

Politics and Religion

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- [0 : 0 0] Well, as Kevin said at the beginning of the service, happy Father's Day, happy Trinity Sunday. We've been beta testing a new ministry at Church of the Advent.
- We've had a couple of events. It's a ministry called Common Cup, and some of you have been a part of Common Cup. If you want to be a part of it, there'll be plenty of opportunities, God willing, down the road. But Common Cup is an opportunity for Christians to get together, and we sit around the communion table, and sitting around the communion table, we debate divisive, polarizing issues, and we disagree, and we argue, and then we end the night by taking communion together, affirming our unity in Christ.
- And it's been a great outlet. It's been a way for us to, as Christians, explore topics that might otherwise divide people and end relationships. The last topic that we explored together was the subject of Christianity and nationalism.
- How should Christians feel about their country? How much pride and excitement is too much? Is there a point at which we should be wary of our nationalistic pride?
- Should we value and prioritize our country over other countries, over Christians in other countries? Very, very divisive, which is good in terms of the event that we're doing.
- [1 : 3 0] And there was a lot of disagreement, and it's clear that there are a lot of strong opinions about those questions. What should we think of when we think of our political leaders as Christians?
- What does that mean? You know, in our country, we have endeavored throughout our short history as a nation to keep politics and religion separate from one another, the separation of church and state.
- But, you know, that's only possible to a point, because at some point, politics and religion begin to overlap, because they offer a lot of the same things. Both politics and religion offer us a vision of what it means to be human, for instance.
- Both politics and religion try to order our lives and try to tell us what is most important. Both politics and religion offer hope, and they make promises about the future that they want us to believe in.
- And perhaps most relevant, both politics and religion call for our allegiance. And sometimes, our allegiance to one requires that we disobey the other.
- [2 : 3 8] And that's one of the reasons why, if you look at most of history, politics and religion was the same thing. Your political leader was your religious leader. Your political leader was your God that you worshiped.
- And certainly, that was true in the Roman Empire in the time that the Bible was written. The emperor was seen as a god, as a divine being worthy of worship.
- And so, Christians in the Roman Empire were forced to wrestle with these questions. How do I live and be faithful to my God when the emperor is demanding that I worship him as well?

What does Christian faithfulness look like? And, you know, I think it's obvious that we live in a very different culture in some ways. And yet, I think you may agree with me when I say that often, when we look at our political climate today, it seems like it's getting more and more religious.

People are putting ultimate hope in their political party, in their political leader, their chosen candidate, to bring the kind of hope and change and peace that the world needs. Likewise, I think religion is becoming more and more politicized.

[3 : 46] And so, Christians, I think, need to be asking similar questions today. How do we live faithfully in this world when religion often seems very political and politics has become more and more and more religious?

And so, for that reason, we're going to be looking at Revelation chapters 12 and 13 and a little bit of chapter 14. We weren't able to read all of this because of time, but we are going to look at all of it together.

And this section, the kind of narrative that we're going to be looking at, breaks down into sort of two sections. There's the woman and the dragon, part one.

And then there are the two beasts, part two, the woman and the dragon and the two beasts. And so, we're going to walk through this image together, these images. We're going to talk a little bit about what they mean and unpack them, and then we'll draw out a couple of implications for how we as Christians should think about living faithfully when it comes to politics and religion in our country.

So, let's pray, and then we'll get started. Lord, we thank You for Your Word, and we thank You that even when it is not entirely clear, even when it is mysterious, that, Lord, at the end of the day, we can trust You to speak through Your Word, that every syllable of Your Word is breathed out by You for us, for our good.

[5 : 09] And so, we pray that as we sit under Your Word tonight, You would help us have a vision for what faithfulness means in our day and age. Lord, for Your glory, in Your Son's name, Amen.

So, part one, chapter one, the woman and the dragon. Revelation 12 opens in this dramatic way. Imagine you're John, and you're sitting, and you're sort of looking at this heavenly stage, this heavenly theater.

And imagine the curtain has dropped on the last scene, and then the curtain comes up, and the next scene is laid out before you. And what you see is this, it says this in verse one, a great sign appeared in heaven, a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars.

