

The Woman and The Dragon | Evening Service

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[0:00] Let's pray. Almighty God, this is a very strange and different story that we're hearing tonight.

And so we need your help. We want to chew on this word of yours. And we pray that it would taste sweet in our mouths and also bitter.

That you would use it to transform us. To help us to worship you and equip us for witness. We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen. Good evening, everyone.

My name is Jeremy. I'm one of the ministers on staff here at St. John's. And we've got a doozy tonight. How many of you have been with us all the way through since chapter one?

Yeah. Congratulations. You've made it halfway. We're going to take a break to let you rest. And we'll pick it up again in January. Actually, this chapter is the chapter that Aaron chose when he wanted to illustrate in the very first week.

[1:02] He wanted to illustrate just how crazy Revelation was. He went to chapter 12 and read you guys a few verses. Maybe you remember that. So thank you, Aaron, for inviting me to come back to preach. This is great.

Yeah. Revelation chapter 12. Let's dive in. You're going to need your Bibles open. That's the least you can do for me. Please. Thank you. Thank you. So, you know, actually, we're halfway through the book.

And this, the way Revelation is structured, this is actually the climax. This is the very center of the book, these verses. And actually, verses 10 and 11 are the very center of the book.

And so all the hard work has paid off. We've climbed up this very steep mountain. And we're finally at the summit. And we look out at chapter 12. And what do we see? 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 12 stars. And she was pregnant and was crying out in birth pains. The agony of giving birth. And another sign appeared in heaven. Behold, a great red dragon.

[2:01] We'll stop there. What the heck is going on here? Because we climbed all the way to the top of the mountain. And it's not very clear what we have as the climax of Revelation.

It doesn't make any sense, except that it does. It does make sense because what Revelation 12 is, is a dramatic retelling of the most important story in the history of the universe.

It's the summit of God's entire big story. The climactic moment in salvation history. What am I talking about? Well, you and I, we're reading Revelation 12 in 2016.

So we may not recognize the genre here. But for John's first Christian readers, this language, this apocalyptic language of images and symbols, he uses this language as a storyteller, and it's familiar to them in a way that it might be quite foreign and strange to us.

Because he's borrowing from so many of the most famous myths of the ancient world, and he's also borrowing from the Old Testament. And these are two things that people back then understood, just in their DNA, that we, I'm afraid to say, don't understand in the same way.

[3:13] And so God shows John a vision which uses not only ancient myths and kind of stereotypes, but also Old Testament allusions, he uses this as a way of telling, in a new way, a new fresh way, the story of Jesus' victory over sin and death and Satan.

All of it. Jesus is showing us a vision which retells the good news of the gospel in story form. Let me illustrate. Okay, so there's an heir on the throne, and he's still a young child, and then there's a usurper to the throne.

It's his uncle, in fact, and he's an imposter to the throne, and he's scheming to destroy the heir and to take the throne. But then the usurper, he fails to kill the young heir, and then that young heir flees

into the wilderness, and eventually he returns from hiding to claim his rightful place as king and rescue his people who are under brutal tyranny.

Am I describing Revelation 12? No, I just summarized Disney's The Lion King. Right? Simba and Scar and Timon and Pumbaa. That's what I just, I retold that story.

Just to show you that that is actually a retelling of a very ancient story, which follows the very same plot line as Revelation 12, and I know that some of you will never read this chapter in the same way again, which is fine. So, before we can ask, though, why the heck Jesus would want to show us a vision of the gospel in this strange way, we need to get a few things straight, especially the characters.

[4 : 41] Who are these people that we're meeting? So, let's start with the three main characters. There's a woman, a great red dragon, and a male child born from that woman. So, remember last week Aaron talked about interpretation, a good rule for interpretation, especially with a book like this?

Start with the things that are most clear, and then work downwards towards the things that you're having trouble with, that are unclear. Okay? So, we'll start with the dragon. Who is the dragon? Because that's the clearest one. Thank you, John, for making this clear to us. Look with me at verse 9. The great dragon was thrown down, that ancient serpent who is called the devil, and Satan, the deceiver of the whole world.

He was thrown down, etc. Wow, that's nice when he makes it that clear, isn't it? So, we know that the dragon is Satan. And that name literally means the adversary.

