

DOWN GOES THE DRAGON
(Series: The Apocalypse of Jesus Christ)

¹⁹And the temple of God which is in heaven was opened; and the ark of His covenant appeared in His temple, and there were flashes of lightning and sounds and peals of thunder and an earthquake and a great hailstorm. **12** A great sign appeared in heaven: a woman clothed with the sun, and the moon under her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars; ²and she was with child; and she cried out, being in labor and in pain to give birth. ³Then another sign appeared in heaven: and behold, a great red dragon having seven heads and ten horns, and on his heads *were* seven diadems. ⁴And his tail swept away a third of the stars of heaven and threw them to the earth. And the dragon stood before the woman who was about to give birth, so that when she gave birth he might devour her child. ⁵And she gave birth to a son, a male *child*, who is to rule all the nations with a rod of iron; and her child was caught up to God and to His throne. ⁶Then the woman fled into the wilderness where she had a place prepared by God, so that there she would be nourished for one thousand two hundred and sixty days.

⁷And there was war in heaven, Michael and his angels waging war with the dragon. The dragon and his angels waged war, ⁸and they were not strong enough, and there was no longer a place found for them in heaven. ⁹And the great dragon was thrown down, the serpent of old who is called the devil and Satan, who deceives the whole world; he was thrown down to the earth, and his angels were thrown down with him. ¹⁰Then I heard a loud voice in heaven, saying, "Now the salvation, and the power, and the kingdom of our God and the authority of His Christ have come, for the accuser of our brethren has been thrown down, he who accuses them before our God day and night. ¹¹And they overcame him because of the blood of the Lamb and because of the word of their testimony, and they did not love their life even when faced with death. ¹²For this reason, rejoice, O heavens and you who dwell in them. Woe to the earth and the sea, because the devil has come down to you, having great wrath, knowing that he has *only* a short time."

¹³And when the dragon saw that he was thrown down to the earth, he persecuted the woman who gave birth to the male *child*. ¹⁴But the two wings of the great eagle were given to the woman, so that she could fly into the wilderness to her place, where she was nourished for a time and times and half a time, from the presence of the serpent. ¹⁵And the serpent poured water like a river out of his mouth after the woman, so that he might cause her to be swept away with the flood. ¹⁶But the earth helped the woman, and the earth opened its mouth and drank up the river which the dragon poured out of his mouth. ¹⁷So the dragon was enraged with the woman, and went off to make war with the rest of her children, who keep the commandments of God and hold to the testimony of Jesus.

May I pass on to you a principle for reading the Bible that helps me when reading any text, but especially when reading texts like this one? I do not know when I learned it, but it has served me well over the past decades. The principle: first look for, first listen for, the news of the text. As a way to see and hear the message of the text, for the first readers and for us, look first, listen first, for any news the text announces. Before looking for or listening for any advice the text gives, first look for the news – especially for good news.

We will be able to act on advice the text gives if we see and hear it in light of any news, especially any good news the text announces. And we will be able to cope with any bad news the text might have for us, if we see and hear it in light of the good news the text has for us.

The Revelation of Jesus Christ, chapter 12 turns out to be the theological center of the whole book. What is this text's good news? As I trust you saw and heard as the text was read, there is a lot of good news! Yes, there is also troubling news – sobering news. Very sobering news, variations of which we see and hear everyday. The troubling, sobering news is all due to the good news.

So, what is the good news of Revelation 12? A child has been born. A male child, a child whose birth literally has cosmic implications, massive consequences for the whole cosmos. All the other good news in the text – and there is a lot! - and all the troubling, sobering news in the text – and it can be disturbing - is directly related to the news that a child has been born.

British composer Benjamin Britten captures this news powerfully in his Christmas anthem, *A Ceremony of Carols*:

*This little Babe so few days old,
Is come to rifle Satan's fold;
All hell doth at his presence quake,
Though he himself for cold do shake.*

Remember that Apocalyptic literature, like what we find in the last book of the Bible, and like what we especially have in the 12th chapter of the book, has two very practical purposes – two pastoral purposes. The human author of the book is a pastor. Yes, John is an apostle and a prophet, but he is for those who first read this book a pastor. The whole book begins: “John to the seven churches that are in Asia: Grace to you and peace from ...” and goes on to name the persons of the Trinity.

