

Christmas in July

Scripture: Revelation 12

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Evening Service

Christmas in July. Isn't that a nice cooling thought? During the heart wave of this past week, I was told that one way to try to stay cool was to watch a movie or TV show where winter scenes dominate. In watching scenes of snow, your mind thinks that it is cooler than it actually is. I didn't actually try to see if it worked, though after a few sleepless night in the heat, I might have tried anything.

Working on this sermon should have worked. After all, it deals with the Christmas story. And for us, in North America, Christmas is often associated with winter. Just think of the classic song, "I'm dreaming of a white Christmas." But then, this telling of the Christmas is so unlike the Christmas stories of Matthew and Luke that I doubt it would have worked.

But let there be no mistake about it. In this chapter of Revelation we have a retelling of the Christmas story. Verse five would make a great text for Christmas morning: "She gave birth to a son, a male child, who will rule all the nations with an iron scepter." But the rest of the chapter is unlike our usual Christmas fare. Sure, there are angels—but these angels are at war. And instead of dealing with sheep, we have to contend with a dragon. You won't find this scene on any Christmas card.

This reference to Christmas should blow out of the water any sense that we are dealing with a strict chronological order of events in the Book of Revelation. After all, the seven trumpets have blown. We're ready for the final judgment of God. And it will begin in chapter 16. But in the meantime, we are reminded of the on-going conflict between the Kingdom of God and the kingdom of darkness. The scene is reset to describe the battle between God's people, the church, and the forces of evil. And key to that conflict is

the birth of the child, which is what Christmas is all about.

So let's look a little closer at the three main figures described in this chapter.

There is first of all the woman. Now when we just read verse 5 in isolation, we might be tempted to identify the woman as Mary; after all, she was the one who gave birth to the Messiah. But it's not as simple as that. Verse one describes her as *a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet and a crown of twelve stars on her head*. Now the book of Revelation constantly alludes to the OT and where do you find in the OT reference to a sun, moon, and twelve stars? In the dream of Joseph. There these images represent Joseph's family, which was at that time all of God's people. And so you can say the woman represents God's people.

Indeed, throughout the OT we have the promise that out of Israel would come the Messiah. And yes, specifically the bearer of this child was Mary. But Mary could only be chosen because she belonged to the people of God. She was the representative woman of faith.

The second major figure is the dragon. He is described here as being red and enormous; with seven heads each having a crown, and ten horns. His tail wept a third of the stars of the skies. This picture describes a powerful and deadly force. It is meant to frighten those who see it. We do not have to guess the meaning of the dragon. Verse nine identifies the dragon as *the ancient serpent, the devil or Satan who leads the whole world astray*. The devil is the dragon seeking to destroy the Christ-child.

This child is the third major figure in this chapter. It is obvious that this son of the woman is the Messiah, Jesus Christ. Notice how he is described in verse five. He *will rule all the nations with an iron scepter*. The word rule in the Greek is the same word to shepherd. Christ will shepherd the nations. Again, we can think of many OT references which use the image of shepherd. In Psalm 23 the Lord himself is described as a shepherd, while in Jeremiah 23 the kings of Israel are described as unfaithful shepherds, leading the people astray. But Christ who is born is the good shepherd.

Just as a shepherd uses a staff to guide and direct the sheep, so Christ rules the nations with an iron scepter. This is a direct reference to Psalm 2 where God says concerning his chosen king: *You will rule them with an iron scepter*. That's what Christ will do. According to Psalm 2, the king will rule with justice and righteousness, destroying evil and crushing the opposition to God.

What we have described in this chapter and therefore in the birth of Christ is the fulfillment of the curse placed upon the serpent in Genesis 3: *I will put enmity between you and the woman, between your offspring and*

hers; he will crush your head and you will strike his heel. The seed of the woman now gives birth to a son, the one who will crush the serpent, destroying his power forever.

No wonder the devil seeks to kill this child. Verse four describes it this way: *the dragon stood in front of the woman who was about to give birth, so that he might devour her child the moment it was born.* The dragon is after more than just striking the heel of this child; he is attempting to kill it. Indeed, throughout the OT you can trace how the devil tried to prevent the Messiah from being born by getting rid of God's people, the womb for the Messiah. He tried to crush them under Pharaoh in Egypt. He tempted them to sin so that God's anger would be roused up against the people. He got Haman to get a decree made to kill all the Jews. But all of these attempts failed. God's people survived. And through Mary the baby Jesus was born.

