

A Sermon
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Grace Baptist Church
Bryans Road, Maryland
December 4, 2016

Endurance, Not Escape

Revelation 12:1-17

As our church's children are preparing for their upcoming Christmas program, I sometimes ask them which part they're playing. Their answers include both human and nonhuman characters. The prized roles of Mary and Joseph are usually in the conversation, along with the shepherds and the wise men. Or something less earthly, like an angel. Or perhaps an astronomical role, the star of Bethlehem. And we certainly don't want to leave out our furry, four-legged friends. After all, what nativity production would be complete without a sheep, a cow, a donkey, a camel, or an ox?

Or maybe a dragon? If so, it would have to be the cute, benign, friendly type of dragon that often shows up in films and television shows. Not the bizarre creature we meet in this morning's Scripture passage from Revelation. Red, with seven heads and ten horns, and a crown on each head. A tail that can sweep the stars from the sky. Can you imagine the stagecraft involved in building such a creature, especially if you want it to breathe real fire? I suppose that's one way to light the Advent candles, though it might also accidentally torch the Christmas tree!

What's a dragon doing here in our discussion of Christmas plans anyway? Don't we usually rely on Matthew and Luke to give us information or clues about who, or what, was there at the birth of Jesus? As we prepare for the celebration of the Messiah's first coming, how did we end up in the last book of the New Testament instead of the first?

Today's text offers us a different angle on the arrival of the Messiah. Instead of giving us a simple, down-to-earth story about Jesus' birth into the humble circumstances of a first-century Palestinian town, John gives us an IMAX experience: "A great and wondrous 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. She was pregnant and cried out in pain as she was about to give birth" (vv. 1-2). In this panoramic scene, spread across the sky, the woman represents the people of God, and she labors to bring forth the Messiah, God's agent of salvation, the one who will rule the nations with absolute authority.

And yet, this all-powerful Savior arrives in such fragile, vulnerable form. What chance does a newborn have against a vicious, hungry, multi-headed beast? The only challenge for the dragon will be deciding which of his seven mouths to use to devour the child. Before he can even draw his first breath, the Messiah will be history. Death will have swallowed up life. Chaos will have conquered order. Darkness will have extinguished light. Evil will have defeated good. End of story.

Not so fast, says John. There's more to this heavenly cinema. The woman "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" (v. 5). Just when it looks like God's anointed is a goner, he escapes unscathed and makes it into the safety of the presence of God.

I use the word “escape” cautiously, because we ourselves know the larger story of Jesus’ journey. We know that the trajectory of Jesus’ saving work wasn’t a swift entry into this world and a quick, painless exit from it. When John speaks about the child being born and then taken up to God, there’s a fuller story packed in there about Jesus’ birth, death, and resurrection. Jesus didn’t accomplish God’s purpose by escaping tribulation and suffering but by enduring them and persevering in the grueling work of the cross. In other words, our Lord’s way into the presence of God wasn’t be escaping death but precisely by dying. His death for us and with us was how he defeated the dragon and was exalted to God’s right hand. That was the path of Christ’s victory.

It’s also the path for we who confess him as Lord. Remember that God doesn’t accomplish his saving will in our lives by plucking us out of this world at the first sign of trouble or threat. He usually doesn’t take us out of our trials and tribulations, but comforts us in the midst of them and works to display his saving power in the context of our helplessness. Our weakness becomes the place where he manifests his strength.

Recall that the story in today’s text doesn’t end with the child being taken up to God. John goes on to say that the baby’s mother flees into the wilderness. War breaks out in heaven and the dragon, who represents Satan, is eventually cast out and hurled to the earth. The devil and his angels have been defeated in the realm of heaven, the world that is most real. But here in the reality of this present world that is passing away, an angry Satan and his frustrated forces are determined to do as much damage as they can with the time they have left.

Writer Carolyn Arends tells about a visit some missionaries made to her church when she was a child. They were a married couple who were stationed in what appeared to be a particularly steamy jungle. During their report, they spoke about churches planted, commitments made, and other signs of how God was at work. But what Arends remembers most is a story they told about a snake:

One day, they told us, an enormous snake—much longer than a man—slithered its way right through their front door and into the kitchen of their simple home. Terrified, they ran outside and searched frantically for a local who might know what to do. A machete-wielding neighbor came to the rescue, calmly marching into their house and decapitating the snake with one clean chop.

The neighbor reemerged triumphant and assured the missionaries that the reptile had been defeated. But there was a catch, he warned: It was going to take a while for the snake to realize it was dead.

A snake's neurology and blood flow are such that it can take considerable time for it to stop moving even after decapitation. For the next several hours, the missionaries were forced to wait outside while the snake thrashed about, smashing furniture and flailing against walls and windows, wreaking havoc until its body finally understood that it no longer had a head.