She was pregnant and was crying out in birth pains and the agony of giving birth. So, St. John has this vision of this kind of divine being, or seemingly divine being.

This woman who is standing on the moon, wrapped in sunlight with a crown, but instead of jewels in the crown, there are stars. And she's wrapped in sunlight.

[6 : 19] If you've ever been walking through the woods late in the day, and you see sunbeams coming down onto the forest floor, and the sunbeams almost look like a kind of diaphanous fabric.

You can imagine this image of someone being wrapped in sunbeams. This is what John sees. But this woman is in labor. She's feeling pain, and so she's crying out because she's giving birth.

And then John sees this great, wicked, red dragon that is crouching right in front of the woman, and it is planning to devour her child as soon as the child is born.

And the reason is because this is no ordinary child. The dragon knows that the child that is coming is the true prince of the world. It says in verse 5, he is the one who is to rule all the nations.

He's the true king of the world. But the child escapes and is snatched up into heaven before the dragon can devour it.

[7 : 20] And then a war breaks out in heaven, but the dragon doesn't stand a chance, and so the dragon is defeated, soundly defeated, and is cast down to earth. And then the dragon, in defeat, still won't give up, and so then the dragon goes after the woman.

But then the woman escapes, and is taken into the wilderness and nourished and protected. So I want to stop there and just kind of unpack some of these images. I know, especially if you're not a Christian or if you've never been to our church before, you're thinking, what have I walked into?

And this is bizarre even by Christian standards. For people who read the Bible, this is pretty bizarre. But if you look at ancient mythology, if you look at the different stories and myths from societies in the world at the time that this was written, it would not be nearly as bizarre.

In fact, there are societies around the world from this time period that have very similar stories in their mythology. There is a prince who is going to be born, who is going to rule the rightful king, and there is a usurper, an evil, wicked usurper who wants to kill the king at birth so the king can never grow up and claim his inheritance so that the usurper can instead claim the inheritance.

And then in these stories, the child is miraculously rescued and taken away, and then time passes and the child grows up, and then the child comes back and kills the usurper.

[8 : 51] So there are stories like this in various societies. You look at the Greco-Roman world, their version of the story said that the prince was Apollo, and Apollo the sun god, at birth, the dragon python was going to kill Apollo, but Apollo escapes because of his goddess mother, and then Apollo grows up, and then later Apollo comes back and slays the dragon python.

You say, okay, well, okay, so these stories are not as bizarre, so what difference does that make? Well, here's why this matters. The Roman Empire had a habit of turning old myths into new propaganda.

The Roman political propaganda machine had taken this myth of Apollo, and they had applied it to Emperor Nero. They were putting the word out there.

They were putting forth the idea that Nero was, in fact, Apollo incarnate. Nero was the one who had almost been killed, but who had escaped. Nero is the one who has come back and has the power to slay dragons.

Nero is the one who can bring peace on earth. So when it says at the beginning of Revelation in chapter 1 that John is at Patmos on the Lord's Day, we think of the Lord's Day as the day we gather for worship, the Sabbath day.

[10 : 09] But in the Roman world, the Lord's Day was the feast of the emperor. That's when you would gather together and celebrate and give praise and honor to the emperor as the bringer of peace on earth.

They had applied this story to Nero. They had put forth Nero as a god. There are even coins from this era that depict Nero as the sun god. And so what's so amazing about this, it blows my mind, is that the apostle John, inspired by God, is giving us a depiction of something that deliberately challenges and subverts the political propaganda of Rome.

This is subverting the propaganda. So John refashions this story as a kind of cosmic nativity story. This woman is no goddess.

This woman is none other than Mary herself. But this is not Mary as we think of Mary. This is not Mary as the world sees Mary. This is not Mary who is poor and uneducated and from some backwater town and marginalized in her society.

This is Mary as God sees her. This is Mary as God sees her. Radiant. Heroic. Luminous.

[11 : 31] Crowned with stars. Wrapped in sunlight. Standing on the moon. This is Mary as God sees her. Perhaps the greatest hero of faith in Christian history.

