

This Calls for Wisdom

The book of Revelation reads much like a play, a drama played out on a cosmic stage. Last week we watched people from every nation gather before the throne, worshiping the one who saves them after they endure the tribulation, the grinding down that comes because of their faithfulness to Jesus Christ. The chapters that follow describe more tumultuous events that play out in heaven and on earth. And then the second act of this drama begins with chapter 12 when our attention is shifted to a cast of a woman, a dragon, angels, and the beasts. We are told that the woman who is “clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars,” gives birth to a son, and that “a great red dragon, with seven heads and ten horns and seven diadems on his heads” stands ready to devour the child. Before that can happen the child is whisked away to the throne room and the woman is sheltered in the wilderness. Then war breaks out in heaven 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.¹

The satan character has been around throughout the entirety of scripture. Scholar Craig Koester points out:

The Hebrew word *satan* means ‘adversary’ and the Old Testament [pictures] Satan as the member of God’s heavenly court who accused people of sin...Satan’s expulsion from heaven shows that Christ’s blood effectively ‘conquers’ the Devil (12:11) because he no longer has any business denouncing the saints whom Christ has cleansed.²

¹ Revelation 12:9, New Revised Standard Version, Updated Edition (NRSVue)

² Craig R. Koester, *Revelation and the End of All Things* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001) 122.

In other words, the adversary has been demoted. Even though his power in this drama was limited to begin with, he has even less power now. Koester argues that evil only seems invincible on earth, and that, “From a heavenly perspective...evil rages on earth not because it is so powerful, but because it is vulnerable.”³ Evil’s time is limited and its power has been corralled in John’s vision, making it dangerous but not invincible. [Read Revelation 13]

Since childhood, I have steered clear of scary things as often as I have been able to. I have a vague memory of climbing up behind my parents’ heads on the sofa and trying to hide from Danny Kaye’s Captain Hook when my family watched Peter Pan on TV. I was not a fan of Disney’s animated *Snow White* because I was afraid of the wicked stepmother. The movie villain I feared the most, however, was the evil fairy from *Sleeping Beauty*, Maleficent when she transformed into a dragon. I was terrified of that dragon. I continued to avoid scary movies, preferring rom coms with neat and tidy endings throughout young adulthood. So, I surprised myself by being drawn in so deeply to the Harry Potter books. Dave and I began reading them before we were parents. As I mentioned in bible study this week, I was only mildly embarrassed to be the only adults without children to show up at Barnes and Noble for the release of *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix* when I was 9 months pregnant with Abby. And while I almost always prefer the books to the movies, I will still watch the Harry Potter movies when I come across them. These scary stories with dragons and dementors and horcruxes are comfort food for me in an odd way. I know that evil does not win in the end, and I cling to that with everything in my being, especially when evil so often seems to have the upper hand in Harry’s world and in ours.

One of you wisely wondered aloud this week if Revelation was written to scare people into faithfulness. It’s a great question, one that many traditions would answer with a resounding “Yes!”. This

³ Koester, 123.

narrative of enraged monsters and hostile powers has been invoked repeatedly as a way to frighten folks into faith, and yet that is not how it was intended when it was originally written down. For John's original hearers, dragons, angels, and cosmic battles were the stuff of the culture that surrounded them. The Roman god Apollo was said to have been the son of a Zeus and a woman named Leto who was pursued by a dragon named Python who wanted to destroy this child. Leto was whisked away to safety by the wind. Shortly after his birth the story goes that Apollo sought out the dragon to avenge his mother. Roman emperors loved to make themselves the hero of such stories:

Caesar Augustus was hailed as the new Apollo, for his reign was said to mark a new golden age.

The emperor Nero liked to present himself in the guise of Apollo, his image on coins bearing the radiant beams from his head that were Apollo's trademark.⁴

So, this imagery is nothing new to John's contemporaries. What is new is John's combining images and stories used to celebrate contemporary tyrants with familiar images from the whole of scripture to lift up the sacrificial and saving way of God in Christ Jesus. Because, as Dr. Koester points out:

Christians faced the continual challenge of discerning how far they could go in embracing non-Christian practices, and at what point they needed to resist...John grapples with the icons of the popular culture of his day to unmask them, so that when readers see the realities that lie behind the façades, they might better resist compromise and persevere in faith.⁵

We too struggle with discerning what is good and what is faithful. We too wrestle with when and how to go along and when and how to resist. We too need help knowing how to persevere in faith, which means we need help seeing behind the curtain, behind the façades to discern what is smoke and mirrors from what is true, what is right, what is good. Because we too are called to choose sides, not us against them, but God's side versus all that strives to undermine God and devour God's beloved creation.

