

## **“The Enemy Attacks”**

*Reading: Matthew 2:1-18; Revelation 12:1-17*

Written and preached by [Luke Richards](#)

When the dragon rears its head, you need to find a hero to defeat it. That’s how the story always goes. You need someone brave and true, someone willing to put up with hardship and danger, someone who can push through all the obstacles and keep their virtue intact to the end to be able to slay that dragon. The details of your dragons and your heroes say a lot about you as a person, or about your culture. Dragons and monsters are ubiquitous: cultures all across the world and all through time have told stories about the terrifying beasts lurking out there in the unknown. You never know what you’ll run into out there in the wild, once you’ve ventured beyond the boundaries of civilization. There may be fairies out there — not the cute Disney fairies, but beings that are just as likely to steal your child as they are to show you wondrous new worlds. Or maybe a wendigo, as told in the stories of some Native Americans: a cannibalistic half-demon that lurks in the woods. Or, of course, dragons, fire-breathing, poisonous hoarders of treasure who are far too wise to be defeated easily. Even today we hear stories of Bigfoot or the Chupacabra, monsters haunting the realms that are just out of sight. Don’t stray too far; you never know what might get you.

When the dragon rears its head, you need to find a hero to defeat it. The second movie in the *Hobbit* trilogy is now out in theaters, and in that story the main hero is a very unlikely one, a small hobbit thrust out of his comfortable home and faced with an enormous dragon. That was very deliberate on Tolkein’s part; he wanted to say something about the value of undervalued people and things. Sometimes our heroes are brave, chivalrous knights, and that says something else about what we value. What do we fear, and what do we look toward to save us from those fears?

Our dragons and our heroes don’t just make good stories, they also say a lot about us. What do we hold to be valuable? Just look at the sorts of things our monsters are threatening. What sorts of virtues do we admire? Just look at what our hero needs to defeat the dragon. What sorts of vices or terrors do we abhor the most? Just look at the characteristics of our monsters. And those monsters are always there, personifying our fears, because there’s always something to be afraid of.

Today we encounter a dragon in our reading from John’s Revelation. He’s a terrifying beast, with seven heads and ten horns, with crowns to show his authority and a tail big enough to sweep the stars from the sky. And he’s not just a mindless beast: he’s the ancient serpent, Satan, the accuser, and he’s wily enough to lead the entire world astray. But what do we find him attacking? What treasure does this dragon want to claim for his own? This enormous beast with all his power chooses to threaten a woman giving birth. This baby, apparently, is valuable enough or threatening enough to the dragon for him to want to devour it. He can sweep stars from the sky with a flick of his tail, but a woman at her most vulnerable, in the moment of giving birth, and her vulnerable offspring, are enough to strike terror into the heart of the terrifying beast.

Remember from the last couple of weeks that we’ve had this question ringing in our ears from elsewhere in John’s Revelation: “How long, Sovereign Lord, holy and true, until you judge the inhabitants of the earth and avenge our blood?” How long, Sovereign Lord, until you make things right? It’s the question asked by the Christian martyrs in Revelation 6 as they call out from beneath the heavenly altar in God’s throne room; their lives and deaths have served as an offering to God. It’s

the question of the ages, the question people are always asking in a million different languages and words. What is the meaning of this world? How do we make sense of history? Does suffering have a meaning, and what do we do with it?

It's the problem of evil, the problem of suffering, the problem of meaninglessness, the problem of lostness. John's Revelation spoke to the church in the first century struggling with those questions, and it's been speaking to the church ever since. How long, Sovereign Lord? We're waiting! And as we saw two weeks ago, that was the beginning of Jesus' answer to the church: keep waiting, faithfully, because the Messiah arrives in the context of God's faithful people as they wait. They're the ones who get to see it first, and who get to participate in it, and who get to preach its good news. And as they wait, they worship, because the act of worship participates in the ongoing action of God's coming kingdom. In the context of that worship, God sets in motion His great redemptive work in history.

But why does God need to redeem His people and His creation? Because humanity and creation are in rebellion against God, and in their rebellion they have fallen into the clutches of that ancient serpent. So as God engages in this work of redemption, as He works to make right the damage inflicted by our rebellion, we begin to see in John's Revelation that the rebellion intensifies. Where God works, Satan and those allied with him fight back. The arrival of God's Messiah is a declaration of war, and it is met with opposition.