And he's a spiritual being who's utterly opposed to God and to his rule. He's found throughout scripture, and he's pictured here as wearing ten horns and seven diadems, which are like a crown, which kind of symbolized that he's trying to be a king, but he's a pretender to the throne.

[5 : 55] He's playing dress-up. And scripture is clear that Satan is real, and he's vicious, and he has power, but that power is limited and kept in check by the sovereign and good God.

And we'll be coming back to Satan in a few minutes. So, let's move on, secondly, to the second most clear character, which is the male child. And you can look with me at verse 5 for this one. Verse 5.

She, the woman, gave birth to a male child, one who is to rule all the nations with a rod of iron, but her child was caught up to God and to his throne. This phrase, rule or literally shepherd, the nations with a rod of iron, it's a flashing light for anybody who, remember I said it's myth and illusion, Old Testament illusion.

Anybody who knows the Old Testament, it's a flashing light for Psalm 2, this great messianic psalm. And so when you see that he's going to rule or shepherd with a rod of iron, you know that this is talking about the Messiah, the promised king who's going to rescue God's people, and therefore this child is none other than Jesus Christ.

But who's the mother then? Who's the mother? Is it Mary? Well, it's not not Mary, but let me explain that, because we have to be careful with the symbols in Revelation, not to force them, the symbols want to be big, and we try to force them into a tiny box, and give them one definition.

[7 : 27] So you see in verse 1, that this woman is a sign, clothed with the sun and the moon under her feet, and on her head a crown of 12 stars. Well, all these combine as an illusion, as a way of symbolizing the Old Testament people of God, particularly from Genesis 37.

So the woman represents the people of God, in the broadest sense. And so yes, it is in a way represented, the Old Testament people of God are represented in Mary, who is chosen by God to be the vessel for the incarnate birth of Jesus.

So in some ways, yes, it is Mary. And also, it's certainly, when you read this, it reads like the Christmas story, right? It reads like Matthew chapter 2, where Herod is like the dragon, and he's trying to kill the newborn baby right when it's born, and then the baby escapes into where? The wilderness? Just like Mary and Joseph into Egypt. So yeah, it's meant to evoke that as well. But remember, it's not allegory, because allegory will try to narrow the story down into one meaning.

The woman equals Mary. But symbol will always try to expand the story, and evoke, evoke and invoke, so that we get more than one meaning, if possible. So, now that we have these three characters straight, we can begin to retell this story.

[8 : 47] And it goes something like this. This is not the Lion King. At long last, after centuries of waiting, in painful labor, God's promised king is coming to rescue his people.

And yet, even at the very moment when he is most vulnerable, when God the Son has taken on flesh as a baby boy, the great enemy of God since the Garden of Eden, that serpent, Satan, he swoops in to devour the Son.

But the Son triumphs over the dragon. Verses 5 and 6. Her child is caught up to God, and to his throne, and the woman flees into the wilderness, where she has a place prepared by God.

But if you know the gospel story, this is kind of jarring, isn't it? Because it seems like Jesus is born, and then he ascends, straight to the throne. What about his ministry and the cross and all that? How can this be the gospel story? Well, let me suggest that this is a storytelling technique that John is using here, that Jesus gives a vision of, you could say, in even clearer terms.

[9 : 51] I think that it's meant to show us that this was never going to be a fair fight. So, most of you have seen Raiders of the Lost Ark, and you'll remember that Indiana Jones has that great scene where there's that sword-wielding guy, right?

And then he just, bang, dead, right? So, there would have been an epic sword fight, but instead, he just shoots him, and he's dead. It was never a fair fight. And it's kind of like that here, but when you think there's going to be this big climactic battle, it's over before it even begins.

Because, good and evil are not equal and opposite forces. That's called dualism, and it's a heresy, by the way. Satan, yes, he's dangerous, and he's vicious, but he's no match for the true king.

And so, the narrator can summarize Jesus' victory with just this simple phrase, he's caught up, which is meant to not only evoke the cross, remember symbolic language, it evokes the cross, it evokes the empty tomb, and finally, it evokes the ascension to the right hand of the Father.

And so, the climactic moment in the story is the child ascending to his rightful place on the throne of the universe. And it's a fulfillment of Psalm 2. Remember last week, Revelation 11, 15, the kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he shall reign forever and ever.