All of the promises given to Eve that we would be saved through childbearing. That one day she would bear a son who would crush the serpent's head.

All of those promises fulfilled in Mary who was given the greatest honor ever bestowed on a human being. To bear the true prince into the world. The true king.

And so the message is very clear. Not only to Christians. But all the way into the Roman court. The message is very clear. Caesar is no prince.

Caesar is no god. Caesar is no bringer of world peace. Caesar is at best a lackey. A minion of the dragon.

[12 : 31] As we'll see in a little while. Caesar is just an instrument. Caesar is a dragon. Caesar is a dragon. Now if we go back to the story.

The dragon is very angry. It's been cast to earth. It couldn't get the child. It couldn't get the mother. So the dragon will not give up. It has been defeated. But it will not quit.

And so the dragon declares that if it cannot get the child. And it cannot get the mother. Verse 17. Then the dragon became furious with the woman. And went off to make war on the rest of her offspring. Those who keep the commandments of God.

And hold to the testimony of Jesus. The dragon wages war on the children. The offspring. God's people. And the dragon knows that in order to do this. It needs reinforcements.

And so the dragon calls forth two beasts. You might say the dragon creates these beasts in its own image. They speak with the dragon's voice.

[13 : 31] And these two beasts come. And one is a beast of the sea. And as the beast of the sea rises up in this vision. You see that there are crowns on the head of this beast.

And it's a kind of patchwork quilt of animals. It's a kind of caricature king. It's a kind of parody of a king. With little crowns dangling on its horns.

So there's a counterfeit king that comes from the sea. And then from the land. The dragon raises up a kind of counterfeit priest.

It looks like a lamb. Has horns like a lamb. But it's a false lamb. And we know because when it opens its mouth. It speaks with the voice of the dragon.

Not the lamb. It has the appearance of a lamb. And so now that we have begun to unpack this. And we understand that this is aimed at the political propaganda of Rome.

[14 : 31] The pieces start to fall into place. The sea beast. The pretend parody of a king. This is Rome. This is Caesar.

Caesar is no prince. Caesar is no ruler. Caesar is a beast. Caesar is a minion and a lackey of the dragon. Now that wouldn't have come as much of a surprise to the first readers.

The second beast would have shocked many of the first readers. Here's the shocker. The beast that comes from land. The kind of false lamb with the voice of a dragon. This represents the religious leaders.

The many, many, many religious leaders. The Jews who had thrown their lot in with Rome. Because the emperor had said, You can continue to worship your gods. To the Jews, you can continue to worship Yahweh.

But you also have to worship me. And if they didn't worship the emperor. And bad things happened in the empire. It was blamed on the Christians. You're not worshiping the emperor.

[15 : 34] The gods are angry. You're not worshiping our gods. The gods are angry. And so bad things are happening. This is one of the main reasons that Christians were killed. They were seen as atheists.

Because they didn't worship the Roman pantheon. The Roman emperor. So many religious leaders had said, We will do both. We'll worship our God. But we will also worship you.

Because they wanted to keep the peace. They didn't want any trouble. So they had thrown their lot in with Rome. And this vision is saying that when they did that, They became a kind of caricature. They became a parody of the lamb.

They became a false lamb that speaks with the voice of a dragon. That encourages people to worship and give their allegiance to the dragon. That's what this beast is doing.

This is the religious community. Who had sold out to their political leaders. So this is a massive attack.

[16 : 30] A massive ideological assault. On everything that was happening. So when you put all of this together, You begin to understand, Here's the story.

The birth of Jesus signals Satan's defeat. Satan could not keep that from happening. And yet until Jesus comes again, Once and for all, To slay the dragon, The dragon is waging war On all of God's people.

And the dragon has two very powerful weapons it can use in that war. Politics and religion. Both can be a means of satanic warfare on God's people.

And if you read in detail chapter 13, You can see that this can be an overt war of intimidation and persecution and imprisonment and death. Or it can be a more covert war of deception and seduction and assimilation.

So then we ask, Well, why is John laying all of this out? And there's a refrain that repeats throughout this passage that says this, Here is a call for the endurance and the faith of the saints.

