

Heaven's Scepter, Revelation 12:1-12

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Introduction

John sees a vision of a woman giving birth, but there is a dragon lurking, waiting in ambush. This is a sign, says John. This is God's visual art on display. What does it all mean? The clue is that we are told what it all means in verses 10 through 12, but the whole picture of chapter 12 fits into the Bible, because these images have already been on display for the people of God in the scriptures.

Now some of you might be wondering if anything I say today has to do with Advent and the Christmas story. It has everything to do with it. This vision describes the hope of the People of God for a savior, and what the fulfillment of that hope means. **Let us pray:**

Father God in Heaven, the mystery of all that you are and all that you do is beyond our comprehension, yet you have shown us the way to salvation and eternal life. Open our hearts by your Spirit to receive the promise today, that we may join the great story and inheritance of your own people. In Jesus' name, and because he accomplished your promises for us, Amen.

1. The War in Heaven and Earth

Earlier in the service today we opened the Bible to passages which reappear in Revelation 12. The woman with a crown of 12 stars, with the sun for a robe and the moon as a foot-stool, alludes to the beginning of the salvation story, all the way back in Genesis 37. Joseph has a dream, and his own father Jacob knows what the dream means. The sun and moon are Joseph's parents, and the twelve stars are Joseph and all his brothers. Now this woman in the sign in Revelation 12, that is, in God's visual art, is not just the sun or the moon or any of the stars, she

has all of them together as her royal clothing. The woman is a sign, a symbol, for the People of God. Because of the way the image from Genesis 37 is used, clearly the reference is to Biblical Israel, because God had promised that out of that heritage, out of that motherhood, the savior of the whole world would come. The pain of her childbirth is the story of Old Testament Israel, which is a story filled with good and bad, hope and pain sharing the same moments.

The savior of the world is the child born by the heavenly woman, who will rule the nations with a rod of iron, an iron scepter. That image of course is what we read at the beginning of worship today, as our call to worship, from Psalm 2. The images and language of Revelation 12 are already part of the Bible. God's plan for a savior is opposed by the devil. Here the devil is pictured as a dragon, waiting in ambush. Now the vision does something very interesting. It takes the entire story of the passion of Christ, and passes over it to the glorious victory: "The child was snatched up to God and to his throne."

On the strength of that victory, of the woman's offspring ascending to the throne of God, the devil gets thrown out of heaven. These signs do not have to go over the whole story of the cross and the blood of Jesus again, because readers of Revelation already know who sits on the throne of God: That is, the one whose sign is a slaughtered Passover lamb, Jesus Christ. What matters now is what all that means for the People of God who have to live on the earth filled with devils and demons who have been thrown out of heaven.

So now the devil is angry, and since it cannot touch the Christ or harm anyone in heaven, it goes after the People of God on earth. That is the focus of this vision. How do we who are God's People today, who by faith in Jesus have entered into the Salvation story, cope with a raging devil? God shows us two sides to that: First, God protects us. Second, God secures our vindication against the devil who is always seeking to trap us and accuse us of sin.

There is a place prepared for people whose faith is in Jesus. The sign for such a place is the desert. The desert is a very important part of the story of the People of God, for it was in the desert that Israel was constituted as a nation under God. At a time when they had no homeland of their own, that is when they were brought into Covenant with God. Sinai is in the desert.

The desert is the place for God's Covenant people, who are looking for a home they have not yet inherited. The desert is truly the world, it is even a place of suffering, it is a place of rebuke and correction in righteousness, but the desert is not sought after by the world because the world likes things easy and comfortable. That desert place is the Church.

Maybe one of the reasons we find the book of Revelation so confusing, is that when we read it, we forget everything else the Bible has already shown us and taught us. So we read about this woman with a crown of twelve stars and the sun and moon under her feet, and we scratch our heads. But John did not intend for his language to be misleading. Heaven was revealing images to John that had already been part of God's Word.

As I have said throughout the fall, my firm conviction is that the book that ends the Bible is part of the Bible and has the same intent as the rest of the Bible, which is, to teach the People of God how to live for God in a world of darkness, confusion, and conflict. Revelation brings light, it does not add to the confusion and it does not add to the darkness. God does not leave us in the desert, wondering what this is all about. Revelation teaches us how to live and what to believe, and in verses 10 and 11, what that means in our spiritual war with the Devil.

2. Beating the Rap

The Church in its desert place is the haven of safety for believers in Christ, however, the spiritual war with Satan is very real, it is still a thing that we have to deal with.

In this world the souls of believers can be safe from the attacks of the Devil, when we put ourselves under the protection of Jesus Christ.

