

“Revealed” / Sermon 3: A Child and a Dragon / August 30, 2015

Sometimes there is way more going on than we can see, or know. And sometimes what we don't see is way more important than what we do see.

- We can see just the tip of an iceberg. But an iceberg is just an ice-cube on steroids. Nearly 90% of it is not visible above water. And that 90% can kill you, if you happen to take the Titanic on your next cruise. Because sometimes what we don't see is way more important than what we do see.
- We look up into the sky and see all these stars. Astronomers tell us that we can see about 10,000 stars with the naked eye. The rest is just dark, just blackness. But they focused the Hubble telescope on just a tiny piece of that dark sky; a piece of darkness about the size of a grain of sand. Here's what they saw ... And most of those aren't stars; most of them are galaxies, with hundreds of billions of stars each! There is way more happening than we can see!
- Look at your hands. Did you know that there are more cells in your body than there are stars in the Milky Way? Did you know that in the time you listened to my last sentence, about 25 million of your cells died? But that's okay. Every day we make about 300 billion more. In fact, our bodies replace all their cells – all of them – every 7-10 years! That means that every one in here is actually 7-10 years old! And this one will blow your mind: Did you know that your body is composed of somewhere around 7 billion, billion, billion atoms? That's a 7 followed by 27 zeroes! There is way more to you than you can imagine!
- Well ... that idea works with God too. There's more to God than we can see – way more! And there's more to what he is doing than we can see. There's way more going on behind the scenes: more that God is doing -- more that Satan is doing – and that more determines how tough life can be for us now, and how perfect life will be for us then...

But God gives the apostle John a peek. He let's John peek behind the curtains for a moment, and then he let's John share that peek with us. Because when life gets hard here, we need to know that God is still in control, and that if we hang tough, it will be worth it – more than worth it!

We're doing a short series on different pictures of Jesus in the book of Revelation. We're calling it "Revealed." God gives the old apostle John 4 different pictures of Jesus. They are very different. Each of them reveals something extraordinarily important about Jesus.

- In the very first chapter of Revelation Jesus appears as incredibly glorious. The hair on his head is as white as snow, signifying his wisdom. His eyes are like flames of fire, eyes that look through you, and purify you. His feet are like polished bronze: strong, immovable, incorruptible. His voice thunders like mighty ocean waves: because someday Jesus will use his outside voice, and everybody is going to listen. He holds seven stars in his right hand: those probably represent us, we are safe in his powerful right hand. A sword comes out of his mouth, a sword of judgment. And his face is like the sun in all its brilliance: perfectly holy, perfectly pure. We looked at those images two weeks ago.
- Last week we unpacked the picture of Jesus in Revelation chapter 5. God the Father is sitting on his throne with a terribly important scroll in his right hand, a scroll no creature in heaven or on earth is worthy to open. And John starts weeping, because he's not worthy to open the scroll either. But then the Lion of Judah steps forward – that's Jesus. But when John looks up to see the Lion, instead Jesus looks like a Lamb that had been slaughtered, and then raised from the dead. And he is worthy to open the scroll. And then all the creatures of heaven begin to worship him: "Worthy is the Lamb who was slaughtered -- to receive power and riches and wisdom and strength and honor and glory and blessing." And then all the creatures of earth join in: We say, "Blessing and honor and glory and power belong to the one sitting on the throne and to the Lamb forever and ever." If you were here last week, do you remember those pictures? Powerful stuff!

Well, today's picture of Jesus is completely different. It's a picture of the extraordinary risk God took when he sent Jesus into our world. And it's a picture of the war that is raging behind the scenes – a war we can't see, but a war we are part of. It's a picture that explains why life in this world can be so tough for God followers; but it's also a picture that tells us to hang in there, because the decisive battle has already been fought – and

won. Choose against Jesus, and you have already lost. You hang with God, you keep following Jesus, and you **will** win. The way John tells it actually kind of sounds like a Christmas story, but from a very different point of view.

