

A Woman, Her Baby, and the Dragon

Christmas / Revelation 12:1–17

The birth of Jesus is heaven's eternal declaration of war against Satan, sin, and death.

Christians around the world are entering, this Sunday, into a season of the church we call “Advent.” This is a season of preparation for Christmas. It takes its name from the ancient word, Lt. *adventus*. You see, when a new emperor took the throne in ancient Rome, he would visit a city to symbolize the start of his reign in an *Adventus*. An *adventus* celebrated the visit of a king to a city in his official capacity. For example, after Nero visited Corinth in the time of the apostles, Corinth struck coins which had his image and said “*Adventus Augusti Corinth*,” which “The arrival [or visit] of [the emperor] to Corinth.” The first generations of Christians appropriated this word into their own liturgical calendars to talk about the arrival of Jesus.

We think that it is a really helpful phrase to recover for ourselves, and it animated our desire to bring a slightly different accent to our advent series. Because a king has come.

You see:

Christmas isn't mainly about a manger; Christmas is about a cross.

Because Christmas isn't mainly about a baby born to live; Christmas is about a king born to die.

So, this Advent season at Rivertree, we're going to trace the life of this king born to die. See, the night of Christ's birth, it isn't merely a silent night. Christmas is God's declaration of war against sin, shame, and death. But death doesn't just roll over at its knell. At every step of Jesus's life from birth until his death, Christ is opposed by the very ones he came to save. At the same time, Christ is making the tent wider and bringing people into his work we'd never expect.

When Herod's infanticide drives infant Jesus out of the land, the ancient enemy of Israel, Egypt, is the place where he finds shelter until his next advance.

When Jesus is announcing the kingdom to his hometown, they reject him---not realizing that he is the king born to die not just for his friends and family. He's born to die for the world.

And at the close, when King Jesus is teaching about the nature of his kingdom, people conspire to silence him. But the King born to die can't be stopped. His birth is God's declaration of war against sin, shame, and death.

His birth is for the person despairing about the brokenness in the adult child's life. His birth is for the teenager trying to make sense of their identity. His birth is for the person is for the man or woman who is too ashamed to talk about being beaten down by life's circumstances.

This season announces the unstoppable progress of the conquering king who jealously loves his people's hearts and makes war for them.

So, my aim today is pretty simple. We're going to look at the John's nativity, and I hope for you to see that **the birth of Jesus is the cosmic reversal of the tragedy of Eden.**

Philip Yancey said it this way, "From God's viewpoint—and Satan's—Christmas signals far more than the birth of a baby; it was an invasion, the decisive advance in the great struggle for the cosmos."

Now, when I say it like that, I hope you know that I understand that Hallmark can't sell nativity scenes like that. I mean what would you package such a nativity scene? I don't know, maybe a Pacific beachhead, pillboxes on the ridge, smoke and some Type 92 Heavy lead flying through the air, and amphibious assault craft landing on the beach. Eh. Probably not. But with that we're approximating what Christmas means *theologically*. If John were in the board meeting, he'd tell the product development group. we'd need to have a woman, her baby, and a dragon in our nativity scene.

Turn with me to Revelation 12:1-17. So, this isn't Linus's Christmas speech, but it's Christmas all the same.

A brief word about our book this morning. Revelation is the last book of the Bible, written by John who also authored one gospel and three epistles. He likely recieved this apocalypse at the end of the first century in a period of white-hot persecution. It is during this time that Christianity begins to lose its protection as a sect of

Judaism and bears the full weight of Roman coercion. Eusebius tells us that the emperor at the time Domitian followed in Nero's footsteps, so this wasn't empire wide as it will become in the next century, but it is intense.

Why does all of this matter? Christians in this early period were watching their daughters and wives eaten by lions for Roman spectacle, their sons were being burned alive, and their pastors were being crucified or exiled. But it wasn't supposed to be like this. What about the whole "the government will be upon his shoulders" thing? The Holy Spirit gives John the answer here.

