

Revelation 12:1-6

A great sign appeared in the sky: a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet and a crown of twelve stars on her head. ²She was pregnant, and she cried out in pain and agony as she gave birth.

³Another sign also appeared in the sky: There was a huge red dragon that had seven heads and ten horns and seven crowns on his heads. ⁴His tail swept away a third of the stars in the sky and threw them to the earth. The dragon stood before the woman, who was about to give birth, so that he could devour the child as soon as it was born.

⁵She gave birth to a son, a male child, who will shepherd all the nations with an iron rod. Her child was snatched up to God and to his throne. ⁶Then the woman fled into the wilderness, where she has a place prepared by God in order that she might be fed there for 1,260 days.

God's Gift of Love

I.

Christmas. It's such a wonderful time of the year, isn't it? Even from a secular perspective it's a wonderful time of the year. Pundits who may or may not have any religious leanings look at what they call the "Holiday Season" as a time for families to connect or reconnect and enjoy one another. Those who aren't familiar with the Christ Child—and even some who *are*—think that Christmas is all about family and the love you have for one another. It's just a wonderful time of the year.

Looking at Christmas from a religious perspective, we know there is so much more than family time. Christians like to look at our picturesque little manger scenes. We are carried across time more than 2,000 years. We ache with Mary and Joseph when we are reminded again that there is no room in the inn. With the shepherds we hear the announcement of the angels: "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward mankind" (Luke 2:14, EHV). With Mary, we pay attention to these things; we treasure them and ponder them in our hearts. God sent the Savior. It's just a wonderful time of the year.

In reality, however, the situation for Mary and Joseph was a bit more grim. They were compelled to go to Bethlehem to register for the census. They weren't homeless, as some people like to imply. Even Motel 6 didn't leave the light on for them, because there was not one room left to be had when they finally got to town—the last stragglers coming in as required, since a 9-month pregnant woman couldn't make the trip very fast riding on her bouncy donkey. The pair settled in at the stable and tried to make the best of it. No sterile birthing room at the local hospital at which to deliver, just straw piled up as best they could to make delivery less uncomfortable, though that surely didn't do much.

Those of us Christians who have been around a few years have probably pondered some of these less sterile scenes and treasured them up in our hearts, too. We appreciate that Mary went through less-than-ideal conditions, and that the Savior came in lowly humility, even at his birth. Even so, we feel the calm, the peace, the joy, the love. It's *still* the most wonderful time of the year.

II.

Every year during the week or so before Christmas my favorite radio morning show has a segment called Holiday Horror Stories. Listeners send in their stories and several are read on the air by the hosts. Some stories are about simple misfortune—something happened to the tree or the house or a family member that made one Christmas especially memorable. Sometimes it is a dysfunctional family story. Looking back, the letter-writer can now laugh at the situation, glad that everyone was able to move on from what, at the time, seemed to be a nightmare. None-the-less, at least for *one* year, that happiest, most wonderful time of the year, was ruined by misfortune or

dysfunction.

Today's Second Lesson is a Holiday Horror Story of epic proportion. The story is wrapped up in the apocalyptic literature of the vision that is the Book of Revelation. Remember when I talked about this pulpit as the End Times, and walked around it, describing what it looks like from different perspectives? The End Times is the New Testament era, I said. The End Times, or Last Days, begins with the birth of Jesus. The lesson before us is one of the perspectives of the End Times.

Apocalyptic literature is like the paintings from the Impressionist period. Claud Monet never intended to paint something the way it actually looked, but his *impressions* of a particular scene. He and others of his era were portraying overall visual effects instead of details.

And so it is that today's Second Lesson is a Holiday Horror story of Christmas from God's perspective. It is no laughing matter.

We know Jesus' mother as Mary. In this vision, however, it is not Mary who is depicted as the mother, but the Christian Church—believers who have been waiting for this special Child. She is clothed with the sun—that is, the perfection won by Jesus. She has a crown of 12 stars. 12 comes from multiplying the number of God, which is 3, by the number assigned to mankind, which is 4.

The red dragon is Satan. 7 comes from adding God's number and mankind's number. Satan wears 7 crowns, trying desperately to take God's place. The third of the stars swept out of the sky are the angels who follow Satan.

Most importantly, the red dragon—Satan—knew what this birth was all about. He stood there at the birth, waiting for the Child to be born so that he could devour him before Jesus could do anything to thwart his evil plans.

