

FGBC: A Woman, a Dragon & a Child: Why the 'Force' is so Angry

Revelation 12:1-17

February 16, 2020

Dan Hoffman

In high school I took an art class – introduction to art and imagery, or something like that. And I remember the class was all about looking at famous pictures and describing what the artist was trying to convey. And the picture I remember was Rene Magritte's "The Lovers" painted in Paris in 1928. Two people with their heads wrapped in bed sheets, or something, kissing. And we were supposed to write a paragraph, a whole paragraph!

Now I will admit up front that this was not my favorite class, and so, as a high school student I poured the majority of my energy into finding ways to cut corners rather than actually do the assignments.

And so I remember looking at this and thinking "This guy is on drugs! Who kisses someone with a pillowcase over their head? I can't write a paragraph about that."

But my second thought was a bit more esoteric. It's not that I can't write a paragraph about this, I shouldn't. Because the purpose of great art is to transfer feeling and emotion to the viewer, and so if I could successfully sum this picture up in a paragraph then I would have effectively rendered it obsolete.

My teacher didn't appreciate either of these answers and so I begrudgingly wrote some nonsense about love being blind and unknowingly prepared myself for my Bachelor's degree where I would spend endless hours writing similar papers.

...

Alright, today we are looking at a section of text that is a lot easier to understand than the one we looked at last week. But just because it is easier to understand doesn't mean it is any less dramatic. In today's text we have a dragon, a woman and a child wrapped in sensational conflict.

The woman is stunning, clothed in the sun and standing on the moon. And the dragon is huge – think Lord of the Rings but bigger. His tail sweeps stars out of the sky and he's angry. And there's a war. A heavenly war between the forces of heaven and the dragon and his minions.

And nobody's sure how the war is going to go and then out of nowhere the struggle culminates in a surprise defeat. Marvel would love this. It's a huge chapter. It's a chapter full of obvious pictures. And, because my art teacher isn't here, I mainly want to help you see them rather than worry about interpreting all the details. Fair?

Would you stand with me for the reading of God's word? Revelation 12.

[Read Revelation 12:1-17]

To help you see these pictures you need a question. And the question is: Since the gospel says Jesus has won the victory – for example Paul says “Jesus... broke the power of death and illuminated the way to life and immortality through the Good News” – that’s 2nd Timothy 1:10. Why are things so bad? Why does it seem like evil is winning?

...

And Jesus answers this by playing out an incredible drama in the heavens for John to see. Imagine John in the hugest Omnimax theater ever.

Now this section actually starts in the last verse of chapter 11. Look there:

[Read Revelation 11:19 – 12:1a]

So chapter 12 unfolds as God’s temple in heaven opens to John and he sees the Ark of the Covenant. And there’s thunder and lightning. This is the Indiana Jones eat your heart out chapter.

And the reason everyone dies in Indiana Jones at this point is because in the Old Testament the Ark of the Covenant was the most sacred thing in all the earth. It’s this box overlaid with gold. And inside the box is a jar of mana from when Israel crossed the desert, the 10 Commandments and Aaron’s staff.¹ And on the box two golden angels are facing each other, with their wings just touching over something called “The mercy seat.”

This is God’s throne – think Revelation 4. Now here we are looking at the Ark in heaven, but when its replica existed on earth this was where God met humanity. And only the high priest got to see the Ark once a year. Anyone else who went past the curtain died.

But here the curtain’s gone – John can just look right in. The throne room of heaven has been opened to him. And it’s opened to us. When Jesus died the barrier between us and God was destroyed.

This is the context of our chapter today, and in fact the context all the way through to the beginning of chapter 15. And chapter 12 is the theological center of this section and all of Revelation. It unpacks the war behind all wars.

So war started in heaven long ago, but at one point, heaven experienced a victory – a decisive victory. But surprise! The victory for heaven was won on earth! Things are not what they seem.²

...

¹ Hebrews 9:4

² Darrell Johnson “Discipleship on the Edge” pg 218.

Now there is something else we need to see here in relation to the context. John doesn't tell this story in a vacuum. He's speaking in a way that would be totally understood by his first century audience.

So not far from Patmos, where John is imprisoned, there is another island called Delos. And Delos was special to the Greeks because myth stated this is where the god Apollo was born. And he was born there because his mother, Leto, had fled there to escape the dragon Python who wanted to kill this new son of Zeus.

And when she reached this island Poseidon hid the island under water so that Python, the great serpent, couldn't find her and her child. Then after Apollo was born he went and killed the dragon.³ Does any of that sound familiar?

Well it was familiar to the Romans, who conquered the Greeks, because Caesar August used this myth for his own political advantage. He portrayed himself as the new Apollo, and even made statues of himself as the son of God.

...

