

Apocalyptic Advent: The Woman and the Dragon

LaGrave Avenue Christian Reformed Church

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Revelation 12

We come to the last of our Apocalyptic Advent sermons, and appropriately enough, we are in the Apocalypse itself – the book of Revelation.

In Greek, the title of this book is the *Apokalypsis*. You can hear how the English word apocalypse comes from that Greek title. Which tells you that apocalypse means revelation. An apocalyptic book is a book that pulls back the curtain and *reveals* the deeper meaning of events. That's Revelation. Revelation is a book that reveals the workings of God in the events of history. In this passage you will hear the Holy Spirit pull back the curtain to reveal the cosmic drama right behind the Christmas story. Luke tells the story of Jesus' birth one way – a small intimate way. His camera lens zooms in on the stable where Mary swaddles her baby. John, following his vision, tells the story from a cosmic point of view – he doesn't just show us the stable; he shows us what's happening in the heavenly realms. **Read Revelation 12**

There's a little piece of paper that I have pinned to the bulletin board above my desk. It has a saying on it that I turn to sometimes to help ground me. I'm not sure who said it. I looked it up on the internet and I found it attributed to multiple people. In the end it doesn't matter so much who wrote it, because the words have their own power. Here's what it says: "Be kind, because everyone you meet is fighting a great battle." The older I get, the more I like that quote. Because in my pastoral work, it's so absolutely true.

It never ceases to amaze me how much is going on just underneath the surface of people. I meet a person in the congregation and on the outside they seem professional, successful, and carefree. Then one day they plunk themselves down in my office, they close the door, and out comes all the stuff. And you realize that, under the surface, they are fighting a great battle. You find out that just under the cheerful, functioning surface there is a war going on. Sometimes it's a family struggle. Sometimes it's an old trauma, a hurt that someone gave them that fills them with shame. Sometimes it's a temptation that they can't resist, or an addiction that they can't shake. When you start out in life you see this, and you say "Wow! some people really have a lot of stuff!" But then you live a little longer you say, "No, EVERYONE has a lot of stuff." All of us spend our days struggling with fears and worries, and insecurities, and temptations, and discouragement. Every day there's a battle in our hearts and minds. "*Lord, how long must I wrestle with my thoughts!*" cries the Psalmist. And when he says it, he wasn't just speaking for himself. All of us feel that prayer.

Revelation 12 is a good passage for all of us who know what it is to wrestle with our thoughts, to have this great battle in our minds day after day. In Revelation 12, John tells the

story of another great battle, a cosmic battle. The main combatants in this battle are a pregnant woman, her baby, and a great dragon. Who are these combatants? Remember, Revelation is presented to us in a kind of symbolic, mythical language, so in order to understand what the Spirit is saying to us, we have to understand which historical figures these characters are supposed to make us think about.

Let's start with the child. Who is the child in this passage? That's a pretty easy one.

The child is Jesus. Just like the child in this vision, right from the day of his birth, Jesus was pursued by evil forces. So the most obvious association here is Jesus, born in Bethlehem and pursued by King Herod. But while Jesus birth is the most obvious event referenced in this vision, it's not the only event. Read carefully and you see that the whole of Jesus' life is included here. Verse 5 for example says that Jesus was born of a woman and then he was snatched up to God and his throne. What event does that reference? Jesus snatched up to heaven? That's a reference to the ascension. Jesus is taken up to heaven after his resurrection to sit at the right hand of God the Father. There, our passage tells us, "he will rule the nations with an iron scepter." That's a quote from Psalm 2, a Psalm that Christians regularly applied to Jesus and his ascension (Acts 4:25). So the child is first of all Jesus during the struggle of his birth, but then that struggle is extended to remind us of Jesus' struggle throughout his life.

What about the woman. Who is the woman? If the child is Jesus, the woman must be Mary, right? Well yes...and no. Here's where interpreting Revelation gets hard. Symbols refer to more than one thing, more than one event, more than one person. Certainly the first and most obvious reading is to see the woman as Mary when she gave birth to Jesus. But the woman is more than just Mary here. She is crowned with 12 stars. What are those stars? They are the 12 tribes of Israel. Remember Joseph's dream in Genesis? Joseph sees his brothers bow down to him, but he doesn't see them as people in his dream, he sees he and his brothers as stars. Because of that dream, rabbis would sometimes refer to the twelve tribes as stars. So the woman doesn't just stand for Mary; she stands for the people of God in the Old and New Testaments. She stands for the Old Testament people of God and the church. That part of the woman's identity is also clear in verse 6 where, after the child has been snatched up to heaven, after Jesus is ascended, she is taken into the wilderness where God protects her. That's a pretty clear reference to God's protection of the early church during their persecutions. It's the church that the dragon tries to destroy after the ascension, not just Mary. So the woman in this story is Mary and the struggle she faced at Jesus' birth, but her struggle reminds us of the struggle of God's people throughout history.

Finally, the dragon. Who is the dragon? Again this is more complicated than you think. When you know the Christmas story, the first candidate for the dragon is Herod. After all, he's the one who tries to kill Jesus - tries to devour him - right after he's born. And that's right. The dragon is Herod, but just like the other characters in this vision, it's more than just Herod.

When you look at dragon imagery and serpent imagery in the Old Testament, the dragon and the serpent is an image used for a whole host of enemies of God and his people. In Jeremiah 51:34, the dragon is Pharaoh and the power of Egypt in the time of Moses. In Amos 9:3, the dragon is the power of Babylon when they came to destroy Jerusalem. The image of dragons and serpents are used repeatedly for Israel's enemies throughout the Old Testament. When you put all these together you see that the dragon is not only Herod; the dragon is the ancient serpent the devil who leads the whole world astray.