Revelation speaks of the Last Days as 3½ years. That's the 1260 days that the woman, the Holy Christian Church, flees into the wilderness to be fed by God until the very Last Day will come.

Picture the manger scene again in the words of our text, keeping these vivid colors of apocalyptic imagery in mind.

“A great sign appeared in the sky: a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet and a crown of twelve stars on her head. ²She was pregnant, and she cried out in pain and agony as she gave birth” (Revelation 12:1-2, EHV). There we are at the stable. Clothed with the sun, the Christian Church has the perfection of Jesus. Jesus is born to save and bring the perfection we enjoy.

“Another sign also appeared in the sky: There was a huge red dragon that had seven heads and ten horns and seven crowns on his heads. ⁴His tail swept away a third of the stars in the sky and threw them to the earth. The dragon stood before the woman, who was about to give birth, so that he could devour the child as soon as it was born” (Revelation 12:3-4, EHV). Satan wants to rule over us in God's place. He does everything he can think of to make that happen. He even tries to look like God. A third of the stars is not the majority, but it is an enormous number of evil angels who follow Satan. There is an all-out battle to end the work of the Savior as soon as it begins.

“She gave birth to a son, a male child, who will shepherd all the nations with an iron rod. Her child was snatched up to God and to his throne. ⁶Then the woman fled into the wilderness, where she has a place prepared by God in order that she might be fed there for 1,260 days” (Revelation 12:5-6, EHV). Jesus is born. He shepherds the nations with an iron rod by successfully completing God's work of salvation. Everything that Satan throws at him is just a desperate attempt to stave off the inevitable defeat. Jesus is snatched up to God's throne. The vision jumps immediately to Jesus' ascension, where he re-assumes all his power as God. Now, for the 3½ years of the New Testament era, the Christian Church is protected by God—kept safe from the dragon—as we wait to go home to heaven for eternity.

III.

How is this Holiday Horror Story a depiction of love? God saw this whole terrifying reality when he sent his One and Only Son, Jesus, into the world. He *knew* what he was doing. When earthly parents see something that threatens their child, they move immediately to limit the damage or halt it completely. They do all they can to protect their child.

Not God the Father. He willingly sent his Son—his One and only Son—to face the unspeakable horror of the huge red dragon.

The famous gospel in a nutshell says: “For God so loved the world that he gave his only-begotten Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish, but have eternal life” (John 3:16, EHV). When we read that passage in the light of Revelation 12, we think, *that’s* how much God loved the world. But the word translated “so” means “so” in the sense of: “in this way.” In this way God showed you his great love: he sent his only-begotten Son to you.

The dirt and straw and donkeys and goats and lambs of the manger scene weren’t going to eat the baby. But the red dragon of the Revelation 12 Holiday Horror Story certainly intended to spare no effort to try. That’s what makes “he gave his only-begotten Son” so astounding.

God knew. God was willing to pay any price—for *you*.

There is something even *more* astounding than that. God knew that the dragon wouldn’t get Jesus and consume him before he could complete his work. What got Jesus was even worse than the dragon—it was our guilt. Jesus did not lose to the dragon. Jesus was abandoned by God the Father as he hung on the cross for our sins and guilt. Jesus paid the price of our sins with the wrath of God poured out on *him* in *our* place. The horror God had to witness was far worse than a huge red dragon.

However...just like the Holiday Horror Stories read by a radio station, we look back on this horror story with great joy. God’s love was poured out for us until his love ran over. Jesus *did* accomplish everything, in spite of the red dragon. He completed the task. He endured the abandonment of God. God accepted his payment and Jesus rose from the dead and ascended into heaven to prepare our place.

IV.

Back to the end of the impressionistic vision of our text: “Then the woman fled into the wilderness, where she has a place prepared by God in order that she might be fed there for 1,260 days” (Revelation 12:6, EHV). Remember: the Christian Church is the woman. God is protecting her—you, me, and the whole Christian Church on earth—from the dragon until he determines it is time to bring us home to heaven.

Sometimes it isn’t easy. The painting of Revelation shows us in the wilderness, and that’s exactly the way it seems sometimes. But God is there. He protects and sustains us. Always.

While we wait, we use what God has given us to help others see the love of God, too. We have a great and wondrous sign. Not only do we have the peaceful scene of the manger at Bethlehem, we can see God willingly sending Jesus into the dragon’s teeth. We have Jesus willing to do battle against Satan himself so that he could *give* us the victory. Thanks be to God! We get to see the Father’s love each Christmas. It’s the most wonderful time of the year. Amen.