

33rd Sunday of Ordinary Time (with Baptisms), 2018
St. Mary Church, Richmond VA
Fr. Michael Renninger

It's how we begin every celebration of the Sacrament of Baptism.

I turn to the parents of the infants and I ask: "What name have you given to your child?"

Names are important. Our parents give us our names, and everyone – including God - will call you by the name that your mom and dad gave you.

Names are important. And *they mean something!* There was my best friend in 4th grade, *Christopher*. That name means "Christ-bearer." I had a neighbor named *Peter*, which of course means "rock." I had a neighbor named *John*, which means "God is gracious."

Eventually, I did some research on my own name, "Michael."

I found out that the last part of my name, "-el", means "God." It is found in lots of Hebrew names: like *Raphael* & *Gabriel*.

You can imagine my delight when I discovered that my name, "Micha-El," is a Hebrew word meaning, "One who is like God!"

In today's first reading, we hear about a biblical figure named "Michael." The context of this reading is crucial.

In the Book of Daniel, we hear a prophecy concerning a terrible time in the life of the Jewish people.

Violence was everywhere. Foreign enemies were attacking from every side... and the enemies were winning. Every day there seemed to be new reports of disasters. It was a time of terror, and loss and sadness.

People wondered where God had gone.

Hmmm. A time of disasters, violence, fear, sadness. Sound familiar? Sound like now?

In the midst of this chaos, Daniel the prophet has a vision.

And through the prophet God says:

“At that time (*that is, at the time when you feel hopeless!*), I will send someone to lead you, and to help you, and to teach you what is just.”

And who is this ‘someone’ that God is going to send? God says, “I will send you... *Michael*...”

Many scholars say that the “Michael” referred to here is the figure we Christians would eventually call “St. Michael the Archangel.”

But remember, names *mean* something. God is speaking to his suffering, frightened people, and God says to them, “help is on the way. Hope is possible. Because I am sending someone named Michael.”

But “Micha-El” means “who is like God.” And if you read the full history of the Nation of Israel, what you discover is this – every time disaster hit; every time violence reigned; every time people were convinced that the end of their civilization was near... God changed things, by sending a person or persons to Israel.

And what did all of those people have in common? They were “like God.” That is, they *thought* like God, *responded* like God, *cared* like God. They were human beings, but they were so focused on loving and serving God that they were becoming more and more *like* God.

And these people were the ones who brought light to darkness, brought hope to the hopeless, brought healing to the brokenhearted.

They were all “Micha-el.” That is, they were all “like God.” That is what the name means – that is how these people tried to live, each day. And because of that, God worked through them, and saved his people. Every time.

So – the Michael mentioned in the Book of Daniel may not simply be one person – the Michael mentioned here may be EVERY person who tries to respond to the world and its events in precisely the way that God calls us to respond.

And in every age, the world needs “Micha-els,” that is, the world needs people who are passionately committed to living as God calls us to live, and loving as God calls us to love, and speaking the truth which only God can provide.

And that is how, in every age, God’s people overcome the darkness.

In today's Gospel, Jesus speaks about the times of tribulation, and darkness, and the end of the world as we know it.

And he promises that God will not abandon us - ever.

But here's the challenge with a Gospel passage such as this: in every century, people have read this Gospel and said, "It's happening *now!* The end is *here!* The world as we know it is *over!*"

People read a Gospel passage about the end of the world, and then they look at today's headlines. Wildfires killing people in California. A strange polio-like disease afflicting children. Gun violence on city streets. Domestic violence. Clergy scandals. Political turmoil. Angry people watching angry TV personalities who make us more angry.

And on a personal level, it may feel as though *your world* has somehow ended, or *is ending*, or *might end*. You may have come here today with a burden, a fear, a struggle, a weight on your shoulders that seems to consume your attention and energy.

You may be living, right now, with understandable fear.

But Jesus Christ told us that "fear is useless, what is needed is trust."

How do we find the ability to trust when there is so much to be afraid of? Well, in my personal experience, ***I trust, if I remember...***

I need to remember – there have been other times in my life when I thought that there was no way out, or now way through, or no way forward. And every time, Christ has shown me the way. Often he shows me the way by sending someone into my life who is, very much, like God.

Israel learned to *trust* because Israel tried to *remember*. There were many times when the people of Israel thought that the future was hopeless. Then they remembered how God had sent "Michaels" into their midst, to show them the way forward. And they found hope.

Over 2000 years of Christian history, over hundreds of years of American history, over the years of your history, there have been times of darkness and fear. How did God uphold you? Whom did God send to help you?

Jesus said, "fear is useless." Trust is born when we recall that our ancestors have faced great challenges. They faced darkness and fears.

In every age, some people are tempted to conclude that there is no hope.

Then God works through “Micha-els,” that is, God works through people who are willing to live like God, and love like God, and serve like God. And through them, light shines in the darkness, and truth is known, and hope is restored.

In that sense, the greatest “Micha-el” is Jesus! He changed the world, because he is not only “*like* God...” he *IS* God. And he showed us how to live like God.

So it will be our privilege, in the years ahead, to teach these children who God is, and how they can see God in the person of Jesus.

And it will be our privilege to teach these children that they, too, can change the world if they become a “Micha-el,” a person who strives, each day, to be like God.

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