[17 : 42] So God is telling us all this through John so that we will be able to endure. And so that we will be able to remain faithful. So that we will be able to penetrate the lies and see the truth of what's really going on.

He doesn't want us to have a close-eyed, blind faith. He wants us to have both eyes open to recognize the truth of the world. So that we can be vigilant and faithful. Right?

So back to the original question, What does Christian faithfulness look like? When it comes to politics and religion in our society, I would say this, Based on Revelation 12 and 13, I would say it means this.

It means holding out the true story of Jesus over the false stories of the world so that we can be faithful Christian political witnesses. It's holding out the true story of Jesus over the false stories of the world so that we can be faithful Christian political witnesses.

And with the time we have left, I'll just break that down a little bit. What do I mean by holding out the true story of Jesus? The Roman Empire, as we said, had this habit of using mythology as propaganda.

[18 : 51] But we should not be so naive as to think that ended with the Roman Empire. It still happens everywhere, and it still happens in our country. As rationalist and as sort of post-religious as we like to think we are, we are still religious creatures.

And we are still suckers for a good myth. And you see this in our political world. There's a sociologist at Berkeley named Arlie Huckschild, and she spent a lot of time studying voter behavior.

And she discovered something that I think is fairly important. As she's looked at the past election and the one before that, and why people vote for the candidate they vote for, she realized that many voters, not all voters, but many voters, vote not as a kind of outcome of a rational decision-making process.

They vote because they have bought into a kind of mythology around the candidate that they support. They have bought into a kind of story. And it's interesting, if you think about that, in our climate, in order for a candidate to sort of stand out, they almost have to take on a kind of mythological quality to them.

They have to be larger than life. They have to be able to grab headlines and capture people's hopes and give them a vision of ultimate salvation. And so what she realized is that people will sometimes even vote against their own economic needs because they're voting for their emotional needs.

[20 : 20] They're voting emotionally based on the myth. And this happens on both sides of the aisle. You know, whether you have people who are voting for the champion who will protect their way of life and guarantee their stake in the American dream, or you are voting for the candidate who will champion equal rights and inclusion and justice and opportunity for all, on the right and the left, people are not simply voting for a person.

They're buying into a mythology. And it's interesting, you know, I moved here not long before Barack Obama was elected, and then I've been here, obviously, more recently for Donald Trump's election.

And I remember thinking, in both cases, when I looked at the people who were most passionately supporting these two presidents, both have a kind of messianic quality in the eyes of their supporters, a kind of larger-than-life, almost mythological quality.

John shows us in Revelation that the only way to counteract these false stories is with a true story, the true story of Jesus Christ.

C.S. Lewis wrote a famous essay called Myth Become Fact. And in that essay, in that piece of writing, he says that all of the myths of the world, all of these mythologies, ancient and modern, they're all appealing to us because they remind us of the true story.

[21 : 54] And yet they're all simply dim imitations of the true story of Jesus. And what he says is that Jesus is the myth become fact. He's the mythological hero who is actually real.

So he is the prince who comes to wake us up. He is the once and future king of the Arthurian legend. He is the chosen one. He is the dragon slayer.

He is that hero that we long for. And the reason that it's important for us to hear this is because if you know the truth of Jesus, then you can see clearly the truth of all of the Caesars of the world.

We can say, you're no prince. You're no divine hero. You're no savior. And I know that because I know what one looks like. And it's not you. So in other words, the gospel story inoculates us, you might say.

It inoculates us against all of the false stories of the world. And the more our hearts and imaginations are captured by the heavenly city, the more resistant we will be to the mythologies and the idolatries of the earthly city.

[23 : 08] Now, why does this matter? Why do we need this true story? Why do we need to be able to penetrate the lies and the false stories and to see through them? Well, it's because our calling is to be witnesses.

And I think that includes being political witnesses in the world. In other words, we need to be present as God's people in the politics of our society, in every sphere.

John's vision of the second beast shows, I think, what religion can become when it only exists to serve the state. When religion only exists to prop up the state, to prop up political leaders, it becomes a caricature of itself.

It becomes a parody. It becomes a joke. It becomes a false lamb that speaks with the voice of a dragon. So this is a warning about the danger of nationalism when it goes too far.