What John calls the Apocalypse of Jesus Christ, has two practical, pastoral purposes. The first is to set the present moment in light of the unseen realities of the future. Talk about good news! The same Jesus who was crucified and was resurrected from a borrowed grave, is coming again; and He is bringing with Him a city, a city magnificent beyond what any of us have ever imagined. “Look,” is the first command of the book, the first good advice. “Look! He is coming ... and every eye will see Him” (1:7). So the first practical, pastoral purpose of apocalyptic literature is to set the present moment, in all its uncertainty and confusion and upheaval, in light of the unseen realities of the future.

The second practical, pastoral purpose is to set the present moment in light of the unseen realities of the present. And as we have discovered as we are making our way through the last book of the Bible, the greatest unseen reality of the present is a person. The greatest unseen reality of this moment is the risen, living, reigning Jesus of Nazareth. The greatest unseen reality of the present is the Lamb, the slain Lamb, who is seated on the throne of the universe. The greatest unseen reality of the present is the child who was born.

And because He was born, and because He died and rose again, and because He is alive and on the throne, other things are also true about the present. And that is what Revelation 12 helps us understand. The other unseen realities of the present.

So we hear the command again, John's consistent good advice: "Look!" Verse 3 – "Look!" As in, "wake up and look." As in, "wake up and realize what is taking place in the world."

Revelation 12 is the opening section of the third act of the five act drama that is The Apocalypse of Jesus Christ. Like other acts, it opens with the verb "open." 11:19: "And the temple of God which is in heaven was opened ..." The second act opened at 4:1: "After these things I looked, and look, a door open in heaven ..." The fourth act will open at 15:5: "After these things I looked, and the temple of the tabernacle of testimony in heaven was opened." The fifth act will open at 19:11: "And I saw heaven opened."

So the third act. "And the temple of God which is in heaven was opened, and the ark of His covenant appeared ..." For John the life-long Jew, the ark of the covenant was the most sacred thing in all the earth. A box, layered in gold, on either end of its cover where two angelic figures. It was in the space between the two figures, between the cherubim, that the living and holy God chose to meet humanity. It was there that God met Moses, and Aaron the high priest, and countless others after them. The cover of the box, was, therefore, the dwelling place of God. John looks, and to his amazement, the temple is wide open. And to his amazement, the ark appears. And to his utter amazement, he can see in!

Which means that in this third act we are being taken deeper into the unseen realities of the present. The ark appearing says we are now going to be given even greater insight than we have already been given. Up to this point in the drama we have seen the church under pressure to compromise; under pressure to compromise our loyalty to Jesus Christ as the true Emperor and true God. Now in this third act we are going to learn why the pressure is so intense.

As you no doubt noticed, in Revelation 12 there are three major characters: A dragon, a child, and a woman. And as you might have noticed, there are three scenes in this part of the drama: verses 1-6; Verses 7-12; and verses 13-17. Let us first make sure we know who the three characters are before we work our way through the three scenes. A dragon, a child, a woman. A great red dragon, a male child, and a woman who birthed him into the world.

John identifies the dragon as the arch-enemy of God. Verse 9: "... the great dragon ... the serpent of old who is called the devil and Satan." The phrase "serpent of old" takes us back to the opening chapters of the Bible, where the serpent enters the garden, and tempts humanity to make the choice to try to live independently of God. This choice results in the ruin of God's good creation. The term "devil" tells us that this dragon is a divider, a deceiver, a destroyer; various meanings of the word *diabolos*. The term "Satan" tells us that this dragon is the great accuser; that is what the term means – accuser. He delights to bring up and focus on our sins; seeking to accuse us before one another, and seeking to accuse us before God.

The dragon hates God. Why? Why would anything hate its creator? We are not told. All we know is that he wants to be God; he wants to be in charge of his own destiny; he wants to be in control of the world. And he experiences the living God as an obstacle to his ends. He hates God, and will do anything he can to destroy God, or at least, to destroy whatever God has made.

