

“Go, and the Lord Be With You”

A Sermon by the Rt. Rev. Peter Buss Jr.

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“...Your servant will go and fight with this Philistine.” (1 Samuel 17:33)

“And war broke out in heaven: Michael and his angels fought with the dragon...” (Revelation 12:7)

In the spirit of New Church Day, when we celebrate the launching of the New Church faith, we take up two related stories about courage—courage specifically to step forward and take on a spiritual challenge that needs our very best. This is the story of Michael fighting against a seven-headed dragon, and this is David stepping forward against all odds to take on the giant, Goliath. Within the stories is inspiration, hope for victory together with the Lord, and the promise of everything good that we long for in life. It all can come to us when we courageously live our faith, trusting always in the Lord.

I love the way this against-the-odds courage is brought to life in the twelfth chapter of the book of Revelation. Characteristic of that book, we’re introduced to a world of mythical figures—a woman clothed with the sun, who has the moon under her feet and a garland of twelve stars on her head, who is later given wings of an eagle to flee from her persecutor. That persecutor, as already mentioned, is “a great, fiery-red dragon having seven heads and ten horns and seven diadems on his heads” (vs. 3). To underscore the massive proportions of this battle, that dragon’s tail drew a third of the stars of heaven and threw them to the ground. It stood, with all that fury and power, ready to devour the child that the woman was about to deliver. But along comes a troop of angels led by Michael, who vanquish that dragon, causing the whole of heaven to rejoice, saying “Now salvation, and strength, and the kingdom of our God, and the power of His Christ have come, for the accuser of our brethren, who accused them before our God day and night, has been cast down” (vs. 10).

There is much to capture the imagination, too, in the parallel story of David fighting against Goliath—a story that has become synonymous with most of our “against all odds” challenges—a David vs. Goliath moment. I bring forward this story because of two pivotal sayings in it that are central to our focus for today. The first comes out of the mouth of David himself, as he comes to the battle field, hears Goliath’s challenge, and raises his hand and says to Saul, who is king at the time, “Let no man’s heart fail because of him; your servant will go and fight with this Philistine” (1 Samuel 17:32).

Before getting to the second saying, we remind ourselves that Saul initially dissuaded David, saying “you are but a youth and he is a man of war from his youth.” But David offers that profound trust in the Lord who had been with him before and would be with him in this instance. So we hear the pivotal phrase, which is chosen as the title for this talk—words from an unlikely messenger but beautiful in their message—“Go, and the Lord be with you” (vs. 37).

In what ways can we be one who says, “Your servant will go”? And how could we hear and absorb the encouragement, “Go, and the Lord be with you”?

Going to battle. It is useful to note that both of these stories happened in wartime. We read in Revelation: “And war broke out in heaven: Michael and his angels fought with the dragon; and the dragon and his angels fought” (Revelation 12:7). We read concerning these words, “This means combat between those who are for the life of love and charity and for the Divine of the Lord in His Human, against those who are for faith alone and faith separate and are against the Divine of the Lord in His Human” (*Apocalypse Explained* 735). Also: “The only way to heaven is for people, from the Word, to abstain from evils because they are sins, (*Apocalypse Explained* 798:7; cf. *Apocalypse Revealed* 531:6).

The truth is, there are things in our lives that are worth fighting for, and worth digging deep, to do what we know to be right. In our lives that could look like any number of things. It could be an evil that we discover in our lives that needs to be vanquished, through self-examination and repentance. It could be a relationship that is worth fighting for, calling for us to go the extra mile, to creatively and courageously approach that person with forgiveness and reconciliation at heart. It may be a pivotal change in focus—to the next chapter of spiritual life, with a firm commitment to live intentionally and actively with the Lord’s principles in mind. Another way this battle could show up is in a concerted effort to reprioritize the things and people that matter most in our lives. We no longer wish to give ourselves permission to coast, or to take loved ones for granted, or to procrastinate on the things we know we should get after. And of course, it could be a use that has our name on it: our profession, or a sizable project, or a leadership position that has calls for us to say to the Lord, “Your servant will go”—I’ll do that; I see that has my name on it, that’s central to my core values and worth spiritual battle.

