

Rappahannock Christian Church – 10/17/10

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Communion Meditation

When we think about how we should imitate the Lord Jesus Christ the thought might creep into our head that it is really, really hard to be forgiving. It is very hard to really forgive someone who has wronged me. I have to give up my anger and indignation. It costs me something. Perhaps we think that it is easier for God to forgive. After all, He's God, right?

If we think this way, I have to wonder if we've ever been to the foot of the cross. It wasn't easy for God. He had to give up even Jesus Christ to forgive us. It wasn't easy, and the cost was high.

As we take these elements I hope we will ponder the high cost that He willingly paid to forgive our sin. Let me read the words of the Apostle Paul in 1 Corinthians:

1 Corinthians 11:23-26 – For I received from the Lord what I also passed on to you: The Lord Jesus, on the night he was betrayed, took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, "This is my body, which is for you; do this in remembrance of me." In the same way, after supper he took the cup, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood; do this, whenever you drink it, in remembrance of me." For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.

DragonSlayers

Our Scripture reading this morning is found once again in the book of Revelation. We're going to read quite a bit for our Scripture again this week. As I read, let me tell you ahead of time what I want you to listen for. You are going to hear a parable or allegory. We'll talk about it later and about what it means for us during the message.

Revelation 12:1-12 – 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. She was pregnant and cried out in pain as she was about to give birth. Then another sign appeared in heaven: an enormous red dragon with seven heads and ten horns and seven crowns on his heads. 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. ⁵She 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. 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.

And there was war in heaven. Michael and his angels fought against the dragon, and the dragon and his angels fought back. But he was not strong enough, and they lost their place in heaven. The great dragon was hurled down—that ancient serpent called the devil, or Satan, who leads the whole world astray. He was hurled to the earth, and his angels with him.

Then 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 Christ.

For the accuser of our brothers,
who accuses them before our God day and night,
has been hurled down.

They overcame 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.
Therefore rejoice, you heavens
and you who dwell in them!
But woe to the earth and the sea,
because the devil has gone down to you!
He is filled with fury,
because he knows that his time is short."

When the dragon saw that he had been hurled to the earth, he pursued the woman who had given birth to the male child. The woman was given the two wings of a great eagle, so that she might fly to the place prepared for her in the desert, where she would be taken care of for a time, times and half a time, out of the serpent's reach. Then from his mouth the serpent spewed water like a river, to overtake the woman and sweep her away with the torrent. But the earth helped the woman by opening its mouth and swallowing the river that the dragon had spewed out of his mouth. Then the dragon was enraged at the woman and went off to make war against the rest of her offspring—those who obey God's commandments and hold to the testimony of Jesus.

All right. So maybe I should have said this first, but just as a reminder, a parable or allegory is a story that has some symbolism in it so that, while it appears to be a story, it really means something else. We all know some of these. Remember the story of The Little Boy Who Cried "Wolf"? Which one of us wasn't told that story when we were a child? It is a cute little story, but the person telling it to you probably didn't have in mind just to entertain you with a cute story. In the point of the story is that if you act like something bad is happening when it isn't, then when you really are in trouble no one will believe you and come to help you. This isn't just a cute little story. It's meant to make a point about real life.

Here in our Scripture we have a story about a woman and a dragon and a baby boy. As the baby is born the dragon tries to kill him, but he is whisked away to a safe place. We mentioned several weeks ago that John is a prisoner. Some of what he is writing may be about particular men who hold positions of power at that very time or some might be about the mighty Roman Empire itself. Obviously, he cannot come out and name names if he wants his book to get into the right hands. This may account for much of the symbolism in the book of Revelation.

So what can we make of the story about the woman and the dragon?

First of all, it seems fairly obvious that the Child who is to be born can be none other than the Lord Jesus Christ Himself. He is described as one who "will rule the nations with an iron scepter." This is the very language that is used of the Messiah in the Old Testament (Psalm 2).