John tells us who the child is. Verse 11: He is the Lamb; verse 17: He is Jesus. And John says the child is the fulfillment of God's promise. Verse 5: "And she gave birth to a son, a male, who is to rule all the nations with a rod of iron." John is quoting from Psalm 2, the key Psalm for understanding the whole book of the Psalms, and one of the Psalms that the authors of the New Testament quote the most. The Psalm is about the One Whom God installs as the King of Kings. God says to this One: "You are My son, today I have begotten You. Ask of Me, and will surely give you the nations as Your inheritance, and the very ends of the earth as Your possession. And You shall rule them with a rod of iron" (2:7-9).

The "rod" likely refers to a shepherd's rod. Psalm 23: "Thy rod and thy staff, they comfort me." "Rod of iron" suggests this shepherd, this King, is very strong. Which is why some translations render the verb "rule" as "shepherd," and the whole phrase as, "He shall shepherd all the nations with a rod of iron." The child born to the woman in Revelation 12 is the Son to Whom God gives all the nations (see also 2:18, 26-28; 11:15, 18; 14:1; 16:14, 16; 19:15). He is the One Who, when He becomes an adult, will rule the world. And that's why the dragon hates Him.

Who is the woman? She is the people of God. She represents the whole people of God; God's people before the birth of the child, and God's people after the birth of the child. How do we know this? Verse 1: "And a great sign appeared in heaven; a woman clothed with the sun, and the moon under her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars."

John realizes who she is right away, for he was steeped in the Old Testament, the only Bible he had at the time. Where in the Bible do we meet the sun and moon and twelve stars? In a dream Joseph the great patriarch had. As a young adult, he had a dream in which he sees the sun and the moon and eleven stars bowing down to him (Genesis 37:9). The sun turns out to be his father, the moon his mother, the eleven stars his eleven brothers. A woman clothed with the sun, the moon beneath her feet, twelve stars on her head, points to Israel: as embodied in Jacob and Rachael and Joseph and his brothers. The woman is the people of God from whom the child comes, from whom the Son Who is King, comes into the world.

And she is the church. Verse 6: The woman flees into the wilderness, but verse 13: the dragon persecutes the woman. The woman is more than a single individual, she also represents the people whom the child makes His own. And she is Mary, in whom the primary role of Israel and the Church in the world is focused. She is the people of God giving birth to Messiah in the world.

Three major characters. Dragon - the enemy of God and humanity. Child - God's Son and Savior of humanity. And the woman - the people from whom God's Son was born. Now to the three scenes in which the three major characters interact. Three over-lapping, apocalyptic scenes which help us set the present moment is set in light of the unseen realities of the present.

First scene: verses 1-6. The dragon hovers around the woman as she is in labour. Why? Because he knows who she is giving birth to, and is waiting to kill Him. The dragon - the serpent, the devil, Satan - knows Who the Child is. And because he knows, he seeks to destroy Him. Sobering news.

Here John is not only working with the stories told in the Old Testament. He is working with the stories told in Greek and Roman mythology. All cultures have their stories, their myths, by which they make sense of reality. And John, wanting the churches in the Greek and Roman cultures to set the present in light of the unseen realities of the present, connects the Gospel with the cultural myths.

Not far from the island of Patmos, where Jesus gives John His Apocalypse, is the island of Delos, a sacred place to the Greeks because it claimed to be the birthplace of the god Apollo, son of Zeus. When she was pregnant with Apollo, his mother Leto fled to Delos to escape the dragon Python. Python wanted to kill this new son of Zeus. It seems that all cultures have stories about evil forces wanting to kill special human beings who in some way come from another place to win the victory over evil.

In Revelation 12, the great dragon, the red dragon, seeks to kill the Child, Jesus of Nazareth, the long-promised Messiah of Israel. Now here is the key question to ask of this scene: When did this happen? That is, when did the arch-enemy of God first try to kill Jesus? As soon as He was born. Herod the Great hears about the birth of the One people were calling, "The King of the Jews" (Matthew 2). The news is very disturbing, and is very threatening to him. So he orders all boys two years old and younger to be murdered.