Through history this dragon, this ancient serpent has shown himself again and again. He's appeared in a thousand places and in a thousand different ways he's tried to destroy the woman. This dragon is Herod killing the babies of Bethlehem. But this dragon is also Pharaoh sentencing the Hebrew babies to death. The dragon is Nebuchadnezzar throwing Daniel's friends into the furnace. This dragon is Hitler ordering the slaughter of Jews. Sometimes this dragon works through the pious church elder who also happens to be an abusive spouse. Sometimes this dragon is a voice of temptation or accusation in your own head. "You deserve this, it's no big deal, and besides, nobody will know." So the dragon is Herod trying to devour Jesus at his birth, but the dragon is also the great serpent the devil who has menaced God's people throughout history.

So what is the Holy Spirit trying to communicate to us by telling the Christmas story this way? Well, let's think: Who was Revelation written down for? Who was the first audience for

these visions of John? It was the struggling churches of Asia Minor. These churches were small, they were struggling, and they were under enormous pressure. They had enemies who wanted to devour them. As they did their Jesus things from day to day, these churches would not have felt like they were a success. They would not have felt like they were riding the crest of a great wave of church growth and revival. They would have felt like they were hanging on for dear life.

By telling the Christmas story this way, the Holy Spirit is saying to the churches, "*Hey everyone, calm down. This is how it has always been for God's people. Remember how it was for Mary and Jesus right after Jesus was born and they were pursued by the dragon of Herod? It was hard, right? But how did that turn out? Who won in the end? And remember how it was for the Israelites as they left Egypt and were pursued by the Egyptian dragon? It was terrifying. But how did that story turn out? Who won in the end? And remember how it was for God's people in Babylon when the Babylonian serpent was trying to devour them and so many people were leaving the faith? It was awful. But how did that story turn out? Who won in the end. From your perspective things look miserable, maybe hopeless, but let me pull back the curtain! Let me do a little apocalypse here, let me show you Michael and the angel armies fighting for you, let me show you the devil's mortal wound, let me show you him cast down, let me show you that small child whom Herod chased and Pilate crucified, now raised in glory with all things under his feet!!*" **How do you think your story is going to turn out? Do you feel the power of this revelation, this apocalypse?**

It reminds me of the end of the Harry Potter series. In the movies, right before the battle with the evil Lord Voldemort, Harry has a kind of vision in which Dumbledore shows him the deeper meaning of his struggle. It's almost like an apocalyptic vision for Harry and as part of that vision he sees Voldemort. In real life Voldemort is a terror to Harry and his friends. He seems to be hugely powerful. He's about to descend on Harry's friends and destroy them. But in the vision, Harry sees Voldemort as he really is: small, shriveled and defeated - even scared. What JK Rowling does in a work of fiction by way of imitation, The Holy Spirit does in truth and by way of proclamation. The evil one can't devour you. He is a dying animal. He is mortally wounded and he has been hurled down. You belong to Jesus the Lord of Heaven and he has triumphed through his blood and he shall reign for ever and ever.

Which brings us back to that saying I mentioned at the beginning of this sermon: *"Be kind, for everyone you meet is fighting a great battle."* May I gently suggest that the battle that the great battle that all of us are fighting just under the surface of our lives is part of the great battle of Revelation 12? The great battle between the woman and the child on one side, and the dragon on the other? I don't mean to alarm you when I say that, but I think it's true. Everywhere we look in the world we see struggles and conflicts. Conflicts out there in the world between peoples and nations, and conflicts inside our self between thought and feelings and emotions. Those struggles aren't just about economics and politics and psychology – they are about the battle between good and evil, the battle between the child and the dragon. I don't mean to say that you are on the side of the angels and your political opponents are agents of the Dragon. If only it were that simple. The battle line goes right through every human heart including yours. So as you fight your great interior battle, give yourself a break. You may feel like your struggle to hold yourself together is embarrassing and weak. It's not. Because you are fighting an old foe, the ancient serpent. And He's tough. And even though your conflict might seem small, remember: if you were in the stable watching Mary wrap her newborn son and lay him in a manger, that too would have seemed like a small weak thing. Just a poor teenager just trying to hold her life together. But the Holy Spirit uses John to pull back the curtain and you see that all of heaven and earth is holding its breath. You see that History is perched at a tipping point.

This is God's D-day. This is a Holy Invasion. While Mary lays her baby in the manger the hosts of heaven are advancing on the enemy, and the ancient powers of evil are in confusion and retreat. We like to think that the great victories of the kingdom must be large and impressive things, but sometimes they look like a teenage girl saying *"I am the Lord's servant; may it be to me as you have said."* And sometimes the great victory of the kingdom looks like a caregiver staying positive as she helps her loved one use the bathroom because he can't do it himself. Sometimes it looks like a young Mom holding her screaming toddler as he kicks through another tantrum while she sings "Jesus Loves Me" to him. Sometimes it looks like a young adult who wakes up every morning with a weight of anxiety on his chest, but offers it up in prayer and then

tries to go out and live in love and hope even though the weight is still there. Sometimes it looks like a 70-year-old recovering alcoholic saying no to alcohol for one more day, when all around him the holiday season inundates him with images of drinking.

The Lord knows your great battle. More than that, the Lord is engaged with you in your great battle. And so is Michael. And so are the angel hosts, and so is Jesus because he knows exactly how this feels. He fought the same great battle when he walked this earth, so he knows your battle. And even though it doesn't feel like it sometimes, I promise you this: He will win.

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