But the devil did not give up. Instead, he re-doubled his efforts. Through King Herod he tried to kill the baby. When Jesus was in the desert, the devil tried to tempt Jesus. Demons challenged Jesus. Satan used Judas to hand Jesus over to be crucified. When Jesus hung there on the cross, crying out "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?", the devil thought he had finally won. He had destroyed the Son of God. But he was sorely mistaken. The great dragon was unable to devour the child.

Instead this child, according to verse five, *was snatched up to God and to his throne.* Here we have an allusion to the ascension. This escape from the dragon's threat is not to be viewed as if the child was removed from the playing field. It's not as if the Christ-child tries to avoid a confrontation with the dragon. He wasn't fleeing from the scene, to avoid his responsibility. Instead, we are told that the child was taken away to his throne--where he reigns over heaven and earth.

And what are the results of this turn of events? There is warfare in heaven. Michael and the angels fight against the dragon and his angels, who are cast out of heaven, down to the earth. There is civil war among the spiritual beings. This was not first time such conflict erupted in heaven. Before the dawn of human history, Satan had rebelled against his Creator. Though the details are few, it seems he still had access to heaven, as the Book of Job indicates. But now he is finally cast out of heaven.

Because of Christ's victory, because Christ now reigns, there is no room for Satan in heaven. Instead, he is cast to the earth, where from his days in the Garden of Eden, he has long caused havoc and destruction. We'll see shortly how that continues. But before we get to that, we hear another song.

Christmas is full of songs. The angels in announcing the birth of Jesus

sang their song to the shepherds: “Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace to those upon whom his favor rests.” We’ll sing that song again tonight. But now we hear another song of heaven:

Now have come the salvation and the power and the kingdom of our God and the authority of his Christ.

Like the angels’ song on Christmas, this song too gives glory and praise to God. But now it is sung not in anticipation of what the Christ-child will do; this is song is sung because of what He has accomplished. He has overcome the devil. Heaven has been cleansed.

But there is a downside. The devil now focuses his sights on the followers of the Christ-child. Sure, on Christmas morning the angels could sing “peace on earth.” But that peace comes after a period of conflict and battle. That’s what this chapter reminds us. It brings in a different dimension to the Christmas story. While the birth of Christ does bring us peace, it also comes with a time of conflict. That’s what the rest of this chapter describes.

When the dragon could not kill the Christ-child, he went after the woman. But the woman was protected from the attacks of the dragon. And so we read in verse 17:

Then the dragon was enraged at the woman and went off to make war against the rest of her offspring—those who obey God’s commandments and hold to the testimony of the Jesus.

We are the offspring of the woman. We who believe in Jesus as Lord and Savior. We who seek to serve the Lord and his kingdom. The dragon is now after us. Since he can’t get at Christ anymore, he will try to get after his followers.

That’s not a comforting thought, is it? But it should not be a surprise. Jesus himself warned his disciples that just as he faced opposition and persecution, so too his followers will experience opposition and persecution. Of course, in the days of John, believers were beginning to experiencing just that.

And throughout the ages, even today, believers to one extent or another will face the enraged dragon. In some places today, such opposition is overt and harsh. But in our own land, it is much more subtle, as the dragon seeks to undermine our faith through temptation and a slow erosion of our commitment.

But we do not need to be downcast or deterred by this enraged dragon. After all, the whole point of this chapter is that the Christ-child has defeated him. Jesus now reigns over heaven and earth. The dragon is a defeated enemy. Just as he could not swallow the woman, so he cannot swallow us. In Christ, we are secure.

But this chapter does remind us of the spiritual warfare that exists in our world. A warfare that is part of the Christmas story. That's an aspect so often neglected at Christmas time. But it is a message that takes into consideration the reality of evil in our world.

Christmas in July. Does the thought of snow at Christmas cool you down? Maybe. But this chapter's version of the Christmas does not cool us down. Instead, it heats it up, as we are reminded of the spiritual conflict between the dragon and woman. A conflict centered upon the Christ child. But while in the short term, this may produce hardship and difficulty for followers of the Child, in the long run, it will provide the answer to the sin and evil that plagues our world.

And so we can sing the Christmas hymn, on this July day: No more let sin and sorrow grow, nor thorns infest the ground. He comes to make his blessings flow far as the curse is found. Amen.