Sweating in the heat, they had felt frustrated and a little sickened but also grateful that the snake's rampage wouldn't last forever. And at some point in their waiting, they told us, they had a mutual epiphany.

I leaned in with the rest of the congregation, queasy and fascinated. “Do you see it?” asked the husband. “Satan is a lot like that big old snake. He's already been defeated. He just doesn't know it yet. In the meantime, he's going to do some damage. But never forget that he's a goner.”

Arends goes on to say: "The story haunts me because I have come to believe it is an accurate picture of the universe. We are in the thrashing time, a season characterized by our pervasive capacity to do violence to each other and ourselves. The temptation is to despair. We have to remember, though, that it won't last forever. Jesus has already crushed the serpent's head."¹

John says, "The great dragon was hurled down—that ancient serpent called the devil, or Satan, who leads the whole world astray" (v. 9). Don't let Satan lead you astray. Don't be led astray into thinking that evil is basically about the total of individual sins, when in fact it's much greater and more powerful than just that. Don't be led astray into thinking that sin is just a personal thing, when in fact it can shape and control systems, organizations, and institutions as well. And don't be led astray into thinking that when it comes to your own individual sins, the devil made you do it, when in fact you're still responsible and accountable before God. And yet at the same time, don't be led astray into thinking that the power of evil is something you can overcome on your own, when in fact only God can ultimately deliver you.

And most of all, don't be led astray into thinking that the primary purpose of the Christian life is escape from the trials and troubles of the world. Remember that for we who confess Jesus Christ incarnate, crucified, and risen, our primary aim isn't escape, but endurance. We're called, not to comfort, convenience, and carefree living, but to cross-shaped lives in which we abandon worldly notions of power and success, and stay the course of dying with Jesus, so that God's resurrection power can work in us, bringing us at last into the fullness of his presence. But that doesn't happen without faithful perseverance through sorrows and suffering.

Maurice Sendak wrote a classic children's book called *Where the Wild Things Are*. I remember having a copy of it when I was growing up. In the 2009 screen adaption of the book, we follow the adventures of Max, an imaginative child who feels neglected by his mother and older sister. So he escapes into a fantastical world of hairy, monstrous creatures. When these "wild things" threaten to devour him, Max pretends that he possesses magical powers and convinces the monsters to make him their king. Because the creatures believe that Max has been sent to abolish suffering in their world and to establish permanent peace and happiness, they ask him, "Will you keep out all the sadness?" And Max, still playacting his role as king and miracle worker, declares, "I have a sadness shield that keeps out all the sadness, and it's big enough for all of us."²

Wouldn't it have been good if the Messiah, King Jesus, would have shown up here in the world carrying a sadness shield that would keep out all the evil, pain, and suffering, and protect us from it? But that's not how it happened. Instead, as today's text describes it, salvation from God arrives in the form of a vulnerable, unshielded infant who is immediately exposed to the risks, the evil, the sinfulness, and the threats of life in a world that's not yet fully redeemed, including the deadly appetite of a seven-headed, ten-horned monster. And eventually, at the cross, the Savior would be swallowed up by death. But that became the very means by which he conquered it, secured our forgiveness, and brought us into the fullness of resurrection life.

For now, we're like the woman in today's text, still pursued by the dragon. Satan knows he has lost, and desperately uses what time he has left to deceive us, tempt us, and try us. On top of that, into our lives and the life of the world come torrents of hardship and floods of suffering. Most of the time, God doesn't take us out of our tribulations or snatch us quickly and painlessly from our troubles. But he does care for us and provide for us in the midst of them. He enables us to overcome, by the power of the suffering Savior who has

already overcome. So we continue to hold to the testimony of Jesus, with lives that conform to his pattern.

The Hunt-Lenox Globe, built in 1510, has some interesting words of warning on the southeast coast of Asia. The phrase reads, "Here be dragons." It was probably a way of warning potential explorers about the travails of the terrain or the possibility of monstrous beasts in that territory. There were also lots of other old maps that contained pictures of terrifying creatures, reminding folks that, "Hey, we don't really know what's out there, or whatever is out there could be really dangerous."

Contrast these depictions with another map called the Psalter map that includes some dragons of its own, as symbols of sin, in a lower frame below the world. But reigning over the circle of the earth is Christ, holding an orb in his left hand and offering a priestly blessing with his right hand, while he is being worshipped by a pair of angels. The purpose of the Psalter map wasn't just to convey historical and geographical knowledge, but especially to convey salvation knowledge. To put the story of the world within the story of Christ, who lives and reigns with God, not by escaping from the world, but by coming into the world, and enduring faithfully on the way of the cross. May God give us Christlike faith, cross-shaped faith. Faith that endures.

¹ Carolyn Arends, "Satan's a Goner." *Christianity Today* (February 2011) 54.

² Joseph Laconte, *The Searchers* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2012) 35-36.