

A great and wondrous sign appeared in heaven: a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet and a crown of twelve stars on her head. ² She was pregnant and cried out in pain as she was about to give birth. ³ Then another sign appeared in heaven: an enormous red dragon with seven heads and ten horns and seven crowns on his heads. ⁴ His tail swept a third of the stars out of the sky and flung them to the earth. The dragon stood in front of the woman who was about to give birth, so that he might devour her child the moment it was born. ⁵ She gave birth to a son, a male child, who will rule all the nations with an iron scepter. And her child was snatched up to God and to his throne. ⁶ The woman fled into the desert to a place prepared for her by God, where she might be taken care of for 1,260 days. (Revelation 12:1-6)

A Wondrous Sign Shows Wondrous Love

What does your manger scene look like? I assume you have one. Do you have one of those Italian style manger scenes with shepherds and wise men folding their hands and adoring the baby? Or is it different? We don't have one like that, but we have a couple that are made of cut glass. Whatever style they are, most manger scenes share certain key elements: shepherds and animals, wise men and angels, and, of course, Mary and Joseph and the baby Jesus. Most of them also share another characteristic: they portray the scene in the stable as very peaceful and beautiful. Most of our Christmas carols and our Christmas cards do the same thing. The way we usually depict it, there's no reason you couldn't have Mary and Joseph and the baby in the manger right there in your living room. The shepherds don't even track mud in.

Of course, the reality was quite different. It was, after all, a stable. It would've smelled like a barn and city folk like us might not have appreciated that. Jesus was born in a world that didn't take personal hygiene nearly as seriously as we do, and again, it was a stable. It would've been filthy. The people would've been filthy. The animals would've been filthy. But it's even worse than that. Mary gave birth in that stable. In the best of circumstances, childbirth is bloody and messy. But at least in a hospital, someone changes the linens and takes the soiled stuff away. On the first Christmas, the most they would've done was sweep some straw over it.

Not very pleasant to think of, is it? But this is our last regular Sunday Advent service before we begin to celebrate Christmas. Rightly, in those Christmas services we are going to focus on the incredible beauty of the Christmas story. It's one of the most beautiful and moving stories ever told – all the more so because it is an absolutely true story. But today, we want to stop and look at this story from God's point of view and see the ugliness that he would've seen, ugliness that is absolutely essential to achieve the beauty of God saving us. To help us understand God's perspective, he gave us this reading from the book of Revelation. But go back to your manger scene for just a moment. How many of us put a dragon in that scene? We don't. But God did in our lesson today. God put an ugly, red monster there in the stable waiting to devour that baby just as soon as he was born. That horrible picture of a monster munching on a newborn baby is about as far from Christmas as you and I can get. But God includes it in his manger scene today to show us what that baby really means. The evil and the horror of the dragon help us see **a wondrous sign that shows wondrous love.**

How do we get from God's dragon to Christmas? To understand that, you have to know a little bit about the book of Revelation. It's different from the historic books in the Old Testament. Those books tell us a story – Jesus being born or David fighting Goliath or St Paul traveling – and they do it a pretty straightforward way. They're like painters who want to show us what something really looked like. But the book of Revelation is kind of like an impressionist painting. Impressionist painters didn't try to show what things looked like in their paintings. They figured you could see that for yourself. Instead, they tried to convey the emotions that they felt when they saw something. So they would exaggerate certain features. They would even paint things in an incredibly unrealistic way to try to get you to think about how they perceived them. The book of Revelation kind of does that. It does not repeat the historical accounts. It uses all kinds of fantastic imagery and numbers to get us to think about the meaning of the things it talks about. That's what we see in our lesson for today.

The reading is about the birth of Christ. A woman is about to give birth to a child who will rule the world. That's Jesus. But the rest of the details point to what that birth means. The first detail that we need to understand is the woman in the vision. Because she's giving birth to the baby, we naturally think of the Virgin Mary. But that really does not fit the description. The woman in the vision is clothed with the sun. She has the

moon under her feet and a crown of twelve stars on her head. That crown is the key: twelve stars – just like there are twelve tribes of Israel. Throughout the book of Revelation, twelve is the number of the church, the people of God, in both Old and New Testaments. The woman in the vision represents the Church. She is clothed with the sun because the church wears the glory of Christ. She gives birth to the child, because God used the Old Testament Church, the people of Israel, to bring his son into this world.

The dragon is the devil. He has seven heads and ten crowns because those things represent his efforts to rule this world. His tail sweeps stars from the sky. The Bible often uses stars for angels and when Satan revolted against God, he led many angels astray. The devil waits to devour the child as soon as he is born. Satan understood that Jesus was coming to save the world and from the moment Jesus was born, he opposed him. Think of Herod slaughtering the infants of Bethlehem and Mary and Joseph's flight to Egypt. But finally, the devil cannot succeed. In the end, Jesus wins. He dies and rises and ascends to heaven – as the vision says, **“Her child was snatched up to God and to his throne.”**

But the woman wasn't. Instead, she fled into the desert where God takes care of her for 1,260 days. What does that mean? Obviously, there's nothing in Mary's life that we can connect this to. But the church in the desert – that makes sense. The desert is life in this world. And a desert is often dreary and difficult. In truth, the desert is deadly if you don't know how to survive there. But God takes care of the woman in the desert. God takes care of his church. Finally, the woman's time in the desert is limited. When Jesus comes back, he will bring the church home.