In John's Revelation, which tells the story of the Second Advent of Jesus Christ, that opposition begins in this image of a dragon attacking Mary and Jesus in a cosmic drama. In the First Advent, we see the dragon rearing its head in the person of Herod the Great. In our quiet Christmas festivities we can be lulled into a comfortable forgetfulness of how much the birth of this Christ child threatens to overturn our world, but Herod shocks us awake. Jesus was born into a highly charged political setting. He was born an utterly powerless peasant child in a world where the poor and powerless were disposable pawns of people like Herod. Jesus was born into a tragedy, a massacre designed to purge the town of potential threats to Herod's power. As the Magi gather to worship at the arrival of the Messiah, the dragon rears his head, but he's defeated by God's warning to Joseph, and this Messiah born into political oppression is then taken into exile in Egypt, and lives his early childhood as an immigrant. Of course, if we know the rest of His story we know that the dragon doesn't leave Him alone; Satan tries to turn Him aside from the path to the cross, and others come to oppose His message, and they eventually crucify Him.

Indeed, if we were to continue through John's Revelation, we would see other beastly figures arise to bring ruin to God's people and His creation; though the dragon is representative of evil in all its forms, his is not its only face. We would see other cataclysms taking place, too. Meteors fall, waters are poisoned, plagues break out, and warmongers gather. What is happening is this: God is doing the work of re-creation, and re-creation involves first de-creating and cleansing that which needs re-creation, and it's a messy process. What's more, that work is contested by the dragon and rebellious creation who are invested in the rebellion against God. And so John's Revelation involves disasters of all sorts. Sometimes they are the judgment of God being poured out, because rebellion against God brings consequences. Sometimes they are natural disasters that seem to have no rhyme or reason, but bring great suffering in their wake. Sometimes they are the result of personal evil,

people who act as though they were demons hell-bent on destroying what is good. Sometimes they are the devil himself, crouching to devour a newborn baby.

And as John's apocalypse plays out, from the standpoint of the people on earth it isn't always clear which disaster is caused by which: is our suffering caused by God's wrath, or by demonic entities, or by our own sinful choices, or simply by random natural events? We can't always discern with our mortal eyes. Whatever dragon we are faced with, we cry out to God and ask how long it will be until our salvation comes. John assures us that the movement of history is not random. We may not be able to understand its movements on this side of eternity, but John gives us enough of a glimpse to see that even in disaster, even when the dragon is thrashing most violently, the world is still in God's hands.

It is as though we have a large hole in our understanding of history and our lives. We struggle for meaning, something to make sense of our suffering, and we jam all sorts of things into that hole in the puzzle. Sometimes we're more successful than others, but then the dragon rears his head again, and we find that our piece doesn't fit as well as we'd hoped. The puzzle is too complex, and evil, it seems, is too strong. That ancient serpent is too persistent. We've been asking the Lord "How long?" in every generation since John wrote the Revelation, wondering and hoping that maybe ours is the one that will get to see the Second Advent of the Messiah. But still we wait, and still John's Revelation speaks to us. And we see that these events keep happening in every generation: every generation of the church asks the question of "how long?" in the midst of its suffering. But at the same time, history is moving forward, and God continues to work toward the end. The Second Advent will come, and the closer we get to that day, the harder the dragon will fight against it.

And so we keep wanting to ask how long we will have to wait for our Messiah to arrive, but that's not really what we should be concerned with. We can't do anything to make Him arrive sooner. The *real* question is what we do in the meantime. How do we respond while we wait, while we worship, and while we face the attacks of the enemy? That's the real concern of John's Revelation.

As this great battle takes place between the dragon and the heavenly hosts, John gives us direction. He points us to the piece that fills that hole in history, the Rosetta Stone that makes sense of the gibberish that is our suffering. "I heard a loud voice in heaven say: 'Now have come the salvation and the power and the kingdom of our God, and the authority of his Messiah. For the accuser of our brothers and sisters, who accuses them before our God day and night, has been hurled down. They triumphed over 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 only way to make sense of history is through the Lamb Who Was Slain, the focal point of John's entire revelation. We triumph over evil by accepting His blood and following His example. If we love our lives so much that we are not willing to lose them for His name, we will never make sense of our suffering and we will not join in the triumph of our Lord's return. The message of the blood of the Lamb does not truly begin to make sense to us until that blood has been applied to us. Until you take the step of conversion, repentance and belief, death and rising in the baptized life, transformation toward holiness — until the blood of the Lamb is applied to you, that piece of the puzzle will always be missing, and you will never truly triumph when the dragon rears its head.

And so here we are, continuing in this time between the First Advent of Jesus and His Second Advent. We continue facing the attacks of our enemy as he vents his fury at us, “because he knows that his time is short.” And our response is the word of our testimony. We continue to preach through our words and our lives that the blood of the Lamb has triumphed, and that history only makes sense when He is its focal point. We live our lives in such a way that we show that we will not shrink from death out of fear, because we know how the story ends. The dragon rears his head at the Advent of our Lord, and he rears his head when God’s people are at work, and our hero is Jesus Christ. It is in Him that we triumph.



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