

“Living in Christ’s World: Monsters Under the Bed”

Reading: Luke 6:20-31; Revelation 12:1-17

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Today we dive headfirst into the really strange part of the book of Revelation. We’ve spent these weeks after Easter in this book because it shows us like no other book what it means to “Live in Christ’s World;” Revelation gives us startling visions of the world as the victorious risen Jesus comes to claim His creation and complete His work. We’ve already read some strange things, and some of them are very difficult to understand. But last week we read and talked about the part of the story where God makes His claim for His creation. He declares that it is His, that there will be no more delay, that He will reign forever and ever. Today we get into the part of the story where that announcement that God is reclaiming His world is going to be contested. Not everyone accepts God’s claim. So John is going to take the strangeness of his story and crank it up a notch; we get seven-headed dragons and monsters out of the sea and epic battles raging across the world. It’s hard to know what to make of all of this.

I’ve titled this sermon “Monsters Under the Bed,” because we’re reading about monsters — and they are indeed monstrous — but they surprisingly become less threatening when you take a close look. We read about these monsters that remind us that the night is dark and full of terrors, but the dawn is coming. They make me think of lying in bed as a child, not afraid of the dark but not always sure what’s out there in the dark, convinced that *something* will get me if I let a hand or foot dangle over the edge, but just as convinced that I’m perfectly safe as long as I stay beneath my millimeters-thick blanket. There’s something about the dark that makes those clearly irrational fears seem so much more rational. You know there’s no such thing as zombies, except for the one under your bed. And eventually you fall asleep, and you wake up, and those fears seem so silly. We worry about monsters, but maybe they aren’t so worrisome when we look at them.

In our story told to us by John the Revelator, the announcement has just gone out: “The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and His Messiah, and He will reign forever and ever.” And God has opened the door between heaven and earth, revealing His heavenly temple and showing that the way is open for Him to come and claim His kingdom. There will be no more delay, as one of the angels said earlier. And suddenly we see a magnificent woman in the heavens, adorned with the sun and the stars and standing on the moon, and she’s about to give birth. She’s Mary the mother of Jesus and the nation of Israel all in one; she’s the one who gives birth to God’s Messiah. It’s a dramatic re-telling of the birth of Jesus, except that this time His birthplace is full of the splendor of the heavens, rather than the humility of a stable. God has announced that the time has come, and now we’re seeing how that plan is accomplished: through the birth of Jesus.

But this is different than our Christmas pageants. A monster appears, a dragon with seven heads, and he positions himself to devour the child as soon as He’s born. But in spite of his best efforts, the dragon can’t get his teeth on the child. The child is taken to God’s throne, and the woman is taken into the wilderness to be taken care of. The angels make war on the dragon and toss him out of heaven, and even the earth does its bit to foil his plans, until at last the dragon realizes that he can’t stop God’s plans, but he can hurt the ones God loves: he decides to wage war on God’s people.

And that's what we see happening for much of the rest of the book. The dragon, who is Satan, the ancient enemy, builds up his army using a monster from the sea and a monster from the land, and the three of them work together to make an unholy Trinity, mocking and copying the work of God to try to deceive the earth. Many nations are deceived, and they join the persecution of God's people, until eventually they gather into a vast army to make war on God. But they are defeated, almost anticlimactically: they don't stand a chance against the risen Jesus Christ. This is His kingdom.

Part of the message is that there are indeed monsters under the bed, so to speak. Living as a follower of Jesus between now and that final battle is dangerous business. There are people and nations and yes, even demonic forces that are opposed to us. The dragon knows his time is limited, so he's going to make the most of it. He can't stop the work of God, so he's going to attack the workers of God. So if you're a worker of God, you need to know that there are monsters out there. There will be opposition. There will be trouble. There will be persecution. We live in a battleground. The battle's outcome is already known, but the fighting still goes on.

God is in the midst of purging the world, taking it apart and putting it back together again, working in a million ways to get things ready for that big announcement, and all along there are those who are fighting a rebellion against that work. What that means is that we must expect to see great and terrible things when we are following Jesus. As we participate in God's work, we need to expect to see both great actions by God and terrible rebellions by God's enemies. We need to be bold in our anticipation of God's faithfulness and power, and we need to brace ourselves for the ferocity of the enemy. God is doing mighty works to purge and re-create this world as He re-claims it for His own; look for those works! Expect to see them! Pray for them! And at the same time, the dragon is thrashing and biting at the feet of God's people wherever they join that work; don't be surprised! Don't be afraid! Pray and be faithful!