Now why do I tell you all this? It's because the church has always had to tell the gospel in the context of other stories. Every culture has myths about humanity's good vs. evil struggle for peace – stories like Star Wars which is special to me because episodes 4,5 and 6 came out around when I was born and they've kept coming out my entire life. (And now that Disney owns them they'll keep coming out forever until people stop watching because episode 36 will be just spaceships flying around and exploding with no plot whatsoever). But until that happens people love these stories because they make sense of life.

Now nobody goes to the theater saying "My goodness my life is a mess. I should watch Star Wars to help me figure things out." But movies like these resonate with us because they answer questions like: what makes a person human? Why do we exist? What's wrong with the world? And what's the answer?

And we love stories that do this because we've been programmed to hunger for these answers. And so all great stories shadow God's story. Think Lord of the Rings. Think Harry Potter. Think Star Wars. Think Greek and Roman mythology. They are all stories of struggle between good and evil with a Christ figure who stands in the gap.

So author John Steinbeck says:

"I believe that there is one story in the world, and only one... Humans are caught—in their lives, in their thoughts, in their hungers and ambitions, in their avarice and cruelty, and in their kindness and generosity too—in a net of good and evil. . . . There is no other story."⁴

³ Story adapted from Johnson pg 218.

⁴ John Steinbeck, "East of Eden"

And so it shouldn't surprise us when we see similarities between what we read in scripture and what we see in the world. This one story is God's story, and He has imprinted it on our hearts.

So let's look at the three characters in chapter 12: the woman, the dragon and the child.

First the woman. An incredible woman. She's clothed in the sun and standing on the moon wearing a crown of 12 stars. Can you even imagine what that would look like?

And the first words John uses to describe her in verse 1 are "A great sign appeared in heaven."

Now a sign points beyond itself. Not far out of town there is a sign that says: "Prince George 50Km." It points beyond itself. And so here this sign in heaven points beyond itself. Now in Revelation the word "sign" appears only in this section – chapters 12-15 – and 'surprise' it appears 7 times. But for now who or what is this sign pointing to?

Well, theologians think she is three things. She is the Old Testament people of God. And she is Mary, Jesus' mom. And she is the church.

So in Genesis 37 Joseph has this audacious dream where the sun, moon and eleven stars bow down to him – remember that story? The sun and moon are his parents, and the stars are his brothers – he's the twelfth star. And this is God's people, the family He chose, that enters Egypt.

Also throughout the Old Testament God's people are pictured as a woman about to give birth. So for example Isaiah writes:

Before the birth pains even begin,
Jerusalem gives birth to a son. (Isaiah 66:7)

But this sign isn't just the Old Testament people of God. The story gets personal. This sign points to a literal woman. Mary's not a constellation, she's a young lady who had a baby that defeated Satan.

And this sign is also the church. This is why in verse 14 John says she gets given wings to fly to a place prepared for her in the wilderness. And she is here for a time, times and half a half a time. This is the 3 and a half years we touched last week – it's a quote from Daniel. And 3 and a half is 42 months is 1260 days is a picture of the duration between when something starts and when it ends.

And so Mary's offspring John says – verse 17 – are those who "keep God's commands and hold fast their testimony about Jesus" – that's Christians. And they are out in the wilderness while Satan hunts them down for 1260 days – the period between when Jesus redeemed the church with His blood to when He returns. So, the first sign is the people of God, Old and New, and Mary herself.

...

Then in verse 3 John says “And another sign appeared in heaven: an enormous red dragon with seven heads and ten horns and seven crowns on its heads.”

John’s not talking China and the Corona virus here. This red dragon is Leviathan from the Old Testament. He’s the embodiment of chaos and evil. And he’s red, the color of blood. And he’s got seven heads. 7 means complete. And ‘head’ is the symbol of authority. And he’s got 10 horns. Horns picture power. And he’s got seven golden crowns. He’s got wealth. And he sweeps a third of the stars away with his tail.

Who is this guy? Well, John just goes out and tells us, verse 9. This is “the great dragon... that ancient serpent called the devil, or Satan, who leads the whole world astray.” And these words take us back to Genesis where Eve gets tricked by the serpent and God tells the snake:

And I will cause hostility between you and the woman,
and between your offspring and her offspring.
He will strike your head,
and you will strike His heel. (Genesis 3:15)

Satan. And there’s one more character. Look at verse 5:

[Read Revelation 12:5]

Now notice something big here. John sees a sign, a woman. He sees a sign, a dragon. And he sees a child – not a sign. There is never going to actually be a woman clothed in the sun standing on the moon. And there isn’t a literal dragon sweeping stars out of the sky. But there is a child. The child isn’t pointing beyond Himself – He is the reality. This is Jesus the Messiah. And that makes this a Christmas text.

So in Matthew 2 we read that when Herod heard a new king had been born he killed all the baby boys in Bethlehem. And so the dragon is crouching ready to devour the child.

This is Christmas Eve. But it’s not a Hallmark Christmas or a Precious Moments nativity. It’s not smiling wise men on camels who are excited about the birth here, it’s evil itself that is incited.

Now why? Why does Jesus’ birth incite evil? It’s because evil knows what this birth means for evil.