The book of Revelation can be broken up into seven sections. It has a prologue and epilogue. John has two experience which he called "being in the Spirit," a section regarding signs in heaven, and two final experiences "in the Spirit." That middle section regarding signs in heaven is our chapter today, and its important because of the first time in the whole book, the Lord is revealing nothing new to John, but instead, the Holy Spirit shows John a summary of redemptive history. Though this is one sign for John, there are four scenes.

Since this is a theater of cosmic war, I want you to see three fronts of the war with a moment for divine commentary. So, first, we'll see the earthly front over the boy child. Then, we'll see the heavenly front between spiritual powers. Third, we'll have divine commentary. And finally, wphie'll see the cosmic resistance until the final battle yet to come, even for our time.

God Himself entered the pain we experience (1-6).

First, I want us to see that God Himself entered the pain we experience on account of evil and death.

Now, why in the world do I think Revelation 12 is a nativity? Lets read and see:

English Standard Version Chapter 12

And 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. 2 She was pregnant and was crying out in birth pains and the agony of giving birth. 3 And another sign appeared in heaven: behold, a great red dragon, with seven heads and ten horns, and on his heads seven diadems. 4 His tail swept down a third of the stars of heaven and cast them to the earth. And the dragon stood before the woman who

was about to give birth, so that when she bore her child he might devour it. 5 She 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, 6 and the woman fled into the wilderness, where she has a place prepared by God, in which she is to be nourished for 1,260 days.

In our first part, we encounter the three main people in our text: a pregnant woman, a dragon, and a baby boy.

We see the woman's appearance and her action. The book of Revelation is full of types and antitypes. So, John tells us about two women in his apocalypse: this woman and another woman, the a great prostitute of Babylon. Both are arrayed in clothing, and both are mothers. That woman is arrayed in purple and scarlet, drunk on the blood of martyred saints. Rev 17:5 tells us that she is the mother of earth's abominations. She represents the city of Rome, which ultimately represents the kingdom of this world opposed to the rule of God.

By contrast, our woman here in Rev 12 is "clothed with the sun" and stands with the "moon under her feet." She has a crown of twelve stars on her head. Because this language is reserved to describe God himself in Scripture, John is seeing this woman as exalted. She is also pregnant, and the birth of a child is imminent.

So who is she? Commentators debate whether she is Mary, Israel, or the church. I do not care to get stuck in those details.

Who is the woman? What is clear to me in this passage is that the woman is locked in a struggle with a dragon, and that dragon, John tells us is "the ancient serpent, the deceiver of the whole world."

So, it seems plain to me that this woman is a archetypal woman.

At the beginning of the Bible, God made a covenant promise to Eve that her offspring would crush the head of the serpent.

Now, here at the close of the Bible, in this nativity, we see God keep his promise in the baby who is to be born.

There is, however, another character present here: a dragon. Just like the woman, we see his appearance and action. The word dragon here is translated from the Greek *δράκων*, which is a cousin to the word *serpent*. His seven heads and ten horns is, of course, metaphoric, symbolic language to show how terrifying he is.

By saying that this is symbolic does not make it *less dangerous*. Symbols attempt to express a reality greater than themselves. All the symbolic language of Revelation shows just how weak our language is to grasp cosmic realities. Let me give you an example. I was back on base a couple of years ago for a wedding at the Officer's Club, which sits on a ridge overlooking the Tennessee River. On the way there, you drive pass rows and rows of these munitions bunkers. Now these bunkers are clearly labeled as such with the design that you stay away. The symbol is pretty benign compared to the reality of the thing.

This dragon is infinitely more dangerous than munitions on the base. He is Satan himself.

Who is the "dragon"? We see later that in v. 9 that this dragon is "that ancient serpent, who is called the devil and Satan, the deceiver of the whole world." His seven heads and ten horns show him to be the beast from Daniel 7, and his sweeping "the third" is a clear allusion to the demonic activity in Daniel 8 where the beast opposes God by trampling upon the hosts in heaven.