[11 : 12] This is the good news of the gospel. On earth, as it is in heaven. The dragon stood on the brink of victory when the sun was most vulnerable, and yet, even the sun's death, which surely looked like the dragon's victory, and looked like defeat for the sun, it proved to be the very means of Jesus' victory over the dragon when he rose from the dead and conquered sin and death and Satan.

And this is the gospel story that Revelation 12 is narrating. Okay. I hope you're with me so far, because we're going to dive a little deeper now.

And we're going to try to tackle the rest of the chapter now that we have these three characters in the story straight. because the way the story works is that it's, remember, Revelation's not chronological, right?

It's ordered by the order in which John receives the vision, but it's not necessarily history and chronological timeline, right? So in this retelling of the gospel story, the key moment is the cross and the resurrection.

So you could kind of visualize that in the middle of the story. And everything else in the story needs to fit in relation to that, to that victory that Jesus wins. And so, to help us do, to help us kind of place the pieces and unfold this plot, I want to, I want to put it in this form.

[12 : 37] This is the structure for the rest of the sermon. The king takes the throne. The dragon gets thrown. T-H-R-O-W-N. The woman gets flown.

And the church is not alone. Okay? So if you can write a little rap for me, you can freestyle it for me after the service. But the king takes the throne, the dragon gets thrown, the woman gets flown, and the church is not alone.

Let's try to use that to unpack the rest of this chapter. And it's this first point, the king takes the throne, which is really the one point for this sermon.

And the other three are actually implications of the truth of that first thing. So, if chapter 12 is not chronology, it's not in order in that way, then this central crux, if you will, of the passage is the moment of Jesus' victory on the cross.

It's that decisive moment we've already talked about in verse 5 when Jesus is caught up to the throne. And it's also, listen carefully for this, the same moment in which verse 7 and 8 take place.

[13 : 47] Okay? Verse 7 and 8, the war between Michael and Satan, is actually just a retelling of the same story as verses 1 to 6, but from another perspective.

So, kind of like another camera angle, right? But of the same fight scene. And then, and then we come to verses 10 and 11, and we realize that actually verses 10 and 11 are also describing the very same moment of victory as verse 5 and verse 8.

And yes, a third angle, a third camera angle here. Except this time, we're kind of like over here and we're panning out to the heavenly, imagine it as, it said it's a voice, but you can almost imagine it as a heavenly choir that's singing now a hymn of praise about Christ's victory.

That's verses 10 and 11, which I said is really, in all of Revelation, those might be the two verses at the very center of it. So, verse 10 and 11 are interpreting the very same victory.

And if you look at verse 10 with me, this is what it says. It says, now, now at this moment, at this exact moment, the salvation and the power and the kingdom of God and the authority of his Christ, his sitting at the right hand of the Father on the throne, now it has come at this exact moment.

[15:14] So, verse 10 and 11 has to take place at that moment when Christ wins the victory. This is the song that's sung at that moment of victory. And how has it happened?

That's verse 11. Verse 11. And, or for, because, the accuser, nope, that's not verse 11.

There we go. That's why I lost it. For, halfway through verse 10, for or because, the accuser of our brothers and sisters has been thrown down who accuses them day and night before our God.

That's how it's happened. the accuser, Satan, has been thrown down. And then the final word on this point about the king taking the throne is verse 12. Therefore, because of this victory, in other words, rejoice, O heavens, and all you who dwell in them.

So, in summary, a great cosmic war has taken place in the spiritual realms between God and his adversary, the Satan. And the outcome was never in doubt. Satan and evil have been conquered.

[16:23] The dragon has been thrown down. And so now we can move on from the king takes the throne to the dragon gets thrown. Because what's the first implication of the king taking the throne?

It's said six times in this passage we get thrown down, thrown down, thrown down, over and over again. And I don't know if there's another one between 12 and 20, but it would be nice if there wasn't because then we could say the seventh and completed time of thrown down is chapter 20 when it says he's thrown down one final time into the lake of fire.

You can find out for me if there's another one between because that would be very tidy. He's thrown down finally into the lake of fire but for now he's thrown down where? To earth. He's been defeated. He has no power or authority now over those who belong to the king but he's angry. He's very angry. And there's this kind of romantic misconception when we talk about Satan that, well, the misconception comes really more from Milton, John Milton's Paradise Lost than it comes from scripture.