⁴ Koester, 118.

⁵ Koester, 117.

And it is not easy. John knows this, thus the detailed description of the two beasts. One wields fear; the other wields deceit. The first beast sounds like something straight out of *Harry Potter* or the *Lord of the Rings* (or maybe *Game of Thrones*—if I had the guts to watch it). It emerges from the sea with:

Ten horns and seven heads, and on its horns were ten diadems, and on its heads were blasphemous names. And the beast that I saw was like a leopard, its feet were like a bear's, and its mouth was like a lion's mouth.⁶

This beast receives power from the adversary, and people begin to worship it because they believe it is all powerful, that it cannot be defeated. In other words, they worship the beast because they fear it. And then the second beast emerges, one that awes and deceives people with fantastical tricks, convincing people to worship the first beast, “whose fatal wound had been healed.”⁷ Does any of this sound at all familiar? One who resembles a lamb who was thought to be dead but now lives? A prophet who calls down fire from heaven? According to John's vision, these adversaries, these monsters who would lure people away from Christ are following—or pretending to follow—God's script, God's playbook, or rather a twisted version of it. John's contemporary audience would have heard another familiar theme in John's words, too. Nero died by his own hand, and persistent rumors swirled about that he was coming back, that he had not died but was in hiding, plotting revenge. They would see Nero in John's vision, along with Nero's corrosive and destructive ways. The question was whether they would see through the mask, behind the ploys and distance themselves from this unholy trinity. Would they align with the adversary and his minions, or would they cling to the one who had claimed and cleansed them in Christ? As John says, “Here is a call for the endurance and faith of the saints.”⁸

⁶ Revelation 13: 1-2, NRSVue

⁷ Revelation 13: 12, NRSVue

⁸ Revelation 13:10, NRSVue

At the end of this chapter, we come upon a snippet of Revelation that has tripped people up for centuries—the number 666. The number signals incompleteness, telling us that something is missing. The number and the one it represents will never be whole. 666 also adds up, John tells us to a number matching a person. Using a system of numbers corresponding to letters of the alphabet the number equals the sum of Nero's full name. The same number is the sum total of other names throughout history, as well, including Hitler and any number of politicians and leaders—from both sides of the aisle and around the world. That said, it was never intended to be a tricky clue. John and his contemporaries knew exactly who was being referenced. It's not a trick. It is descriptive, underscoring a power that is incomplete, lacking, vulnerable. In the end, the more important snippet at the end of this chapter tells us: "This calls for wisdom." Indeed, it does.

We, too, are bombarded with choices every moment of every day. We are urged to act, to choose sides. *This calls for wisdom.* In Revelation, we are not gazing into a crystal ball to try and figure out what lies ahead. Revelation instead reminds us that the struggle for our hearts and our hopes dates back to the dawn of time and persists here and now. *This calls for wisdom.* We live in an era when truth is debated. We are urged to question everything, which is a good thing. It is good to think and pray and wonder what is right and faithful and just. It is good to consider what it is that Jesus would have us do, how the Lord of all would call us to act. *This calls for wisdom.* In the face of contested claims or the latest outrage, it is good to ask: Who stands to gain? Who stands to lose? Who or what are we being told to fear? What or who are we being called to worship? Who or what are we urged to hold most dear?

Toward the end of the final Harry Potter movie, Lord Voldemort declares that Harry has died and that it is time for everyone to now put their faith in him. Voldemort calls all who are gathered to declare themselves, to choose sides. Neville Longbottom steps forward, not to switch sides but to insist on the goodness, the rightness of their cause. "Harry did not die in vain," Neville proclaims. "Harry's

heart beat for us, for all of us.” In other words, Harry and those who died fighting evil sided with love, with goodness, with truth. Death is not defeat in the end.⁹

By the larger world’s standards, crucifixion and persecution appear weak. Following a crucified savior seems exceedingly unwise. John knows and reveals the truth. The truest power is found in sacrifice, in service, in love. We haven’t reached the end of the story yet, and no text can tell us how the next chapters will go, or how long the struggle will last. Regardless, the Lamb is still on the throne.

This calls for wisdom. Will we listen to the ones who prey on our fears? Will we heed calls to grasp for control or abuse our power? Will we take the bait and fall prey to the ways of meanness, selfishness, pettiness, or cruelty? Or will we stand with the One who claims us in love? The One who—in the words of Paul, “humbled himself” for us?¹⁰ The One who saves us in grace? The One who stands with us always and beside us forever?

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

⁹ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1vY7HjZ-VMs&ab_channel=Christo

¹⁰ Philippians 2: 8, NRSVue