A key enemy—faith alone. It helps, in all these pivotal life situations, to know what we are fighting against, or who our enemy is. In a very general way, it is hell and those who from there plague us or tempt the worst reflexes within us. In the two stories we are focusing on, the hells are pictured by the dragon, and by Goliath. Not surprisingly, they both have the same symbolism, namely that of “faith alone.” It’s stated this way in the story of the war between Michael and the dragon:

This means dissent and battling by those who are in faith separated from charity [or faith alone] against those who are in the doctrine of the church respecting the Lord and the life of charity. (*Doctrine of Faith* 59)

Then there’s this regarding the Philistines:

[They represent] those who champion separated faith are represented, that is, people for whom the knowledge of...faith is all-important but not a life led in accordance with that knowledge, consequently people who teach and believe that a person is saved by faith alone. (*Arcana Caelestia* 8093; cf. n. 3024)

Note further that the dragon represents “reasonings that spring from self-love and love of the world, thus from desires for what is evil” (*Arcana Caelestia* 7293:5). I picture those seven heads, weaving around a person such as us with constant whispers into our ears: “It doesn’t matter.” “The situation calls for you to knowingly bend this rule this time.” “It feels good, doesn’t it? There’s nothing more important than you indulging and really, you can’t do otherwise.” “You’re not strong enough or good enough.” Besides, “You deserve better.” Even, “You believe in a God

of love, right? He'll forgive you no matter what, so again, what's the harm?" And on and on those false reasonings go.

In this regard, we can bring forward a few of the taunts of Goliath, to remind ourselves that he too, as the champion of the Philistines, represents this kind of reasoning:

'Am I a dog, that you come to me with sticks?' And the Philistine cursed David by his gods. And the Philistine said to David, 'Come to me, and I will give your flesh to the birds of the air and the beasts of the field!' (1 Samuel 17:43-44)

The messages of faith alone, or the hells by means of that construct, are multitudinous. They combine together into the form of one giant foe, pictured today by that dragon and by Goliath. They seduce us into thinking it is okay to be weak on our spiritual follow-through, to do what we know to be wrong, or to justify what comes naturally.

A core aim—living our faith. So how do we go to battle with this powerful spiritual enemy? We do so armed with the even-more powerful truths from the Lord, key among them that *we must live our faith*. We already heard that this means striving to “be for the life of love and charity and for the Divine of the Lord in His Human” (*Apocalypse Explained* 735). It is also explained succinctly and powerfully in two other teachings we read earlier in the service:

- Charity, moreover, is the affection for *doing those things* that pertain to faith. (*Apocalypse Explained* 789:7)
- In faith alone there is no action or work. And yet *religion consists in doing*. (*True Christian Religion* 389:3)

What does that look like? It means being useful when the opportunity is there, paying attention to and emulating examples of faithful spiritual living, showing up for those you love, repenting, repairing relationships that are broken or making amends, investing in spiritual practices, volunteering, embracing a heavenly quality, talking about meaningful truths that have had impact in your life, and engaging further within the church.

Beautiful in this story from Revelation are the “helps” that the Lord provides. There is the woman clothed with the sun, her Child, and those wings of an eagle representing the New Church (*Apocalypse Revealed* 533), its principles and doctrines (*Apocalypse Revealed* 543), and the spiritual perspective that can help us rise up to behold things as the Lord would have us see them (*Apocalypse Revealed* 561). Then there is Michael, together with all his angels—the host of heavenly guardians whom the Lord sends to surround us, two in particular watching over and protecting us at all times (see *Arcana Caelestia* 5470). These angels are said to fight for us, against the influences and false ideas streaming into us (see *Arcana Caelestia* 5036:2). We experience that, as one passage states, in the form of “perception, dictate, and conscience” (*Arcana Caelestia* 227). Another passage says that our angels “breathe into [us] every kind of good and truth, as well as a horror and dread of evils and falsities” (*Arcana Caelestia* 50:3). This, together with the direct promptings from the Lord, give us the tools to resist and to conquer. The right truth, the holy fear lest we harm someone we love, the power from above to do the right thing—these are evidence of this internal conflict, where we use our God-given energies to put our faith into practice when it matters most.

Courage. Often, most often in fact, that takes courage. We've been focusing on Michael and his angels, and David fighting against Goliath. We remind ourselves of David's stated courage, even as a young man, raising his hand and saying, "Your servant will go and fight with this Philistine" (1 Samuel 17:32). It's powerful to remember David's words when challenged by Saul, that there was no way he was up to the challenge. He spoke about the Lord: "The Lord, who delivered me from the paw of the lion and from the paw of the bear, He will deliver me from the hand of this Philistine" (1 Samuel 17:37). It is reminiscent of the passage we heard earlier about "charity in the common soldier."