You can see, therefore, that Revelation 12 is a Christmas story. One which, in light of the massacre in Newtown, Connecticut a week before Christmas, I thought about preaching on Christmas Eve. I did not for a number of reasons. But had I preached it, I would have quoted from a courageous essay posted by Russell Moore, on his blog "Moore to the Point." Steve Milos was the first to alert me to it. It is entitled, "School Shootings and Spiritual Warfare," Friday, December 14th, 2012. Let me read portions of it.

The nation is watching, with horror and disgust, news reports out of Connecticut of a horrific act of violence against an elementary school filled with defenseless children. While every act of murder ought to provoke outrage, there's something especially condemnable about the murder of children. I think there's a reason for that. ...

Throughout the history of the universe, evil has manifested a dark form of violence specifically toward children. Not only did the Canaanite nations demand the blood of babies, but the Bible shows where at points of redemptive crisis, the powers of evil have lashed out at children. Pharaoh saw God's blessing of Israelite children as a curse and demanded they be snuffed out by the power of his armed thugs. And, of course, the Christmas narrative we read together this time of year is overshadowed by an act of horrific mass murder of children. King Herod, seeing his throne threatened, demands the slaughter of innocent children.

Jesus was not born into a gauzy, sentimental winter wonderland of sweetly-singing angels and cute reindeer nuzzling one another at the side of his manger. He was born into a war-zone. And at the very rumor of his coming, Herod vowed to see him dead, right along with thousands of his brothers. History in Bethlehem, as before and as now, is riddled with the bodies of murdered children.

Why?

There are more factors at work here than just impersonal psychology and sociology. "The course of this world," we're told, is driven along by "the prince of the power of the air" (Eph. 2:2). And behind all of that is a bloody skirmish. Satan is, Jesus tells us, a "murderer from the beginning" because he hates life itself. And he hates the life of children, particularly, because they picture something true about Jesus of Nazareth.

Jesus showed his disciple John that behind the particulars of history there's another, darker, story going on. Jesus showed the picture of a woman giving birth to a child, with a dragon crouching before her to devour the baby (Rev. 12:4). When the woman and her child escaped, the dragon "became furious with the woman and went out to make war on the rest of her offspring" (Rev. 12:17), and has done so ever since.

Satan hates children because he hates Jesus. When evil destroys "the least of these" (Matt. 25:40, 45), the most vulnerable among us, it destroys a picture of Jesus himself, of the child delivered by the woman who crushes the head of our reptilian overlord (Gen. 3:15). The demonic powers know that the human race is saved, and they're vanquished, by a child born of woman (Gal. 4:4; 1 Tim. 2:15). And so they hate the children who bear his nature.

Violence against children is also peculiarly satanic because it destroys the very picture of newness of life and dependent trust that characterizes life in the kingdom of God (Matt. 18:4). Children are a blessing, and that enrages the horrifying nature of those who seek only to kill and to destroy (Jn. 10:10).

The satanic powers want the kingdoms of the universe, and a child uproots their reign.

Let's not offer pat, easy answers to the grieving parents and communities in Connecticut. We don't fully understand the mystery of iniquity. We don't know why God didn't stop this from happening. But we do know what this act is: it's satanic, and we should say so. ...

The mystery of evil is a declaration of war on the peace of God's creation. The war goes on, but not for long. And sometimes the most warlike thing we can say, in an inhuman murderous age like this one, is "It's beginning to look a lot like Christmas."

But we're getting ahead of the text, let's go back to the first scene. The dragon hates Jesus, and tries to kill Him while just a child – and many other times. Like after Jesus' first sermon in Nazareth, when having quoted the prophet Isaiah, Jesus announced that He had come to set captives free, saying, "Today this Scripture is fulfilled in your hearing." The townspeople react in a rage and lead Him to the brow of a hill, intending to throw Him off the cliff to certain death. And like on the Sea of Galilee, when a violent wind churned up the waves, and seasoned fishermen were sure they would die. And like when religious leaders, furious that Jesus was unsettling their cherished traditions and institutions, banded together to do Jesus in. And on Good Friday, when politics and religion joined hands, and delivered Jesus up to the cruelty of crucifixion. The dragon hates Jesus, and has done everything he knows how to do to murder Him. But nothing has worked. Thank God, nothing has worked.