Now some people try to read the book of Revelation as a timeline. The first chapters of the book (they think) deal with the world of the apostle John, and then in a picturesque way it moves chronologically through history to the end of time as we know it. They think our job is to figure out where in the book we are, so we know when the end is coming. But that's really a misread, I think. Actually Revelation kind of keeps retelling the same story from different points of view. And God is sweet enough to give us a picture of the glorious Jesus first, and then the all-worthy Jesus next, before he gives us a glimpse of the Jesus who took an extraordinary risk by entering into a world that has fallen into enemy hands ... that's our world, a world where it still can be very difficult to be a Jesus follower. And the book of Revelation is going to close with one more picture of Jesus: triumphant, victorious, conquering. But that's next week.

So, if you have a Bible with you, or a Bible app, open up to Revelation chapter 12. That's where we are going to settle in this morning. This may be the strangest Christmas story you have ever heard. But in reality, it is perhaps a truer picture of Christmas than any you have ever heard. But let me start by telling you a parable about the Christmas story, written by a very perceptive Christian philosopher who lived 200 years ago. (Soren Kierkegaard)

He says: Suppose there was a King who loved a humble maiden. Now, no King was like this king, every other ruler trembled before his power. This king had the strength to crush every opponent. No one dared breathe a word against him. And yet this mighty King was melted by love for a humble maiden. How could he confess his love for her? In a way his kingliness tied his hands. If he just comes to her cottage with an armed escort and white banners waving, it would overwhelm her. If he just took her to the palace and made her his queen, crowned her with jewels and clothed her with robes, she might stay. But would she really love him? How could he know? You see, the King didn't want a subject, he wanted a lover. Did you get that part? That's huge. The King didn't want a subject,

he wanted a lover. So in Kierkegaard's parable the King disguises himself as a beggar and he comes to the maiden's door alone, to win her heart... Jesus took the form of a beggar, to win our hearts... Guys, that's the Christmas story, it's a love story of a humble maiden (that's us), loved by a mighty King (that's Jesus). You see, ours is the most beautiful of all love stories. The ancient of days sneaks into the enemy camp (that's our world) under cover of night, as a carpenter from Nazareth, to win our hearts. Because he doesn't want just subjects; he wants lovers.

And that's what Revelation 12 is all about. The Apostle John gives us a picture of the real Christmas story, from God's perspective. You see, the babe in the manger surrounded by shepherds and wise men doesn't begin to capture the immensity, or the intensity, of the scene. Something much harder to see is happening, more ominous, more epic.

(On Screen: 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.)

It's the story of a woman, clothed with the sun, it says, the moon under her feet, a crown of stars on her head. Now this woman probably does not represent Mary, the virgin of Bethlehem. She probably represents the people of God, God's faithful, God's bride, through whom and for whom His long-expected messiah would come. You'll see why as the vision continues. And her crown is especially significant, I think. She's wearing a crown of victory, even though it's going to look like she is in deep, deep trouble. If you are a Jesus follower, you wear that crown too. Well, she is pregnant, very pregnant, crying in pain as a child (our Messiah) passes through her birth canal.

(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.)

And then it pictures an enormous red dragon, with 7 heads and 10 horns and 7 crowns, with a tail that sweeps the stars out of the sky. It has 7 heads – meaning that it is enormous, and incredibly difficult to kill. It has

10 horns – meaning it has incredible strength. And it has 7 crowns – as this dragon (this symbol of Satan) usurps the authority of God on earth. He sweeps a third of the stars out of the sky. Some people think those stars are Jesus followers, knocked down by Satan, pulled away from God by Satan. They are apostates. Maybe they include some of you. Others think the stars represent the angels. A third of the angels pull away from God in a rebellion led by Satan. Those are realities we can't see, but realities that affect our lives here on earth every single day.

(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. She gave birth to a son, a male child, who will rule all the nations with an iron scepter.)

