

Sermon Reading: Revelation 12:1-6

A great sign appeared in heaven: a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet and a crown of twelve stars on her head. ² She was pregnant and cried out in pain as she was about to give birth. ³ Then another sign appeared in heaven: an enormous red dragon with seven heads and ten horns and seven crowns on its heads. ⁴ Its tail swept a third of the stars out of the sky and flung them to the earth. The dragon stood in front of the woman who was about to give birth, so that it might devour her child the moment he was born. ⁵ She gave birth to a son, a male child, who “will rule all the nations with an iron scepter.” And her child was snatched up to God and to his throne. ⁶ The woman fled into the wilderness to a place prepared for her by God, where she might be taken care of for 1,260 days.

Sermon Theme: A Sign of Real Love

When we picture the scene of Jesus’ birth, it’s often peaceful. There’s Joseph standing, watching over Mary while she holds the infant baby Jesus peacefully asleep in her arms. You might see a few cows, some sheep, a camel and the donkey all standing near-by maybe even looking in on the whole scene. You look out at the sky, it’s a clear night—or maybe you prefer it with a few snowflakes in the air—with stars shining bright and shepherds watching their flocks at night. It’s all so picture-perfect. But the reality was quite different. The situation was ugly. A birth in a manger, unsanitary and risky (especially compared to our modern conveniences and advancements). But it’s more than just that it was dirty and dingy. Today we see Christmas Eve as God the Father sees it. It’s a story about a pregnant woman about to give birth, and yet it is the stuff out of nightmares. Look again at Revelation 12:1-6.

The book of Revelation is known as apocalyptic literature. In this type of literature it’s not meant to show how things actually or literally are. For example, this reading isn’t teaching us about a literal/actual dragon. Instead, apocalyptic literature uses vivid images and numbers symbolically. It works to impress on us the emotional reality behind an actual event. Here, we look behind the actual event of Christ’s birth and what we see is a terrifying reality.

But in order for us to understand what God is teaching us, we need to work through the various images and symbols. So we do with the book of Revelation as we do with the rest of God’s Word: we let God’s Word interpret God’s Word. (For more in-depth proof passages, please speak to me and I will be more than happy to share).

The first is in verse 1, who is this woman? Because the child being born is Jesus, one might conclude the pregnant woman is Mary. But nowhere else does the Bible describe Mary like this. In Revelation we see a woman wearing “a crown of twelve stars on her head.” We see she has some authority over everything else in Creation with her using

the moon as her footstool. She also is clothed with the Sun. Thus, the woman cannot be just Mary but it is the Church, all believers. As a pregnant woman eagerly waits for her child to be born, so here we see all believers who eagerly wait for the special, promised Child.

The second sign appears in verse 3. This time we see a fiery red dragon. Later in this chapter we learn this enormous dragon is Satan, the devil himself. And from the picture with the seven heads and the ten diadems it wears—a type of crown—we see Satan’s desire to take God’s place.

We continue into verse 4 where the dragon swipes a third of the stars out of the sky. This seems to represent the other evil angels who join in Satan’s rebellion. In Revelation 9, Satan himself is pictured as a star falling from heaven. Again, with apocalyptic literature, this doesn’t mean that exactly one third of the angels fell. But, we get the impression. A third is not the majority, but it’s still a large number! Satan, the great dragon, is an extremely powerful creature who wants to rule over us.

Not only is the dragon powerful, it’s smart. Satan knows Jesus’ coming into this world would stand in the way of his desire to rule over mankind. And so the dragon, wanting to strike as soon as possible, stands in front of the woman to eat the child “the moment it was born.” We see an example of this in Jesus’ life. When the Magi do not tell him where exactly to find Jesus, Herod orders the slaughter of all the male children under two years old in and around Bethlehem to try and kill the newborn King Jesus. With something so horrible and dark we can see the devil’s fingerprints all over it.

But the child is born, verse 5. She gives birth to a son, a male child “who will rule the nations with an iron scepter.” Psalm 2 speaks of the coming Savior King who: “**Will break the nations with a rod of iron.**” This is speaking about Jesus. There isn’t any more explanation giving us the impression that this ruling is inevitable. The dragon wants to take authority over the creation. But even when it stands right there to devour the child, he will not have it. As quickly as Jesus is born, as quickly in John’s vision Jesus ascends into heaven to God and his throne. The devil never had a chance. There Jesus reassumes the full use of his divine power, he is given a name above every name, and Christ shall reign forever and ever.

But the dragon is not done. It decides to turn his attention back to the woman that is the Church, all believers. And so, to escape the dragon, the woman flees to the wilderness for 1260 days (v.6). Revelation chapter 11 helps us understand that those days represent the time period of the New Testament church. This is the time from Jesus’ ascension until he returns again on the Last Day. In this era, believers are not home. Believers wander in the wilderness of this world eager to go home to heaven. But it’s not all doom and gloom while we are here. This place is “prepared for her by God.” In other words,

God has us right where he wants us to be. He continues to take care of all our needs, including keeping us safe from the dragon.

