring to become a teacher. The teacher is charged with a task of judgment, that means that they must open themselves up to a greater judgment.

As Jesus teaches in Matthew chapter 7 verse 2 in the Sermon on the Mount, for with the judgment you pronounce you will be judged, and with the measure you use it will be measured to you. The person who is the teacher is charged to engage in acts of judgment, and so they must assume this greater responsibility to be judged themselves. Beyond this, they also have a responsibility for the spiritual well-being of those committed to their charge.

The teaching that they give will have an influence upon people's lives. We might here consider the way that Jesus particularly focuses upon the religious teachers of his time. He challenges them for their unfaithfulness, and the way that they lead others astray, the way that they bind heavy burdens upon people, the way that their pride, love of money and love of the praise of men, leads them to adulterate the word of God, to substitute their traditions for the word of God, and the way that their hypocrisy means that the judgment they mete out to others is not something that they apply to

themselves.

James is very much thinking along the same lines. The teacher works with his tongue, but the tongue is a treacherous tool. The person who has mastered their tongue is a perfect and mature person.

If you can master your tongue, you can master every single part of your life. We might consider here the importance that the tongue has for the prophet. When prophets are called in scripture, often what is particularly focused upon is the preparation of their mouth for speech, the way in which halting mouths are equipped to speak, the way in which unclean lips are purified, the way in which tongues are made glad and kindled with a spiritual fire.

The bit in the mouth of the horse and the rudder on the ship both illustrate the power of a little thing to control bodies much greater than themselves. The images here are ones of control. The person who controls their tongue can control their entire life, or an entire body of people.

Tongues can be controlled, of course, for good and for evil. Carefully chosen words can be things that move great nations and their outcomes. We might think about the serpent's temptation of Eve, the way in which he cunningly insinuates that God is one who is withholding.

We might also think of Hushai the Archite's counsel, his brilliant and shrewd use of words to get Absalom to reject the council of Ahithophel and to buy David a window of time to regroup. The person who masters their words can work wonders. They can persuade people, they can emotionally move people, they can instruct people in the truth.

The tongue can legitimately boast of great things then. It is a most powerful instrument indeed. However, the tongue is a cause of destruction.

Now we turn from images of control to an image of a destructive power that is completely out of control, the small spark that starts a forest fire. Such an image of the tongue as a flame is also found in places such as Proverbs chapter 16 verse 27. A worthless man plots evil and his speech is like a scorching fire.

The tongue is a world of unrighteousness. This is maybe similar to what Jesus teaches in Matthew chapter 15 verses 10 to 11 and 16 to 19. And he called the people to him and said to them, hear and understand, it is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person but what comes out of the mouth.

This defiles a person. And he said, are you also still without understanding? Do you not see that whatever goes into the mouth passes into the stomach and is expelled? But what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart and this defiles a person. For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false

witness, slander.

The tongue is a small piece of flesh and yet it stains the whole body. It inflames all of our existence. In Ephesians chapter 4 verse 29 Paul speaks of corrupting speech.

The tongue is something that can spread a sort of rottenness within us and within our communities. A connection between the tongue and fire is not restricted to the negative imagery of the tongue that brings destruction and death in the service of Satan. The tongue might also be set on fire from heaven.

The word of the Lord is spoken of as akin to fire in Jeremiah chapter 23 verse 29. In 2 Samuel chapter 22 verse 9 devouring fire is said to come forth from the Lord's mouth. In Isaiah chapter 30 verse 27 the Lord's tongue is compared to a consuming fire.

And the incendiary character of the words of the prophet is a recurring theme in scripture. The word of the Lord is as fire and fire proceeds from the Lord's mouth when he speaks. As organs of the Lord's speech the prophets also have their mouths empowered and purified by divine fire.

The Lord tells the prophet Jeremiah that he has made his words on Jeremiah's mouth fire. In Jeremiah chapter 5 verse 14 in Revelation chapter 11 verse 5 fire proceeds from the mouths of the prophetic witnesses. The employment of the image of fire in order to describe the relationship between the prophet and the word and the spirit of God is quite appropriate.

The prophet is animated by a power that originates outside of himself, exceeds his own strength as we see in Jeremiah chapter 20 verse 9 and is driven by a will to which his own will must be conformed. The prophet must also faithfully fulfill his duty lest his spirit given power be extinguished. Recognizing this we might see the tongue as something that will either bear the flames of hell, bring destruction and death or it will be kindled with the fire of heaven.

In Isaiah chapter 6 verses 6 to 7 one of the seraphim touches the lips of the prophet Isaiah with a live coal purifying his lips for future witness. We see a similar thing in Acts chapter 2 on the day of Pentecost as tongues of flame come upon the heads of each of the disciples. These tongues are connected with the tongues with which they speak.

Their tongues are kindled so that they can bear the divine word. However in James the tongues are not set on fire from heaven but set on fire from hell. Whether cursing, the spreading of rumors, angry outbursts, lies or other falsehoods and deceptions, flattery, boasting, coarse speech, blasphemy or any number of other things, the tongue spreads corruption and destruction.

Men are unable to tame the tongue. The tongue is something that has a sort of a will of its own. The fool is defined by his tongue in the book of Proverbs.

His tongue and his mouth operate as if by their own accord. He breathes out lies. He speaks lies not because he has planned or deliberated about them but just because he is ruled by lies.

Lies just come forth naturally from him. His tongue is a rod for his own back. He says things not knowing what he's saying and ends up suffering the consequences.

His tongue brings death. His tongue is a fire that gives off sparks that ignite great conflagrations of conflict within communities and which burn up his own life. James challenges inconsistency and doubleness throughout his epistle and the tongue is characterized by just this.

The same tongues that bear God's name in worship can also bear foul language and hateful speech. The tongue is found at the opening of the mouth and it is at the mouth that that which is within proceeds forth. It's at the mouth, the spring of the person, that the true character of what lies within is portrayed.

Jesus teaches much the same. By their fruit you will know them. Our mouths display the fruit of our hearts.

One of the best ways to understand a person's character is to pay close attention to the way that they speak over a long period of time. In verse 13 James asks, Who is wise and understanding among you? It may seem as if he's turning to a very different subject here but he's continuing many of the same themes and I think the underlying theme is the same. It relates to the question of discerning and displaying the presence of true wisdom.

How can we discern and display this? James began the chapter by warning people against the desire to become teachers and I think this is what marks people out as fitting teachers. Wisdom is manifested, James argues, in good works done in meekness. What is this meekness? It's a lack of pride.

It's placing others ahead of ourselves. It produces good works that are characteristic of also. That's how you know what true wisdom is.

James might be speaking to people aspiring to the office of teachers here. Jealousy and selfish ambition can so often drive such a quest. People want a platform.

They want the eyes of the masses to be upon them. They behave with the opposite of the meekness that is characteristic of true wisdom. Some people like to boast about their wisdom in a that is false to the truth.

True wisdom, however, wisdom that comes from God, comes with humility. The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. Humility is integral to such fear.

By contrast, earthly and demonic wisdom is distinctively marked by jealousy and pride and these things produce social conflict and disorder and all sorts of sin. This is precisely not the sort of person that you want to become a teacher and a leader. However, true wisdom is utterly different.

It is characterized by purity, which is a key term for James's understanding and characterization of true religion. It is morally unstained. It will not produce evil.

This is its primary trait. It is a fresh water spring, as it were, that will not give forth brackish water. James describes such wisdom in a manner that is reminiscent of Paul's list of the fruit of the spirit in Galatians 5, 22-23.

A question to consider. What are some of the different forms of wisdom that we can use to