

Beauty on the Beast | Early Morning Service

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Date: 05 February 2017

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- [0 : 0 0] And let us pray together. Father, we pray for your Holy Spirit. We pray for wisdom from above as we hear your word and ask that you will strengthen us, that you will give us the gifts that we need to live faithfully in this world, knowing that we are called and chosen by you, the one who has saved us.
- In Jesus' name we pray. Amen. Please be seated. Well, it's good to be with you on this very frosty, snowy morning, and I thought it was very appropriate that James was reading a psalm about melting the hills on this frozen day.
- So that may be a prayer for the streets of Vancouver. I don't know. Revelation 17. Revelation 17.
- Wild and woolly things, images are here. A scarlet, a great prostitute sitting on a scarlet beast with lots of blasphemous names that has seven heads and ten horns.
- And you have a lamb. It kind of leaves your head spinning at 7.30 in the morning on a very snowy Vancouver morning, especially this time. And so the question when we see those symbols, those characters, is why does God choose to use those images?
- [1 : 2 2] While going through the book of Revelation, there's actually a number of very good commentaries. And one of them is Eugene Peterson. And he writes in his commentary about Flannery O'Connor, who is the American writer, wrote lots of short stories, Roman Catholic, woman of great faith.
- And she would really speak into the culture. And they asked a question, somebody asked her a question about why she created so many bizarre characters in her stories.
- And she replied that for the near blind, you have to draw very large, simple caricatures. And this is helpful for us today because the great prostitute and the beast are large, simple caricatures because we tend to be spiritually blind.
- God needs to open our eyes with these. He brings to our awareness the powerfully seductive presence of those who prevent or try to keep us from worshiping what is true, the slain and risen lamb.
- And that's really the point of these pictures for us, to help us to discern, to be discerning people, to see how we are being pulled away from truth and how evil can work in this world.
- [2 : 5 4] And it's critical for us to do this. This is at the heart of the Christian faith because we are called from our baptism to battle against any forces that try to pull people or ourselves away from true worship of Jesus.
- So in the baptism service, in the Book of Common Prayer, just after the baptism itself, do you remember what happens? Is that the minister signs the child or the adult with the sign of the cross.
- And we pray a prayer that this baptized person will fight under Christ's banner against sin, the world, and the devil.
- And continue Christ's faithful soldier and servant until her or his life's end. And for many of you, that prayer was prayed for you.

And when we pray that in a baptism service, we're praying for that for ourselves and for each other, not just the baptized as well. And when we pray that, that we will fight against the world, we're not praying about the world as a whole, are we?

[4 : 06] We're not combative people that are against everything in the world. There is much good that God has created. And so what is necessary is that God's soldiers discern.

So they fight under Jesus' lordship against any human systems or economies or civilizations or empires or philosophies that are anti-God, that are opposed to his truth, his values, his love, his goodness, and his mercy.

And Christian soldiers do that by bringing Jesus' grace-filled lordship with them. They fight under his banner, the rule of his love and his truth.

Well, Revelation 17 brings us this discernment, which we desperately need. Because it's God's perspective. It's a heaven-eye look at evil.

And the terrible beast that we see symbolizes really any human system that opposes God, that is against him.

[5 : 16] And the great prostitute probably is easiest understood as the local incarnation of that evil. And it's hard in this passage because often those things are really together, the beast and the prostitute.

But that's probably the best way of understanding it, that that prostitute is the local, in a certain time and place, incarnation of that. And that crops up in every generation, in every epoch of human history, you will see that.

In verse 7 and 14, the angel shows us that the prostitute is Babylon, that great city. And it's important because a city, the Babylon, was started as a Babel.

And this was the city that built the great tower to heaven. And they wanted to show that they were as great as God. We will go to heaven. We will rule in place of God.

And in John's time, that city was Rome. And so in the New Testament, you see Babylon as the symbol of Rome. But there have been many cities, many powers in our world since then that have opposed God that could be called that Babylon as well.

[6 : 38] And that's what God's word is doing for us. And because I have very little time, I just want to talk about two things about this prostitute, about evil and how it looks.

And the first is that in this chapter, she puts herself in the place of God. In fact, often what you see is that she is mimicking God. So look at verse 2.

The great prostitute is seated on many waters with whom the kings of the earth have committed sexual immorality. Now the fact that she is seated means that she rules.

And her rule is over the waters. And if you jump down to the, near the end of the chapter, verse 15, the waters symbolize peoples and multitudes and nations and languages.

Very, very large number of peoples. And remember the great reality that we saw earlier in Revelation is that the lamb who was slain is seated, is on the throne, and that the multitudes gather around him.

[7 : 46] Too many to count. And says, salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne and to the lamb. So you see, she is mimicking Jesus, the king of kings, who is the earth's true ruler, puts herself in his place.

And so she's called great. And she proudly makes fun of the true God. That's the blasphemous names. And she is amazing because the beast she rides seems to have the very power of God.

And this curious thing about this entity that was and is not. Do you remember reading that? And then is again. It regenerates.

Evil keeps coming back when you think it's done away with. And what we see here is that kings commit sexual immorality with her. Now that symbolically means that they worship this human system.