Yes, be excited about your country. Yes, take pride in being an American, but also recognize that the further you go down that road, the more easy it becomes to verge into idolatry.

[24 : 24] And if you're a religious person, especially a religious leader or institution, you're in danger of becoming a false lamb, a parody. However, so there's a warning against political idolatry, but there's also a warning in here for Christians who believe that the most faithful approach is to completely withdraw.

Because the entire thrust of Revelation, it's written to equip us to be witnesses in the world. It's written to equip us to be present and to be engaged.

And so the call is not to withdraw. The call is to be a faithful witness. And you know, Revelation and the Bible as a whole does not call Christians to disengage.

The whole point of John's vision is that God's kingdom is coming. It's being established here. The heavenly city is coming to replace the earthly city. And the role of the church is to be a witness to that heavenly city.

It's to point people to the truth of the heavenly city, even as we live in the earthly city. And you know, the more grounded we are as citizens of the heavenly city, the more we can bring God's love and purposes into the earthly city.

[25 : 37] And that's what we're here to do, to bring God's love and purposes into the earthly city. So you say, well, okay, what does that look like? Well, it means you go out into the world and you serve in every sphere and career you can.

It means for some of you, very directly, you go and you work for the government. You serve, but you serve faithfully. And as we go, we go as kingdom citizens who also happen to be American citizens for the time being.

Most of us, anyway. If you're not an American citizen, wherever you're from, we go as kingdom citizens who for the time being happen to be American citizens. And this means that while we pray to, or pray for, I'm sorry, and submit to our earthly leaders, our allegiance remains with Jesus.

And so we follow and we submit to our leaders. And yet there's always the possibility of civil disobedience. Because there's no question where our allegiance lies.

And if push comes to shove, we disobey the earthly authority because we follow the heavenly authority. Because ultimately we're kingdom citizens. This means that we don't get taken in easily.

[26 : 51] It means that we are not easily manipulated. If you know the true myth and you know the true Savior and you're inoculated against all of the other myths of the world, you're not going to be easy to manipulate. Because you're going to be able to see through the charade.

You're going to be able to see the false lamb. Recognize it for what it is. See through to the truth of who Caesar really is. This is no God. This is just a man.

It's just a woman. It's just a person. Right? And so we're not easily taken in. So no matter who sits in the Oval Office, we can be fair-minded. We can be even-keeled.

We're never so opposed to a leader that we demonize them. Even a leader that represents the other party. We're never so opposed that we demonize them because we know demons.

We know that demons are real. This is just a person. But we are never so enthralled to a political leader, even one in our own party, that we demonize them because we know the true God.

[27 : 52] And this is just a person. We know that leaders can sometimes be like Cyrus, who was used by God to bless his people. And that leaders can sometimes be like Caesar, who in this case was used by Satan to persecute God's people.

We know that both are possible with the same person. But we also know that God's purposes will always ultimately prevail. And so we are not easily manipulated or swayed.

We remain fair-minded and even keel. So bringing all of this together, Christian faithfulness, I think when it comes to politics and religion in our society, it means holding the truth, holding the true story of Christ out over the false stories of the world so that we can be faithful Christian political witnesses, fully present, fully engaged.

And by the way, this is why we gather here for worship every Sunday. This is why we have the liturgy that rehearses again and again and again the true story of Christ.

It's why we have the preaching of the Word. It's why we celebrate the sacraments together. All of this is meant to form and reorient and shape our hearts and our minds toward the truth of Christ.

[29 : 12] You're here for formation. That's why we're here, to reorient our hearts toward God. Because listen, Fox News, CNN, Facebook, Twitter, these are not simply media platforms.

These are liturgical formation centers. They are forming us into their image. And unless there is some counterweight in your life, unless there is some counterformational practice that is reorienting you back toward Christ, you will be formed into the image of those things.

And so we gather together, even as we live in this earthly kingdom, we regularly gather together to join with all of the saints across all empires, across all history, and we pray ultimately that God's kingdom would come and that God's will would be done on earth as it is in heaven.

Let's pray.