Was Satan in Bethlehem? Yes.

Have you ever noticed that the magi didn't actually know where to go when they arrived in Israel? Matthew tells us in that the magi went to Herod *the king* and asked them where the real king was. How did they respond? Have you ever paid attention to this? *They knew the Messiah would be born. They knew the prophecies.* So, Herod was troubled and assembled his court, and he asked them where the Messiah would be born. Do you know what they did? They opened up Micah 5:2 and told Herod the answer: Bethlehem.

Of course, however, Herod had no intention of actually allowing the real king to survive. He fulfills the prophecy of Psalm 2 by holding counsel against the Lord's Messiah. So he resolved to have the baby killed, but when the magi didn't cooperate he killed every baby boy under the age of two in the province.

The ruling powers were so opposed to the rule of God that the nation itself turns against its Messiah and slaughters her young boys. The dragon wanted to devour the baby. Oh yes. Satan was in Bethlehem. But, I'll let Ross cover this more next week.

Who is the baby? This baby is the "one who is to rule all nations with a rod of iron." These words are also direct fulfillment of Psalm 2: the Son will break the nations "with a rod of iron." This is unique boy.

We aren't given a great number of details about him right now, but this one sentence captures the boy's whole life: this dragon tried to devour Christ through Herod, but Egypt sheltered him. Later he will attempt to devour this man upon the cross, but he will again fail.

It might seem odd to us that Christ's death and resurrection are not mentioned here, unless we consider the audience. The persecuted church already knows that Jesus was crucified, died, was buried, and resurrected. The boy's struggle against the dragon is the same struggle of the church, as we'll soon see. So, here in the last half of v. 5 is all we see of Jesus's life, ministry, and salvific work on the cross, but it is all that we need, as we'll soon see.

You see, God isn't unconcerned with your experience of evil, which you feel as pain---either emotionally or physically. Instead, he himself enters into that pain.

Let's keep reading.

Heaven isn't silent about evil; it sounds like swords not harps (7-9).

English Standard Version Chapter 12

7 Now war arose in heaven, Michael and his angels fighting against the dragon. And the dragon and his angels fought back, 8 but he was defeated, and there was no longer any place for them in heaven. 9 And 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 to the earth, and his angels were thrown down with him.

You see, we have this idea that heaven is just this place of peace with harps and fat baby cherubs. Nope. Because God the Father cares about the church, heaven itself and the angels there within are earnestly engaged in the war for you and I. Do you know that angels care about you? They marvel at your image-bearing. They marvel that God the Spirit lives inside of you, Christian. So, on this not so silent night, heaven isn't silent. But not on account of trumpets and harps. The clash is sword blows.

While that is happening, a heavenly struggle is being waged. This passage on the surface seems puzzling, mainly because we aren't accustomed to hearing sermons on angelic wars. But, why is Michael fighting, and why are the angels *his*?

John, in this small nativity, is compressing the birth, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus into a small point on a comprehensive timeline. So he's moving back and forth on a timeline as we typically think of things.

Remember that throughout this apocalypse, John is seeing these visions and relies upon the Spirit to interpret their meaning for him. So, God's commentary in vs. 10-12 will be very important for us discerning the meaning here. Michael is Christ's deputy. While the Lord Jesus is handling business down on earth, taking on the dragon personally. His deputy, Michael and his battalion, is taking on the dragon and his angels. Those of us who are familiar with Scripture will not be surprised that at the exact moment Christ was handling business in his incarnation, his hosts were handling their business in heaven. Daniel 12 prophesies of a time when the people "are in great trouble" Michael will be one of the agents used by God to preserve his people.

This moment in history, where the dragon is attempting (but will fail!) to devour the boy child is precisely the "time of trouble" predicted by Daniel. This moment is precisely that from which he and his readers, along with the rest of the Great Multitude, are to be delivered by the blood of the Lamb, who has taken possession of the book of life.