God gives us a picture to help us understand the true gift of love that he gave us in Bethlehem. A baby who should've been a quick lunch for a dragon, triumphs to rescue us. But why did God picture it like this? Because God understands how easy it is for us to look for a different gift. Has that ever happened to you? Christmas came and there was something you wanted, but you didn't get it. How did you feel? How did you act? I'm embarrassed to say that I've had that experience, even as an adult, and I acted like a little child. But I'll share one example from when I was a child. When I was eight or nine, the one thing I wanted for Christmas was a camera. I wanted to take pictures of our family Christmas. For whatever reason, the specific image in my head was taking a picture of my little sister holding her first wrapped gift in her hand, about to open it. Well, I didn't get the camera. After all the presents were opened, I was disappointed and I'm sure I complained about it. Then my mom told me to look under the chair. There, she had hidden one more gift: the camera I wanted. But you know what? That made me even more unhappy because my whole plan was ruined. I never got to take that picture of my sister about to open her first present. To this day, that's all I remember about that Christmas – not my parents' love and generosity, my disappointment.

God has given us the greatest gift we could ever get: he gave us his Son. He gave us the Savior of the world who defeated that dragon and who will return on Judgment Day to cast that dragon into hell forever. He gave us the King who will rule the world, but who knelt down and died so that we, his servants, will live. But is that the gift we want? Too often, we Christians forget that life here is the desert. We don't get out of the desert until Jesus comes back. What is the desert like? It's dreary and brown. It's hard to live here. When I graduated from the seminary, I was assigned to serve as a missionary in Colombia. Before we went to Colombia, Becky and I went to Monterrey, Mexico to study Spanish. Monterrey is in the desert. It is hot and dirty and brown. It had gigantic cockroaches and the only green was cacti. When it suddenly turned cold, it cut through you, especially since there was no furnace in our apartment. There was just this gas stove thing that reeked of natural gas when you used it. So you could either shiver or you could have your stomach turned. But then we left Monterrey and went to Bogota. Bogota is lush and green. When I saw it, my eyes ached. I didn't realize how much I missed the green while we were in the desert.

Life here is the desert. God never promises us that life here will be easy. But we want it to be. We want life here to be green and lush. We want to have perfect children who have great jobs and wonderful families and make us happy. We want to have work that is fulfilling and that we enjoy every single day. We want to have nice homes and white picket fences and holiday gatherings that would do justice to a Hallmark TV movie. But life just isn't like that, at least, not all the time. We live in the desert that sin has made God's world into. God's promise to us is that he will take care of us in the desert. But he doesn't promise to make the desert green, at least not yet. That has to wait until Jesus comes back.

But when our eyes ache for a little more green in our lives, when we want more than God gives us, we can become angry and hurt and frustrated. We can dismiss the fact that in Christ we have the greatest gift,

eternal life. We can easily forget to trust God and be content with what he gives us here. We can become ungrateful, unsanctified, unhappy and unloving people. All that is sin. Because of that sin, God should treat us like the spoiled children we are and send us to hell.

But Jesus paid even for those sins. That baby that was born in Bethlehem, that child that defied the jaws of Satan grew up to face death and hell itself for us. He paid for all our failures to trust, for all our ingratitude to God, for all our pride and sin that thinks we know better than he does. Jesus wiped all that sin away with his blood. That transforms that ugly picture of a monster who wants to munch on a baby's bones into the beautiful image of Jesus in the manger. That ugly, filthy, smelly stable is beautiful because that's where the Son of God came into this world to take all our sin away.

That Savior is now at the right hand of God. There, he cares for us here in the desert. He hears our prayers. He protects us from the devil. He gives us every blessing that would be good for us here and he even sends challenges, when those things strengthen our faith. Here in the desert, Jesus is watching. More than that, here in the desert, Jesus is with us, even while he is at the Father's right hand. Here in the desert, Jesus knows our every need and he does all things to bring us home to him in heaven.

Next week is Christmas. Starting on Sunday at our children's Christmas service, we're going to go back to the stable and see the baby in the manger and we are going to consider that scene to be beautiful – the most precious moment in human history. The Son of God was born as a human child. If you haven't set up your manger scenes already, you're going to do it pretty soon! But as you do that – or when go home today and look at that manger scene that's already there – imagine that dragon there in the stable, ready to devour the child. Not to be morbid or ugly, but to remember what really gives beauty to that scene: the baby came to win life for us. That baby came to defeat the devil and silence all his accusations against us. That baby came to save us from our own sin. That baby came to die and rise. One of our Christmas hymns says of that baby that he “neither crib nor cross refuses.” That's the beauty of the manger scene. The Son of God was willing to be laid in the dirty, smelly, ugly place. He was willing to walk the long, hard road to Calvary. He was willing to share our lives in a sinful world and to take our place in death and hell. Because he was, we will live with him in joy forever. Amen.