You see Jesus has come to rule the nations with an “iron scepter.” This is actually a quote from Psalm 2 – the most quoted Old Testament passage in the New Testament. This chapter’s all about Jesus. But in Psalm 2 He rules with an iron “rod” – and the word rod is the word “Shepherd’s staff.”

This is the Psalm 23 Shepherd – the Lord is my Shepherd. Your rod and staff, they comfort me. Everyone loves Psalm 23 because we show up in it vulnerable and weak, walking through the dark valley. And this is a place all of us go eventually.

And there's lots of scary stuff in the valley. It's the valley of the shadow of death. But Psalm 23 says those who press in to God find themselves taking this journey with the Shepherd. And He's the biggest, strongest, scariest thing in the valley. And He's got a big stick. And the reason His rod and His staff comfort us is because there is nothing in that valley that can touch us without tasting His stick.

Now this doesn't mean nothing bad happens in the valley. Sometimes we, or the people we love, die in the valley. But the dragon doesn't get us. We die comforted by the Shepherd's staff that has already crushed the serpent's head.

Friends, the victory is won and Satan knows it. Six times this chapter says the dragon gets hurled down – verse 9, verse 10, verse 12, verse 13. John's so excited he can't say it enough times. Satan's been thrown out of heaven. And the Greek here is *ebleth* which means "bounced." Satan got bounced out of heaven. Isn't that awesome!

...

But if Satan has been defeated. If he got bounced, then why are things so bad? Why is the force so angry? Look at verse 12:

[Read Revelation 12:12]

Friends, the dragon knows the gospel. He knows his time is short. He knows Jesus is coming back. And that's why he's so active. This is why the force is so angry. The suffering of the church is not a sign of Satan's victory. He's been overcome by the blood of the Lamb. He can't kill the child – that child is on the throne ruling with an iron scepter – and so he goes after the woman's offspring. And he does this in three ways. And standing against these three ways, empowered by the blood of the Lamb, is how we defeat him.

So first, verse 10, John calls the dragon "the accuser of the brothers and sisters." Friends, Satan hates you and he is constantly slandering you before God telling Him how you are dropping the ball. He wants to see you destroyed. This is what Satan does. And he wins when we join him in this endeavor.

So don't get caught up in accusation and slander. Today tearing people down on social media or in politics or to their face is huge business. Don't join this chorus. Don't allow yourself to get excited when you learn something bad about someone that you just know will be lapped up by the dogs when you drop it at a party or a church service.

So refuse to join Satan in tearing down your sisters and brothers. Instead build them up. God-sip instead of gossip. Speak life and love over people, even when they don't deserve it. This is Jesus' game. Doesn't He speak life and love over you even though you've let Him down?

...

Second, verse 9, John describes the dragon as the “deceiver.” He deceives the whole world. This is who he is. James calls him “the father of lies.” He’s fundamentally deceived and deceiving. He’s deceived about his place in the universe – he wants to be God. And so he deceives humanity into also wanting to be gods.

So don’t get caught up playing games with the truth. Don’t speak white lies. Don’t bend the truth. This is the dragon’s game. Instead speak the truth even when it hurts you.

And this leads to the final thing. John says the dragon is a murderer – he’s the color of blood. And one of his main tactics to keep people under his thumb is the fear of death. His message is “If you obey Jesus it is going to go bad for you. If you live for Christ you are going to suffer, you are going to die.” And the temptation is, because death is the end of life, we back off and compromise.

But the truth is that things are not what they seem, and so the answer to the devil’s schemes is to refuse to cower in fear of death. Friends Jesus has set us free from the power of sin and death. Death doesn’t get the last word – it’s not the end. And because that’s true we can stand – and Jesus followers do.

...

We just passed Valentine’s Day. Here’s the story: In 270AD Emperor Claudius II was losing his grip on Rome as the barbarians attacked. And as he was a Jesus-hating man he decided to blame his defeat on Christians and marriage saying it made soldiers weak. So he outlawed marriage in order to get better soldiers. Promiscuity was encouraged, just don’t honour Jesus with your sexuality.

Well Saint Valentine was a bishop in the church at this time. And in direct opposition to the emperor he began marrying people in secret who wanted to honour God.

Eventually he was imprisoned. But while he was there one of his jailors brought his blind daughter to work. Valentine prayed for her and she was healed. And after her healing they fell in love. She would hang out with him in prison talking through the bars.

Eventually Claudius demanded that Valentine recant his faith or die. He refused and Claudius promised him that night would be his last. Back in his cell Valentine wrote the jailor’s daughter a letter professing his love and encouraging her to stand strong in her faith in the face of death. He signed it “From your Valentine.”

Today nobody cares about Claudius the 2nd, but faith and love remain. So give yourself to standing against the dragon’s schemes by refusing to play his games. As a Christ follower speak life and love over people, live the truth, and refuse to fear even death. Live out the reality of Jesus’ victory even while the dragon thrashes.