Here, Christ, being all-powerful, tips his scepter even from the cross and brings all power to bear upon all rebel powers which he had previously allowed to move and work.

I can't quite press the image enough. The fulcrum of all of God's wrath against sin, death, and shame is being poured out at this moment. Christ taking it upon himself on behalf of his people, but also all other rebel forces are being subjugated.

God is pleased to make war against evil for his people (10-12).

In the next two verses, we'll see God's commentary on the battle: he's very happy to do this for his people.

So, what is Christmas? It is an incredibly violent moment in redemptive history where supreme evil, in pride, assumed he could snuff out God's redemptive purpose, but in the end, this pitiful dragon is crushed in the opening battle of the end.

To use an analogy from War in the Pacific, the battle of Iwo Jima has been won and the main islands are now in view. The end is written and the fate is set. Now is only humiliation, pain, and suffering for every power that ever opposed God.

Look with me to what God has to say:

English Standard Version Chapter 12

10 And I heard a loud voice in heaven, saying, "Now the salvation and the power and the kingdom of our God and the authority of his Christ have come, for the accuser of our brothers has been thrown down, who accuses them day and night before our God. 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. 12 Therefore, rejoice, O heavens and you who dwell in them! But woe to you, O earth and sea, for the devil has come down to you in great wrath, because he knows that his time is short!"

See now three things about what God says about this war:

It is not really military but of legality

See that the victory announced is not one of conquest, but one related to Satan's work as an accuser. Satan at no point in all history has actually had a ruling power to rival God. This is not a ying-yang, cosmic dualism. God allows Satan a very short leash in the universe, and his leash allows him to function as a sort of prosecutor.

You know what prosecutors do. They look at the laws of a given dominion and officially charges a criminal with breaking that law. They show up in court and convince the jury that you did in fact commit the murder and deserve the just punishment. We see this twice in Scripture, very plainly where Satan accuses Joshua the high priest in Zech 3 and another where he accuses God of placing a hedge of protection around Job.

But he isn't just an accuser. He is also a deceiver. So, he isn't actually concerned with justice. Motivated by hate, he tempts humankind to doubt God, deceiving them with vain glory and false promises and then charging them with the offense.

With Christ's work, there is no room for accusations against God's people.
That, brothers and sisters, is gospel.

Satan's defeat is not militaristic but forensic

God's salvation does not merely disarm Satan's prosecuting work, but the people who were accused by him now *conquer* their former accuser by the power of "the blood of the Lamb."

Who is this Lamb? He is the one from chps. 5 who alone is worthy to receive power, wealth, wisdom, and might.

How is it that sinners can conquer in such a way? Because the boy child is one of many offspring. Look in v. 17. This male child, the Lord Jesus Christ, is the new Adam, the fellow offspring of this same woman. This one offspring won for his brothers and sisters full salvation.

Their confession of faith, "the word of their testimony," is how these benefits are appropriated. They confess with their mouth that Jesus Christ is Lord and become more than conquerors through him who loved them. The blood of the Lamb empowers anyone who confesses that Jesus is Lord to conquer their accuser, their enemy from hell, Satan himself.

The war is necessary because an alternative rule would be disastrous for our souls.

Why is there woe on the earth and sea? The reign of Satan is one which is disastrous for anyone underneath it. Romans 1 gives us some picture of what it looks like. Exchanging the rule of God for the rule of Satan incurs the wrath of God, naturally, as I hope you can now see.

Alas his time for total vanquishing is short, and he doesn't waste opportunities to harass you and I.

We can expect opposition until the Second

Advent(13-17).

English Standard Version Chapter 12

13 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. 14 But 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. 15 The serpent poured water like a river out of his mouth after the woman, to sweep her away with a flood. 16 But the earth came to the help of the woman, and the earth opened its mouth and swallowed the river that the dragon had poured from his mouth. 17 Then the dragon became furious with the woman and went off to make war on the rest of her offspring, on those who keep the commandments of God and hold to the testimony of Jesus. And he stood on the sand of the sea.

