

An Unholy Trinity

Scripture: Revelation 13

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**July 25, 2010
Evening Service**

People of God: Know your enemy. Those are good words of advice to our political leaders and to those in charge of the soldiers in Afghanistan. In order to defeat your enemy, you need to recognize that indeed, you have an enemy. You need to understand their goals, their strategy, and their way of thinking. Only then, can you come up with the appropriate means to stand up against your enemy.

That's true not just in terms of the conflicts of human history, but it is also true in terms of the spiritual conflict, we are engaged in. We face spiritual enemies. There are those opposed to God, His kingdom and His Church. There are forces that seek to undermine the work of God and his redemption through Jesus Christ.

Because of these enemies, Christians face hardship and persecution for their faith. This was the bitter reality the early Christians had to face. At first, such persecution was sporadic and erratic, as believers faced hostility from members of the synagogue and local officials. But soon, opposition took on a more organized focus, as well as receiving support from higher positions of authority.

Soon, it was the Emperor, himself, who started an intentional attack upon the Christian church. Nero was the first. In 64 AD, a great fire destroyed a large portion of Rome. Suspicion fell upon Emperor Nero to have caused it, thinking that Nero wanted to rebuild Rome. And so to deflect suspicion from himself, Nero blamed the Christians. Probably it was at this time that Peter and Paul were martyred for the faith.

Thirty years later, another wave of government sponsored persecution swept the Empire. That's when John wrote the Book of Revelation, offering assurance and comfort to believers under attack. Here in this 13th chapter, we

have the longest and most extensive description of the enemy, along with words of advice for how believers ought to respond to such attacks.

But in typical fashion, John does not describe the enemies of God's people in straightforward terms. Instead, he uses figurative language to describe what I will call an "unholy Trinity": a dragon, a Beast from the Sea, and a Beast from the Land.

We have already encountered the Dragon in the previous chapter. The Dragon, identified as the devil or Satan, attempted to attack first the woman, then the Child (who is Christ), and then the followers of Jesus. Each time he fails to achieve his desired results. As a result, he ends up on the shore of the sea—a failure. He failed to kill the woman or the child and seems as unlikely to erase the followers of Jesus from the face of the earth.

And so he needs help. And so we have in this chapter this beast from the Sea, followed by the Beast from the Land. Together, they form an "unholy Trinity." I use that word Trinity deliberately because the Dragon, Sea Beast and Land Beast are a parody of the real thing. They are a pale imitation of the Holy Trinity, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Why do I say that? Just as Christ received authority from the Father, so the Sea Beast gets authority from the Dragon; just as the Holy Spirit points towards Jesus; so the Land Beast uses his power to point people to the Sea Beast. We have here an unholy Trinity bent on undoing the work of the Holy Trinity, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

In many ways, the Sea Beast has many similarities to how the Lamb is described in this book:

- both wield swords
- both had followers on whose foreheads were inscribed marks
- both were slain, but recovered from that
- both were given power and authority over the nations, tribes, peoples and languages of the world.

Clearly the Sea Beast is meant to imitate the Lamb. To use the word, John uses in his letters, but never in this book, the Sea Beast is the Antichrist.

It is clear that the focus of this unholy Trinity is upon the followers of Jesus, not upon humanity in general. But how will these beasts seek to undermine the witness and testimony of the followers of Jesus? Through violence and deception.

The Sea Beast uses violence to achieve his goal. Verse 7 states: "He was given power to make war against the saints and to conquer them." The use of the sword can be very effective in making people comply with your wishes. And it is the State, the government, that wields the sword.

According to Romans 13, this power is intended to promote justice and righteousness, but it can also be used to instill terror and cause oppression.

The sword (meaning violence and coercion) can be very effective. The Roman Empire used the sword to ensure that obedience to the Emperor was carried out. Mohammad, and his followers, used the sword to conquer the Middle East and North Africa, ensuring that Islam would replace Christianity. The sword can be very effective.

But not always. Sometimes a frontal assault does not work. Instead, deception is needed. That's how the Land Beast sought to undermine the Christian faith. Verse 14 states: "Because of the signs he was given power to do on behalf of the first beast, he deceived the inhabitants of the earth." The Land Beast uses religious deception to fool people. No wonder he is latter on called in this book, the false prophet.

Deception can be effective in undermining true faith. After all, it's religious. And don't we want people to be religious? Aren't miraculous signs proof that God must be work? And so people are deceived into worshipping a false God, a false way of salvation.