In the first scene, John says – verse 5 – the woman's child "was caught up to God and his throne." The whole of the life of Jesus of Nazareth is collapsed to His birth and His ascension. Why? Why leave out the other critical moments, events in Jesus' life? Why leave out Jesus' teaching and healing ministry, His crucifixion, and His resurrection? Why just, "She gave birth and her child was caught up to God"? Why jump from being born in Bethlehem to being installed on the throne of the universe?

Because being installed on the throne of the universe is the ultimate purpose of His being born! While being interrogated by Pilate, Jesus says, “You have correctly said that I am a King. For this I was born” (John 18:37). He is the beloved Son of Psalm 2, destined to be King of Kings. So Dorothy Sayers entitles her powerful play on the life of Jesus, “Born to be King.”

And that is why the dragon wants to kill Him. And that is why the dragon has not and never will succeed. Jesus is the eternal King. From the beginning of creation this was the plan: the Man from Galilee would be enthroned above all thrones. And the woman fled into the wilderness for 1,260 days. We will come back to that in a moment.

Second scene: verses 7-12. War in heaven. John is not now shifting to a new story. He is simply shifting perspective on the story. What is happening beginning with the Child’s birth on earth, what is happening beginning in Bethlehem, has implications for heaven. Events on earth are going to affect reality in heaven.

The war in heaven is between angelic forces. Between Michael and the dragon, between an archangel and a fallen angel. In Scripture, Michael is the guardian angel of Israel. Which means that in declaring war on Michael, the dragon is declaring war on Israel. The war has implications for the well-being of God’s people. The war in heaven is won in Michael’s favor.

But note: Michael did not win the war. Michael and his forces and God’s people benefit from the war being won. But Michael and his forces and God’s people did not win the war. Michael and his forces and God’s people benefit from the winning of the war, but they did not win the war. Then who won the war? The Child! The war in heaven is won through the actions of the Child on earth. Do you see that? The war in heaven is won by the way the Child lives on earth. The war is won by the way the Child preached and healed. The war is won by the Child going to the Cross; by the Child taking all that the dragon could throw at Him, and dying in apparent defeat. The war is won by the Child then being raised from the dead on the third day. The war is won by the Child then being lifted up to be seated on the Throne.

Which is why in the second scene heaven sings in a loud voice: “Now” Verse 10: “Now the salvation, and the power, and the kingdom of our God and the authority of his Christ have come, for the accuser of our brothers and sisters has been thrown down.” “Now” would be a good summary of Jesus’ preaching! Now “The time is fulfilled, the kingdom of God has come near” (Mark 1:15). “Today this Scripture is fulfilled in your hearing” (Luke 4:21). “Today salvation has come to this house” (Luke 19:9). “Today you shall be with Me in paradise” (Luke 23:43). Now. Today. The war has been won. The battle still rages, as the third scene will show us, but the war has been won.

So John hears heaven celebrate “down.” Verse 9: “The great dragon has been thrown down.” The verb literally means “bounced” (*ebleth*) – thrown out of the bar. “Down.” Six times. Thrown down, thrown down, thrown down, thrown down, thrown down, thrown down. Heaven rejoices – and then laments for earth! Thanks heaven! You get to celebrate, we have to continue in the battle.

So the third scene: verses 13-17. The dragon goes after the woman. Since he cannot get her child, he goes after the woman. But she has been taken to a safe place. Verse 6: “And the woman fled into the wilderness ...” So the dragon goes after her other “offspring.” Verse 17: “And the dragon was enraged with the woman, and went off to make war with the rest of her offspring ...”