John describes this ongoing action and reaction in terms of a mighty cosmic battle between God and monsters, but what does it look like in our lives? I can't say I've seen many dragons or leopard-bear-lion beasts. What does this look like for those of us who can't see the heavenly realities John describes? It looks an awful lot like the church when it has been at its best throughout the ages. I think of that first generation of Christians, faithfully preaching the message of the resurrection and lordship of Jesus Christ as they spread throughout the world, faithfully healing the sick and caring for the poor, faithfully embracing as brothers and sisters those who would normally be outcasts, faithfully breaking down barriers of culture and language and gender and class in the recognition that God's grace is indiscriminate. God was at work, but so was the enemy: according to tradition, almost all of the twelve Apostles died violent deaths at the hands of their persecutors. Stephen, a deacon in that early church in charge of feeding the poor, was falsely accused and stoned to death. As Christians grew in numbers throughout the Roman Empire, so too did their persecution by that Empire; that's at least part of the meaning of the attacks by the beasts John describes.

I think of our spiritual forefathers, John and Charles Wesley, spending their lives reviving the church in eighteenth-century England. They preached the message that religion wasn't just going to church, it was something that transformed your life and transformed the world around you. They preached that you can actually know God, and He loves you and is mighty to save. But as a result they were kicked out of every pulpit in England, and though they sometimes drew crowds of thousands, they were just as often attacked by mobs. I think of the abolitionist Christians in the early days of the

Wesleyan Methodist Church, who boldly proclaimed a message of freedom for all people and worked to free the slaves, even to the point of participating in the Underground Railroad. But much of that work was illegal, and some of them were shot at, had their property attacked, or were even killed. I think of our own brothers and sisters even in recent years who have been faithful witnesses and have suffered greatly: we've seen Christians in the Middle East persecuted and beheaded because they refused to give up the name of Christ. They triumphed "by the word of their testimony; they did not love their lives so much as to shrink from death."

The story of Revelation is the story of God's people all through the ages. God is moving us toward a final end, to be sure, but God has always been moving His plan forward, and the enemy has always been fighting against God's people. God's people have always witnessed great and terrible things when they were faithfully following God.

What this means for us is that we should not be discouraged or afraid when we face opposition. In fact, I think it means we should be discouraged and worried when we go too long *without* facing some sort of opposition. The old dragon doesn't have to worry about opposing us if we're not making any effort to participate in God's work. The devil doesn't have to push back if we're not walking forward. If we're not seeing the terrible resistance of the devil, maybe it means we're not looking for the great acts of God around us.

That doesn't mean every trouble that comes our way is a sign we're doing God's work. Sometimes the path is rocky because we chose the wrong path, or because we didn't plan well. Sometimes bad things just happen. Sometimes God even sends us on a rocky path as a means of testing us and strengthening us. God doesn't cause evil things to happen to us, but there are times when He does send obstacles for our refinement. There are times when we go through the dark night of the soul, and God seems silent or distant from us because He wants us to learn to rely on Him in a deeper way. That means that if we're being faithful to God, suffering is probably one of a handful of things: it's either a sign that we're a threat to the enemy and he counts us worthy of attack, or it's a sign that God considers us strong enough to bear testing, and He wants to refine us, to shape us away from sin and toward holiness, and to use us for His great plan.

So in other words, if we have our eyes open looking for God's great work, and if our hands are ready to join in that work, we have no reason to fear the terrible thrashings of the enemy. The dragon is merely a monster under the bed, a terror only until the dawn comes and reveals the true nature of the monster in the light. His bite can certainly wound us, but we know the truth that his time is short and our God is greater. What then is there to fear or worry about if we are with God?

Maybe what we should be most afraid of in our lives is too much comfort. I don't know about you, but speaking for myself, I'm not always sure I expect to see God doing mighty acts. Maybe we need to pray more boldly for the people in our community, and not just once and then give up when I don't see the results I expect, but continually, persistently, and living on the lookout for God's actions and my opportunities to join in with God's actions. Maybe we need to be bolder in our expectations of what God can do in and through this church. Maybe I need to check myself and see if I'm too comfortable, and whether I'm worried about that old dragon upsetting my comfort if I get bold in God's work and he sets his sights on me. Maybe I need a reminder that the enemy might be a

monster, but he's nothing when the light of Christ shines. He poses and he struts and he roars, but he's just a weak imitation, a shoddy parody of God's power. We live in Christ's world.

We want to be deep, beautiful, fearless people of Jesus Christ. Those kinds of people are rarely comfortable. They know how to be at peace, but they're rarely comfortable. Let's be bold in serving God. Let's be on the lookout for God's mighty acts, and watch for ways to participate. Let's look for great and terrible signs when we follow Christ.



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