Together the Sea and Land Beasts seek, through violence and deception, to attack the followers of Jesus. The Roman Empire, led by the Emperor himself, was the embodiment of these two beasts. After all, it is used the power of the state to attempt to quash Christianity. But it also used religion to deceive people.

That's because the Emperor was viewed in religious terms. The people of the Empire were asked, then forced, to worship the Emperor as some sort of God. They were required to bring offerings to him and make the confession that Caesar is Lord. But Christians could not make that confession, since only Jesus is Lord. They could not present offerings since they could only worship the One True God.

And so we see how Revelation 13 presents the government in a very different light than Romans 13. Romans 13 depicts the state in very positive terms. Paul says, "The authorities that exist have been established by God." And therefore deserving of honor, respect and obedience. And indeed, the state is part of the created order, intended for our good.

But Revelation 13 reminds us that a good institution like the state can turn bad. It can become an instrument of evil and oppression. It can become the Beast from the Sea, waging war on the saints.

These two views of the State are not in opposition to each other. Instead, they counterbalance each other. They reflect the fact that in a broken world, a good thing like the State can become so twisted and

distorted that it becomes a curse for God's people. That was what was being experienced by God's people in the days of John.

Some of you here this evening have experienced such a Beast. Those of you who endured the occupation of the Nazis. That too was a regime where the government used violence and deception, not merely to maintain power but also to enforce anti-human, anti-Christian policies, like the Holocaust. Others suffered under Communism, where again the State used violence and deception to create an Atheistic regime, where God was shut out and where God's people suffered.

And so, in the 20th century, we have seen the rise and fall of the Beast in terms of Nazism and Communism. But the Beast continues to exist in parts of the world. Today, it takes the shape of Islamic fundamentalism. Because in places where Sharia, Islamic law, is the law of the land, Christians find it difficult to give expression to their faith. And Christians are dying for the faith. The Beast is real.

So what is the response of God's people?

Well, it is not to use the same means as the beasts. It is always tempting in fighting your enemy, to use the same tactics and strategy as your enemy. In a world, where violence and deception seems to work, why not use violence and deception yourself. And in the history of the church, there have been occasions where the church has responded to her enemies using the same type of violence and deception.

But that is not the answer of John. Instead, John is very explicit in what is required. He has left us with the direct words of application.

In response to the Sea Beast, with its focus on violence, John says at the end of verse 10: This calls for patient endurance and faithfulness on the part of the saints.

Patient endurance. We have encountered that phrase several times already in this book. In chapter One, John speaks about his own patient endurance while in exile on Patmos. In chapters two and three, he mentions it in terms of churches, which were suffering a localized form of persecution. Now he mentions it in terms of believers as a response to living under the regime of the Beast. Patient endurance.

And faithfulness. Be true to your belief in the Holy Trinity, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Be true to the principles of the Kingdom of God. God does not ask us to be rich, or successful in business, or powerful in the halls of Parliament, or influential in Hollywood. He simply calls us to be faithful. If faithfulness leads to success and influence that's okay, but faithfulness is the standard by which we will be judged.

In the face of violence, we are called to patient endurance and faithfulness. In response to the Land Beast, with its focus on deception, John says in verse 18: This calls for wisdom.

Figure it out, John says. See through the deception. Religious deception works because it puts us at ease. It uses familiar language. We let our guard down. And so John says, use your head. You know what the Scriptures says, you know what the church has taught throughout the ages. Don't be deceived.

But then John adds something that has garnered a lot of attention. He mentions, what we now call the number of the beast: 666. But whom does it refer to? Already in the second century, a very prominent theologian, Irenaeus, could not figure it out. If someone so close to the days of John couldn't figure it, who we kidding if we think we can figure it? In reading through the commentaries, I lean with those who think of 666 as a number that falls short of the ideal: 777.

But I won't say more than that. Because otherwise, it takes away from the clear and obvious point John is making. In response to the Land Beast, Christians need wisdom. We need to develop a Christian mind, a Christian world-and-life view so that we will not be deceived by false teachers. It's as simple as that.

In the next chapter, John will see some further visions that will offer assurance to God's people that despite the attacks of this unholy Trinity upon them, God's people are on the victorious side. But for now, this chapter is a stark reminder that we do face enemies because of our belief in God and his Son, Jesus Christ.

And at times, those enemies will use the power of State to seek to crush the church. We have seen it in our lifetime, with Nazism and Communism. We see it in our present world, where Islamic fundamentalism has taken hold. Who knows what the future might bring?

But what John reminds us is how we ought to respond to such a threat. We do not use the same means as the Beasts. Instead, through patient endurance, faithfulness and wisdom, God's people will stand and emerge victorious. Amen.