And it's this idea that, you know, that Satan is kind of this heroic figure and he's kind of a gentleman and he says beautiful things like it's better to reign in hell than serve in heaven.

[17:44] But that's not scripture and even though, you know, Paradise Lost is a literary masterpiece, it's just fiction. Most of what you think you know about Satan, it's kind of mixed up between a little bit of scripture and a lot of John Milton and other people like that.

And so what we actually know about Satan in this chapter is from the names that are used for him. Names like the dragon, the red dragon, the ancient serpent, the Garden of Eden, the devil, the deceiver of the whole world and the accuser.

That's not an English gentleman, is it? And it's that last name, the only one that we have time to talk about tonight is that last one, the accuser. And you remember we read that in verse 10, the accuser of our brothers and sisters, the accuser of the church.

So, Satan is pictured as accusing day and night before the throne of God. He's sort of like a prosecuting attorney. And what is his accusation?

He's accusing us that we are, you and I, are guilty under God's law. We're sinful and we're deserving of the punishment of death. And you know what? Up until that great moment in the center of history, that cross moment I was talking about, up until that moment he's exactly right.

[19:03] We are guilty. And so he's allowed to stand in the throne room of heaven and hurl those accusations against us. But, but, through Christ's atoning sacrifice for sin, where he dies as the innocent lamb for the sake of sinful humanity, through that, we are set free from any further accusations from Satan.

So let me put it, let me put it in this way. If, if you have put your faith in the Lord Jesus, and yet you continue to struggle with hearing an accusing voice, reminding you of your guilt, friends, that is not

the gospel.

That's a lie. And it comes from Satan and I pray that Revelation 12 will help to purge that thought from your mind. And if you wrestle with guilt or shame, and you've never followed Jesus, this, this chapter and this particular verse is great hope to you because Jesus is saying the, the, the slate has been wiped clean.

No one can make any accusation against you. There is new life as a child of God. And in Revelation, it's pictured as wearing white, blameless and at peace. And so Satan has been thrown down, he's been defeated, and now he's licking his wounds and he's looking around for someone, just anyone that he can attack.

And what does he see? He sees the woman. So Satan gets thrown and the woman gets flown. What happens to the woman after she gives birth? Satan's been defeated and he's, he's roaring for a fight and in verse six, we read this strange story, part of the story about she flees into the wilderness for 1260 days.

[20 : 47] What's all that about? The first thing that's helpful to recognize, remember about the chronology again, is that verse 13 and 14, look with me down, it's the beginning of a paragraph on page 1035, halfway down the first column.

And when the dragon saw that he had been thrown down to the earth, he pursued the woman who had given birth to the male child. The woman was given the two wings of the great eagle so that she might fly from the serpent into the wilderness to the place where she is to be nourished for a time and times and half a time.

We'll stop there. That's actually a repetition of verse six. And so we see that actually verse 13 and 14 are a retelling with a little bit more information of the same story that took place in verse six. And just for the sake of time to summarize, all the symbols that are used in this part of the story are from the Old Testament Exodus story. That great story narrating God's rescue of his people from slavery in Egypt.

And the key point of the symbols is this. When God rescues his people, he rescues them for the sake of relationship. He rescues them for the sake of relationship.

[21 : 56] Did you notice what God does when he brings the woman into the wilderness? Now the wilderness we picture as a place of kind of like I go there to die, right? And, but the thing is that we're told twice he nourishes her there.

God nourishes her. And this word for nourish is the very same word if you go to Ephesians chapter six where Paul starts talking to fathers and mothers. He says the very same word about the relationship between a parent and a child.

The nourish word is used to describe the care that you have as a parent for your children. That's how he nourishes the woman in the wilderness with that kind of tender, loving compassion. And then the second image is this woman getting flown up in verse 14, right? So the dragon swoops in to devour her and God takes her away with the wings of eagles. Now it's reminiscent, I immediately go to Bilbo and his friends being rescued by the eagles, right, in the Hobbit.

But friends, it's not, the imagery is not from the Hobbit. It's the other way around, actually. Tolkien gets it from this. There's this imagery here that symbolizes Exodus 19.4.

[23 : 08] And this is very important. Listen to this. God says, You have seen how I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself.