And they are pulled away from the true God who they ought to worship. It is spiritual unfaithfulness. And I thought that was wonderful reading that because what God's intent is that all these kings, all people, all rulers would actually worship God.

[9 : 03] And they are unfaithful. They are being pulled away from God to spiritual unfaithfulness by these human systems that set themselves up in the place of God.

And there's lots of systems in our own generations that demand this worship. You know, our local Babylon can be materialism. It can be secularism that excludes God, pushes Him to the side.

Military power sets itself up in the place of God. Self-determined sexuality that says this is what sexuality and identity is about, not what God would say.

No reference to Him again. Or a system that determines when human life begins and ends. Who but God takes that? But in our society, the human system wants that.

The desire for fame, which is one of the highest priorities in polls for younger people especially. The desire to assert self and really gain a following.

[10 : 06] These become all-consuming things. They take center stage in many people's lives for multitudes. They're popular movements. And for those powers and systems, the idea of the true king being the lamb who was slain is ridiculous.

And he is blasphemed. The one who takes away the sin of the world. Why? The caricature says that this is evil. And it opens our eyes to the true nature of evil.

That it draws us away from what is life-giving, what is true, what is worship of God. And the sobering thing for us as Christians is that we are drawn to that kind of worship.

It is something that is a temptation and an influence on us. And that brings us to the second feature of these human systems. And that is that the prostitute shows us that they actually seduce with power and beauty.

So if you look at verse 4, the woman was arrayed in purple and scarlet, which is the clothing of kings and queens. And she is adorned with gold and jewels and pearls.

[11 : 21] There is beauty here. And she's holding her hand a golden cup, which is pleasure. And at first glance, there is this powerful promise of immediate fulfillment and pleasure and security, good life.

Many are drawn in. And certainly we Christians are tempted daily to this false worship. But the angel shows that it is a corrupt counterfeit of God.

Because the golden cup, as you see, is actually full of abomination. If you keep going in that verse. And impurity. So that the image of the prostitute says it's not real.

It's not lasting. It is, and involves a caricature of love that is not commitment. The beast that she rides is evil.

There is a destructive force as good as it might look. So Rome looked really, really good and attractive. Rome was bringing peace and stability and economic well-being.

[12 : 26] It didn't look like a beast. And people who lived in Rome would think, why this awful monster and this prostitute as a symbol of where we live? But what he is showing here, what John is showing here, is that evil is often couched in beauty and seems very reasonable.

So even though most living in Rome wouldn't think of their city as a prostitute riding a red monster, it did offer immediate gain and security that God didn't seem to be able to give.

All you had to do was give your life to her to live for the things that she offered and not to the lamb. In fact, to literally worship the emperor. But behind that beauty, power, and popularity, God reveals that there is filth in the golden cup.

He says that she lures you into unfaithfulness to God in exchange and she offers security, power, wealth, and fulfillment. Live for the things she offers, she is saying.

Don't live for the lamb. And her desire in the end is really to destroy those who are faithful to Jesus. So if you look at verse 6, she's actually addicted to this, to destroy the things of Jesus and those who are faithful.

[13 : 51] She is drunk, it says, with the blood of the saints, the blood of the martyrs of Jesus. That is what is behind this. It is a desire for the destruction of the people of God.

But John says this, he says, I marveled greatly. I was awestruck at seeing this picture that the angel showed me. It is awesome that this power can attract people so easily and so openly oppose God.

And God seems powerless to stop this beast. But here's our application as we leave this passage today. Because we, like John, marvel greatly.

And the angel says to us, why do you marvel? Why are you so taken up with this? And it says, you require wisdom, the angel says.

You require wisdom. And he is giving to us in this chapter a final discernment, a real discernment. So you see in the rest of the passage that the beast is now under God's judgment.

[15 : 00] So at the middle of 8, verse 8, the end of verse 11, you can see that the beast goes to destruction. And then God makes the prostitute and the beast fight one another so that the prostitute is destroyed in verse 15.

You know, he's saying that evil will go in and will collapse in itself and fight one another because there is followings. There is rivalry within that. You can see this throughout human history.

Even the greatest, most fearsome human empire or economic system has always collapsed. And this passage leaves us with a powerful and good caricature.

And that is in verse 14, beast and king will make war on the lamb and the lamb will conquer them. Why? For he is the lord of lords and king of kings and those with him are called and chosen and faithful.

So you see the symbol that overshadows the beast and this prostitute is the all-powerful lamb. That's what we go away with. And it calls us to say, cling to this one because he will conquer.

[16 : 13] He has called you. He has chosen you this morning here at St. John's and for all eternity. And our response is to be faithful, to discern what is evil in everyday life and to actually separate ourselves from the corrupting influence of that prostitute, whatever it might be, and instead to trust that Jesus rules, to see our daily life from God's perspective because it is being able to discern what is evil in our world.

It is being able to do that that you can really bless the world, that you can be involved in the world, that you can have confidence to draw it and yourselves towards Christ and away from the faithfulness, the faithlessness that leads to destruction.

May God give us this open eye, that he opens the eyes that are blind to the rule and the reign of the lamb and draw those who are in our lives to him who alone can give life, who alone is the one worthy of our worship.

Amen.