Our debt for sin is cancelled. Forgiveness of sins takes the power out of the accusations of the Devil. That is how we can beat the rap: Not a loop-hole, it is not as though the charge of sin can't stick. But Christ himself, for our sakes, fulfills all the law in his own sinless life, and then includes us in God's verdict of "not guilty." It is an open offer, a treaty of peace given by God on God's terms. And when we accept that Covenant in Christ's blood, our souls are safe despite how angry and tricky the devil is with us.

The world might not think we are safe. The world might see Christians even in literal desert places, like Syria and Iraq, suffering and dying because of their faith and their identity. The issue is not what the world thinks, the issue is what Heaven knows to be true. The truth is, even Christians who suffer and die for their faith obtain the victory over the Devil, for they are following in the steps of Jesus Christ himself. Now they too are snatched up to heaven, forever safe from the Devil being able to lead them astray, and forever safe from having to suffer anymore.

The other side of that promise, is the warning. The more that the church ties itself down to worldly things, and the more that believers set their hopes on worldly things rather than looking forward to our true home in glory, the more we end up playing the Devil's own game. And none of us can beat the Devil. We need Jesus, we need to claim the ransom of his blood, which is the Word of God that comes booming from heaven in verse 10:

“Now have come the salvation and the power and the kingdom of our God, and the authority of his Christ. For the accuser of the believers, who accuses them before our God

day and night, has been hurled down. They overcame him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony; they did not love their lives so much as to shrink from death.”

The good news is that the promised savior of the world has come, has ransomed us by his blood, and now rules in heaven with all authority. The Devil once had authority, the Devil once had a place in heaven, to point out human sin and weakness and failure. Christ has removed that authority from him and cast him out. What that good news means for us is that even here on earth, where the devil is on a rampage, we can overcome by claiming the ransom of the blood of Jesus Christ for ourselves. This is what Advent and Christmas celebrate, this what all these things we do and all these carols we sing, and all our concerts and special events here and elsewhere, that is what it is all about: Christ, our ransom from death, our Passover lamb who saves us from the Angel of Death; seated in heaven as the ruler of the nations. By him we overcome, even when we die. Especially when our death is an occasion to testify to the mercies of God and the redemptive power of his Christ.

There is an issue in this text, which has to do with the time-span mentioned here again, 1260 days which is 3 and ½ years. Sometimes a year equals a day. Sometimes a day equals a thousand years. This amount of time numbered in days corresponds to Revelation 11 and the testimony of the two prophets, who like the woman of Revelation 12, are a sign of the two covenants fulfilled in one salvation plan of God. I am convinced that the days and years named in visions from heaven are counted in heaven, as time is passed in heaven where everything revolves around God; heaven's designation of time is not counted on human calendars.

Many are the students and scholars of the Bible who have looked at how those numbers are used in other places, especially Daniel, as they have argued for a future time line according to how they sort things out. Those who have wanted me to tickle their ears in this series on

Revelation, with predictions for the future and that kind of thing. Let me say this bluntly, or pointedly, whichever way you hear it: If you want to be initiated into the secrets of Revelation, read the rest of the Bible. Doing that will answer lots of questions.

The questions that a thorough knowledge of scripture won't answer might not be questions that Revelation is bothering with. The question: What does Heaven's account of 1260 days look like on a human calendar? does not have a Biblical answer, because the focus of the Bible is not on being a crystal ball, the focus is on how we are to live. Does Revelation predict a global nuclear war? That is not answered in the rest of the Bible, and I am not at all sure that such a question has an answer, because I do not think that question fits with what God is speaking to us in Revelation. The question: On what date in the future is Jesus coming back? is not answerable. Jesus tells us that the question is not answerable from the scriptures, so looking to Revelation to find a hidden time-line is exactly the wrong approach. If your heart is stuck on your own curiosity, your own desire to know the future so you can have power over it, then you are seeking something from the scriptures that has not been given even to Jesus Christ himself.

Conclusion

This is good news. The savior that was promised to the people of God and for Israel's glory, has come. By his blood our ransom is paid. By his authority in heaven the devil is cast out. And in his name our souls are safe. The devil rages against believers in Jesus, but as we persevere, we win. We win as a desert people, for whom the worldly promises and riches are fleeting. We win as a people who have no true home here, but look forward to our promised land. We do not win against the devil with guns and drones, we do not win with court cases and elections, for we do not fight against flesh blood. We win as we testify to what Christ has done for us. By sharing in his testimony, we share in his victory and in his eternal life. Amen.