Before the battle he raises his mind to the Lord, and commits his life into His hand; and after he has done this, he lets his mind down from its elevation into the body and becomes brave; the thought of the Lord, which he is then unconscious of remaining still in his mind, above his bravery. And then if he dies, he dies in the Lord; if he lives, he lives in the Lord. (*Doctrine of Charity* 166)

How can we capture that spirit of bravery, that conscious turning to the Lord, that deep trust? We are wise to pray, and to be vigilant, and to do the spiritual practice of turning to the Lord, believing that He is the one who fights and conquers—He is the one who overcomes the dragon and Goliath, helping us not to fall into the dangerous traps of faith alone, but instead leading us to be ever more like one of His angels. Can we, like soldiers, like Michael and David, develop a habit of "raising our mind to the Lord and committing our lives into His hands"?

The two battles are really the same, as is the enemy. Both get to the faith of the New Church itself at its core—that we have to step forward and live our faith; we have to trust in the Lord who calls us to put our beliefs into practice, courageously and consistently. This is the way to heaven. This is the path of obedience. This is the battle of our lives to determine if we are people who can be created into angels by the Lord who can be blessed by Him forever.

Let's remind ourselves of five truths we've focused on today, like the five smooth stones David used to fight against Goliath, which can serve as encouragement and commitment:

- "Let no man's heart fail because of him; your servant will go and fight with this Philistine." (1 Samuel 17:32)
- "If I die, I die in the Lord; if I live, I live in the Lord." (*Charity* 166)
- "In faith alone there is no action or work. And yet religion consists in doing." (*True Christian Religion* 389:3)
- "The Lord, who delivered me from the paw of the lion and from the paw of the bear, He will deliver me from the hand of this Philistine." (1 Samuel 17:37)
- "Go and the Lord be with you." (*Ibid.*) **Amen.**

Readings from the Lord's Word: 1 Samuel 17 31-37; *Charity* 166; Revelation 12:7-10, 13-14; *Apocalypse Explained* 735:1, 789:7; *True Christian Religion* 389:3.

1 Samuel 17

³¹ Now when the words which David spoke were heard, they reported them to Saul; and he sent for him. ³² Then David said to Saul, "Let no man's heart fail because of him; your servant will go and fight with this Philistine."

³³ And Saul said to David, "You are not able to go against this Philistine to fight with him; for you are a youth, and he a man of war from his youth."

³⁴ But David said to Saul, "Your servant used to keep his father's sheep, and when a lion or a bear came and took a lamb out of the flock, ³⁵ I went out after it and struck it, and delivered the lamb from its mouth; and when it arose against me, I caught it by its beard, and struck and killed it. ³⁶ Your servant has killed both lion and bear; and this uncircumcised Philistine will be like one of them, seeing he has defied the armies of the living God." ³⁷ Moreover David said, "The Lord, who delivered me from the paw of the lion and from the paw of the bear, He will deliver me from the hand of this Philistine."

And Saul said to David, "Go, and the Lord be with you!"

Doctrine of Charity 166

Charity in the Common Soldier. If he looks to the Lord and shuns evils as sins, and sincerely, justly, and faithfully does his duty, he also becomes charity [in form]...a Before the battle he raises his mind to the Lord, and commits his life into His hand; and after he has done this, he lets his mind down from its elevation into the body and becomes brave; the thought of the Lord, which he is then unconscious of remaining still in his mind, above his bravery. And then if he dies, he dies in the Lord; if he lives, he lives in the Lord.

Revelation 12

⁷ And war broke out in heaven: Michael and his angels fought with the dragon; and the dragon and his angels fought, ⁸ but they did not prevail, nor was a place found for them in heaven any longer. ⁹ So the great dragon was cast out, that serpent of old, called the Devil and Satan, who deceives the whole world; he was cast to the earth, and his angels were cast out with him.

¹⁰ Then I heard a loud voice saying in heaven, "Now salvation, and strength, and the kingdom of our God, and the power of His Christ have come, for the accuser of our brethren, who accused them before our God day and night, has been cast down...."

¹³ Now when she saw that he had been cast to the earth, he persecuted the woman who gave birth to the male Child. ¹⁴ But the woman was given two wings of a great eagle, that she might fly into the wilderness to her place, where she is nourished for a time and times and half a time, from the presence of the serpent.

Apocalypse Explained 735, 789:7

Michael and his angels fought with the dragon, and the dragon fought and his angels, means the combat between those who are for the life of love and charity and for the Divine of the Lord in His Human, against those who are for faith alone and faith separate and are against the Divine of the Lord in His Human.

Charity, moreover, is the affection for doing those things that pertain to faith.

True Christian Religion 389:3

In faith alone there is no action or work. And yet religion consists in doing.