Who is the woman and who is the dragon? Well, it sounds to me an awfully lot like the story of Jesus' birth. King Herod seeks the child's life, but Jesus' family escapes to safety in Egypt before any harm can come to him. Commentators have suggested a variety of other interpretations. It's possible that the threat to Jesus is the crucifixion. Satan thinks to extinguish the Savior at that point. But Jesus escapes the grave and arises triumphant in the resurrection....But in this scenario who is the woman? I guess it could still be Mary. There are other thoughts about this, too, but it seems simple enough to assume that this is a re-telling of the birth of Jesus.

I will tell you though, that as you go on to read the rest of the chapter you find the woman still being pursued by the dragon. She is given a pair of eagles' wings and escapes. When was THAT supposed to have happened? I have no idea. So, I admit that there are loose ends.

It may be that this prophecy is like some Old Testament prophecies. A lot of prophecy contains some predictions of things that are about to happen and others (within the same paragraph!) that will not take place for many, many generations. Isaiah, for example, speaks in the same prophecy about the Israelites returning from exile in Babylon and the "wolf living with the lamb" - the end of the age! (Isaiah 11) The prophets saw future events, but apparently they didn't always know how many years lay in between those events. Maybe this prophecy about Jesus and the prophecy about the defeat of the dragon is like that. Abrupt shifts like that make understanding very difficult. We have to just do the best we can.

The clear and important point of this story seems to be that there is a struggle going on between good and evil, and it is the brothers of Jesus Christ that John says will finally defeat Satan. The way they will do this is "by the blood of the Lamb" and "by the word of their testimony."

"By the blood of the Lamb." In the great struggle between God and Satan, Jesus' death on the cross was the decisive blow. I know that I've said this before, but this is something like the impact that D-day had on World War II. Once the D-day invasion took place and was successful everyone knew what the outcome of the war would be. The decisive battle had been fought and the Allies were going to be victorious. There were still battles to be fought, of course, but the outcome was not in any serious doubt. Jesus' atoning death on the cross sealed Satan's defeat.

At the same time, when Jesus rose from the grave Satan wasn't cast down, and the end did not come. We're still here. The decisive blow has been struck, but there is still work to be done -- by US -- by Jesus' followers!

"And by the word of their testimony." It's not just at the cross that Satan is defeated. "The brothers" also participate in the struggle. I'm sure John is especially thinking of those early Christians when he writes this. They are speaking boldly and persevering even though they are sometimes meeting with harsh opposition. They face beatings, imprisonment and death, but they will not back down. It has often been said that the Church is built on the blood of the martyrs.

But folks, WE are the brothers of Jesus, too, and the struggle continues. We are on God's side, and we are involved in the fight against Satan. Listen to the words of Paul in Ephesians 6:

Finally, be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power. Put on the full armor of God so that you can take your stand against the devil's schemes. *For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.*

Paul saw the same thing that John did. He understood this struggle the same way. We are not struggling against flesh and blood, he says.

We "overcome" -- we deal Satan another defeating blow -- whenever we turn from sin, or when God uses us to turn others from sin. On the other hand, we let Satan win if we ignore sin or convince ourselves that it doesn't matter and we go about our daily lives with no thought for God's claim on us. You see, God has given us talents and income and time to use in His service towards the completion of this battle. What percentage of our time and energy and income is spent on God's work? Are we gaining ground, winning battles? Satan wants us to rebel. That way, HE gains ground and wins the day! He often offers us very convincing reasons why God's call to obedience is unreasonable and gives us ideas for why we should not obey. He puts lots of

obstacles in the path, too. He gives us options to choose instead of God's Way. Most of them are enjoyable. Or they use up all our resources so that we can have what WE WANT. Christians are supposed to see through the Deceiver's schemes and keep their priorities in the right order!

One day there will be great rejoicing in heaven because the Accuser has been thrown down. Jesus' followers will be happy on that day. Not only did the Lamb overcome on the cross of Calvary, but THEY overcame when they endured and were faithful. They will be able to say with the Apostle Paul:

For I am already being poured out like a drink offering, and the time has come for my departure. *I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Now there is in store for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day—and not only to me, but also to all who have longed for his appearing.*

Benediction

The Lord bless you and keep you: The Lord make his face to shine upon you, and be gracious to you: The Lord lift up his countenance upon you, and give you peace. – Numbers 6:24-26