Okay, so what? Here God gives another sign of his love for us. He shows what he did and what he continues to do. And still, we question his love. Instead of trusting we treat God's love as something that God gives to us because we do something for him. We point to the kind things we've done recently, how we went out of our way for this person, how I didn't complain too much when someone asked for help, how I finish most of my work, or whatever it is, as if that's why God gives his love. Do we see how this cheapens God's love if you think that you can purchase it with something you do or give?

One might question how good of a gift God's love is. How is God giving me Jesus going to pay my bills? How is that going to heal the cancer? How does that get the kids to listen? How is that going to help mom and dad understand my life? I mean, it sounds nice. But what can it do for me today?

Or, maybe, you still don't feel like God has given a good enough sign of his love. Instead, we are waiting to see something that fits what we want or expect. Sinfully one might give God an ultimatum: "If you really love me, God, then you would fix my relationship, give me the answers I'm looking for, let me have this experience in life, etc." As if God needs to prove his love in another way.

Why do we do this? Because that's how we love in our relationships. Very rarely do we really love without any strings attached. We love when it is convenient for us. We love when we know that we aren't going to be hurt or be taken advantage of. We love after someone fulfills our personal standards that we set after they have done something wrong. You love your spouse because they support you. You love your children because they listen to you. You love your friends because they are there for you. But that is all transactional love—you do this and I will do that or I loved you, now you should do that. It's hard to love your spouse when they are not around physically or emotionally. It's hard to love your children when they are driving you nuts. It's hard for us to love someone who doesn't love us back. And so, we doubt God's love for us.

And still God sends his Son. The Father puts his Son directly into harm's way. He knows the dragon is there ready and waiting to make the most of the opportunity. And still the Father does it. If you are a parent, you know how you react if someone or something threatens the safety of your child. And, yet, here is the Father who willingly sends his one, true, perfect child to face unspeakable horrors. Why? It wasn't because of anything we would be able to do. It wouldn't be because it was some personal benefit to him. No, it's because God loves you. We do not deserve it. We cannot earn it. But God freely loves you who do what is wrong and against his will. He loves you despite your

failing to do what is good. That's grace. And because he wants you to be his child, because he wants to save you and your loved ones, God sends his Son.

But Jesus comes to face much worse than a powerful dragon. When Jesus walks up Calvary, he goes where no one wants to find themselves: in the hands of the angry God who hates sin (Hebrews 10:31). The Son tells the Father to dump all the sins of the world onto him. He tells the Father, "I am guilty for not trusting your love. I'm guilty of not loving you perfectly. I am guilty of it all." So on that cross Jesus hangs between heaven and earth, between God and man, between God's wrath and you. It's on that cross where our just God dumps out and pours on his wrath and anger for sin. He does not spare a single ounce of sympathy for his own Son. No, the Son is not devoured by the dragon. The Father devours him with his wrath. He forsakes his Son. He turns his back on him to suffer in loneliness the pain of hell itself.

But with his punishment, Jesus brings peace to you on earth. The Father's favor rests on you because Jesus pays the debt of sin in full. By those wounds that shed his blood, Jesus heals you and washes you of every sin and its stain. With his death Jesus crushes the dragon's head. In place of his wrath, God wraps you in his love in the waters of Baptism. There Jesus connects you to his death and his rising from the dead so that you are made a new creation. He brings you into God's family and makes you God's child set free from sin and protected against that fiery dragon the devil. And it's all because of God's gift of love.

This gift of love doesn't stop at Calvary. It didn't end at Jesus' rising from the dead. He pours it out on you each and every morning. We are part of that Church that roams the wilderness of this earth looking ahead to our home with Jesus. Yes, this world is like a desert and wilderness where it isn't always comfortable but can be quite frustrating. You know how it's not always easy and it most certainly doesn't seem fair. But through it all, God still gives you his love so that you have the certain hope that Jesus has another place prepared for you with him where he will take you to be. He continues to nourish you with his love when you hear God's voice speaking to you through his Word. You taste and feel that love when he feeds your starving soul with the Lord's Supper. Yes, while on this earth, we continue to roam, but this "a place prepared for you by God." It's a place where you serve him in your daily life. It's a place where God works in you and through you to share this love in how you live and act with others.

As we look ahead to the candle lights of Christmas Eve, the calm Nativity, the peaceful singing of Silent Night, keep this reading in the back of your mind. Remember how dangerous it was the second Jesus enters into this world. Remember what Jesus comes to this earth to do for you. Then we will begin to better understand how real God's love is for us. Amen.