Finally, I want us to know that we can expect opposition until the Second Advent. At the *Adventus* in ancient Rome, emperors were visiting. Before he even left his first visitation, Jesus tells his disciples that he's going to leave them for a season. He would, however, *advent* again. And at that *Adventus* we won't see a baby in a manger. John gives us a vision of him riding a white horse and pulling a sword out of his mouth. Remember, the symbols pale in comparison to reality. The zeal Christ has for his church---the zeal he has for you---cannot be overstated.

God has not, however, abandoned his people to the dragon. No. This woman is given "the two wings of the great eagle" and flies into the wilderness. Now this is really a wild scene until you see that this is an echo of Exodus. That makes total sense because the greatest moment in redemptive history *prior* to the Christ event was the Exodus. Of course we'd see an echo here because all of the seeds in that Exodus story have grown into massive oaks by this point in the redemptive narrative. Exodus 19:4 and Deut. 32:11 both record the Lord talking about how he delivered his people out of Egypt by bearing them on his back with wings like eagles. God will bear the woman in the wilderness, nourishing her there for a "time, and times, and half a time." This phrase is, of course, a fulfillment of Dan 7, which references the allotted time where God permits a reign of evil. This reign of evil is acknowledged throughout the New Testament as well.

So, what does that have to do with Christmas? Christmas is more than about the birth of a baby. Christmas is a declaration of war against sin, shame, and death. But, we don't see all of those powers in subjection to him yet. So, we might give in to just thinking that this is the way things will always be. Or worse, we'll grow weary and fall away.

John's original audience was there. They felt the claws of the dragon against their throat and they were gasping for their lives. So, the Lord allowed John to see how that same dragon tried in vain to snuff the Son of God out, but was unable to do so.

Seeing that enables us to see that we are in a season of occupied resistance. In God's patience, desiring that all would come unto repentance, he has delayed his second coming.

If you are not yet a Christian, the reason he hasn't come back yet is not because he's slow. No, he's waiting on you. Yes, even *you*. But we, those who are his, are being harassed by a dragon who has made it his aim to make war with us.

I opened with allusions to the Pacific War so I'll close in Europe. There are many heroic tales from Europe during WWII. Many of them you are familiar with--- from Dutch resistance blowing up dikes to slow the Nazis or the French killing Nazi officers, etc.—but some of my favorite are the acts of resistance of every day citizens. I think those are important, because they show you don't have to be a hero in a way to resist the enemy.

You and I are in a war of resistance against the enemy. Since he failed to kill your Lord and so he has declared war on you, he is intent on destroying you.

Christmas sealed the enemy's fate; he's not just on the backfoot: he's been disarmed. But he is intent on devouring you.

That's why you still feel the pain of the old order. But wonder not where the prince of peace is. He's waging a war for you against sin, shame, and death. He is zealous for you. He's your king born to die.

Small Group Questions

1. How does John's nativity in Revelation compliment the nativities in the Gospels?
2. The symbolism of Revelation is well-known. What are some principles from Bible study which can guard us from drawing speculative interpretations of the book? One, for

example, is “Scripture interprets Scripture,” where we use what is clear to perceive what seems unclear. What are some other principles that can help with this book in particular?

3. Talk about the intersection of the incarnation and human suffering. What does it say about 1) our God and 2) our suffering that He willingly entered into it? What does Scripture say?
4. What do you think about including language such as violence, war, crucifixion, or even discussions of Satan---in the Christmas season? Is it out-of-bounds? Or is it appropriate? What Scriptures support your position?
5. The last point asserts that we should expect to experience opposition to God’s rule on this side of eternity. What are some strategies for “resistance” prescribed by the Bible? How can we live faithfully on this side of eternity?