Okay? The reason I say it's very important is because he rescues them on eagles' wings to bring them to himself for the sake of relationship. The Lord brought Israel to Sinai, his very presence to meet with him and be in relationship with him.

And here, God brings the woman into the wilderness where he nourishes her in his presence like a parent to a child. The woman gets flown for the sake of relationship in the presence of God.

And finally, the church is not alone. So one of the questions we get when we teach children about Jesus' ascension, you know, when he's on that mountain and he kind of floats up, or that's the way you always picture it, right?

He kind of floats up into the clouds and the disciples are looking up. One of the questions when we're teaching this to children in Sunday school is they say, why did Jesus leave his friends?

[24 : 15] It's a good question. Because it seems like he's kind of like waving as he goes up, right? See you guys in a couple of millennium. Take care. You're on your own for a while.

I hope the church makes it. But no. No, that's not what's happening there. Because when Jesus gets caught up to the throne of heaven in verse 5 there in chapter 12, he's not leaving us in the lurch.

He's not leaving us alone. And this is just saying already what we've said with the woman gets flown, right? He rescues for the sake of relationship. We've already seen from the symbols in Exodus that Jesus does not leave us alone.

He nourishes us. He cares for us. Even as the dragon makes war on us. And so we get a final character that emerges in verse 17. The offspring of the woman.

And I'm just going to tell you the offspring is the church. I'm not going to explain it. We can talk about it after. We don't have time now. The offspring though is the church. And Satan hates the church because he hates Jesus.

[25 : 24] And he's been thrown down and now he can no longer reach Jesus. He no longer has any chance of fighting Jesus or defeating him. But in the mystery of God for a limited time until the final day when he's thrown down into that lake of fire Satan is permitted to make war on the church with this tireless fury that we read about in verse 17.

And so yikes, right? That doesn't seem like a victory. What happened to that conquering in the middle of that cross event? But here's the funny part because by the time we get to verse 17 this story is starting to look it's starting to look like an old black and white Buster Keaton or Charlie Chaplin movie.

I don't know how many of you have seen those but Satan is getting slapped around and he's thrown down and then he's foiled at every turn. So he can't he can't beat Jesus he can't beat the woman he can't even beat creation we skipped over that part but you know the water and gets eaten up by creation at every turn he gets thrown down.

And so yes he will make war against the church but this red dragon is now by verse 17 he's bruised and battered and he more he has a closer resemblance to the dragon and by the end of Robert Munsch's children's story the paper bag princess.

Can you picture that dragon? That's the dragon in verse 17. He's huffing and puffing to keep up with the power and protection of the king who sits on the throne. In other words this final scene this chapter is narrated almost like a parody of some sort of epic battle.

[26 : 55] It's just a parody because Satan will wage war but the outcome is already determined. He's going to lose. He's already lost in fact. And so as we wrap up and conclude we come full circle back again to where we started.

And we read in Revelation 12 11 and they have conquered him by the blood of the lamb and by the word of their testimony for they loved not their lives even unto death.

And we see that the church is not alone because we conquer the accuser and the deceiver in the very same way that our Lord Jesus Christ did. We conquer him by the blood of the lamb and the word of testimony by our worship of the king on the throne and our witness to the true king and his saving promises.

And there's no denying friends that Revelation has a hard word to say to us because it says the lamb has conquered follow him at any cost. It shows us Jesus conquered by being a lamb who was slain.

We conquer in the very same way. We conquer in the very same way. And he's calling us to follow him into suffering into persecution.

[28 : 13] And this is hard. How are we going to do this? It's precisely why we need the gospel story retold in this strange and magnificent way. It's zany and it's uncomfortable but what a story.

Because I can't stand here and tell you and Jesus does not just stand up and tell you hey obey listen do my commandments do what I tell you to just do it. That's not really going to get you to do anything.

It's not going to get you to obey out of your heart out of your affections out of your love for someone. True obedience needs to purge and reposition reignite our holy imagination and our affections.

And that's what this story does. It grips us with the gospel so that we are we're invited to fall in love with Jesus and what he has done for us. And that's why verse 11 says that they loved not their lives even unto death.

This kind of love this kind of love unto death only happens when we recognize what the lamb on the throne has done for us. He says follow me and then only then we can say let's go.

[29 : 29] Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.