What is going on in this scene? And how does this set the present moment in light of the unseen realities of the present? At the end of the second scene we read: Verse 12: “the devil has come down, having great wrath, knowing that he has a short time.” Short time. Praise God, in the larger scheme of things, it is a short time. The dragon is very angry that he cannot get to the Child. Satan is very angry that he cannot destroy Jesus Christ. He knows that Jesus has won. Mark that – the devil knows the Gospel!

So he is going to do as much as he possibly can to undo as much of what Jesus has done – he goes after those Jesus loves. In particular, he keeps accusing us of our sins. Jesus the Lamb has forgiven our sins; Jesus’ enemy will keep throwing our sins in our face. Jesus has embraced us as His own; Jesus’ enemy will keep whispering that we do not deserve it. Jesus is at work making us whole, freeing us from addictions; Jesus’ enemy will keep tempting us to draw us back into the traps. Jesus is drawing us ever deeper into intimacy with Him and His Father and Spirit; Jesus’ enemy seeks to divert us by getting us preoccupied with what ultimately does not matter.

For “times, time, and half a time” – verse 14. For 1,260 days – verse 6. Symbolic numbers for the time between Jesus’ comings. The dragon will do his diabolical best to wrest us away from Jesus the whole time the church is in the world.

And how are we to handle the attack? That is, in the language of the last book of the Bible, how do we “overcome”? Revelation 12, verse 11 is the central verse of the second scene. It turns out to be the central verse of all three scenes, and of the third Act. It turns out to be the fundamental discipleship text of the whole book. “And they overcame by the blood of the Lamb, and by the word of their testimony, and because they did not love their life even unto death.”

We overcome the dragon by claiming the saving power of the blood of the Lamb. We say to the dragon, “You are right, I am a sinner. You are right, I am not in-and-of myself worthy to belong to Jesus Christ. But you do not get it – you do not understand that the blood of the Lamb covers all my sin. You do not understand that by His blood the Lamb bought me, and made me His own. And nothing can now separate me from His love. Your accusations hold no power over me because they mean nothing to Jesus.”

We overcome the dragon by testifying to the truth. We say to the dragon, and anyone he has inspired to hurt us, “Jesus is Who He says He is. Jesus is the Son of God. Jesus is the Son of Man. Jesus is the true Emperor and true God. Jesus is the Bread of Life. Jesus alone gives Living Water. Only Jesus has the keys of death. Only Jesus can open the scroll of history. One day every knee bows to Him.”

As Martin Luther puts it in the hymn we will sing in a moment.

“Though this world with devils filled should threaten to undo us,
We will not fear for God has willed his truth to triumph through us.
The prince of darkness grim, we tremble not for him –
His rage we can endure, for lo, his doom is sure:
One little word shall fell him.”

That word is our testimony to Jesus; that word is “Jesus is Lord.”

And we overcome by being willing to die for the truth. Sure, we may lose our lives, as many have and are today. But when we lose our lives we do not lose, just as when the Lamb died on the cross, He did not lose.

Before I was called to become one of the pastors of First Baptist Vancouver, I served a number of Sundays as guest preacher. One Sunday as I was driving into the city across the Cambie Bridge, I heard in my head, "If you preach that sermon, I will kill you." The words sent chills down my spine – I was frightened. But the Spirit of God gave me grace to realize who was speaking. So while driving, I said to the dragon: "Go ahead. For if you do, you lose. As you always do when you hurt someone who belongs to the one who has overcome you." I was still nervous, but no longer afraid.

In our part of the world we may not be facing the threat of death for following Jesus. As I see it, the dragon works in our part of the world in another way. He gets us to feel embarrassed to name the name of Jesus. He says to us, "People are going to call you naïve for following Jesus. People are going to call you unsophisticated for loving Jesus. People are going to call you stupid." As I see it, that is the form of the dragon's pressure in our city. Make us feel embarrassed about Jesus and His Gospel.

We overcome him by being willing to be embarrassed. We overcome by being willing to be called naïve and unsophisticated, by being willing to be judged as unintelligent and uninformed. We overcome when we say: "Be that as it may be, I am still going to speak His name and announce His good news."

Good news indeed. Good news for the whole cosmos. A Child has been born. And has been installed as King of the universe. And down goes the dragon.