And then it tells us that this immensely powerful dragon crouched hungrily before the woman, waiting to devour the child when it emerged from her womb. What an incredible picture. What an incredible moment. If the dragon had succeeded, we would be without hope. Then it tells us that the woman, clothed in splendor, crying in pain, gave birth to a son, a male child, a Christ child, who would rule all the nations -- every man, every woman, every child -- with a rod of iron. Not with meanness, not with tyranny, but with power, with absolute authority. Eventually, guys, he will take this world back from the usurper. It's coming!

(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 it says the child was snatched up by God, to God. In other words, what Jesus did on earth was only the tip of the iceberg. There was so much more going on in the spiritual realm. The dragon's designs have been thwarted. He could no longer threaten the child. So he turns his attention to the people of God – that's us. You see, if Satan can't hurt God, he'll do whatever he can to hurt those God loves. He'll do whatever he can to take you down. Which is one big reason there is so much chaos, and so much pain in this world right now. And it says that the woman, the people of God, (us, we) fled into the wilderness, to a place prepared by God, where (we) she would be protected by his hand.

(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.)

And then, almost literally, all hell breaks loose. And there is all-out cosmic war -- again. A war we can't see, but a war that will determine our future. The archangel Michael and his angels go to war with the dragon and his legions -- again. And the angels press forward; and the devils retreat -- again.

(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.)

And it says the great dragon, that ancient serpent, that deceiver, Satan, was hurled down from heaven. And it says his legions were thrown down with him... Guys, listen: the decisive battle has already been fought. The war has already been won. Satan has already been defeated. He's just taking as many with him as he can before he is finally caged once and for all. Guys, if you choose against God, you have already lost the war; you just don't know it yet. If you choose for God, you have already won – now matter how tough it is to be a Jesus follower in this world.

And then John says: 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.” Guys, I don't care how bleak life seems sometimes now, that's reality! That's hope!

And that, my friends ... is the the real Christmas story! We see a manger, we see a sweet innocent young girl giving birth to a fragile and helpless child; we see wise men and shepherds and cattle lowing (whatever that means). But Revelation pulls back a veil. It gives us a peek at the spiritual reality behind the scenes of the human picture. It shows us a parallel story, events in heaven mirroring the events on earth.

And it is not a sweet and sentimental picture. It's an invasion. A great invasion. It's a raid by God into the stronghold of evil. It is a decisive blow

in a cosmic war. Folks, without some sense of this part of the story, then what is pictured on our postcards, and in our manger scenes, and in our Christmas carols -- is sentimental deception; it is pious fantasy...

Who do you see -- lying in that manger? The Bible says that the one bigger than the universe itself was passing through the birth canal of a frightened teenager. Almost incomprehensible! The Bible says that the one whose days are numberless was actually drawing his first breath. Mind blowing! It says that the one who could rattle the heavens with his finger flailed his arms as a young girl rocked him. Astounding! It says that the one who spoke the universe into existence with a word ... babbled and cooed. Stunning! That God would do that! That God would stoop so low -- for us! That God would take that risk, to send his own Son into harm's way -- for us!

Make no mistake. That is who the Bible says he was. In another of his books John says (1.14), The Word (that's Jesus; the Word) became flesh (in fact, he became a baby) and he dwelt among us. . .

(In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. 1.1-2)

John says that Word (that babe) was there, in the very beginning, in Act 1, in the once upon a time before time. Before anything at all was created, the Word was there. Why? Because the Word was God.

(Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. In him was life, and that life was the light of men. 1.3-4)

John says that everything in our universe owes its existence to the Word. Without him there is nothing. He is why you are here. And John says that the Word is life itself. We exist physically because of the Word. And the only way we can live spiritually will be through the Word.

(He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him. He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him. 1.10-11)

And John says that that first Christmas may have been the most deceptive event in history. He looked like a baby -- and he was. He looked so fragile, so helpless -- and he was. Who could have known that this young peasant girl had borne the long-expected Christ child? Who could have known that the dragon looked on anxiously waiting to devour the child? Who could have known that a cosmic war was about to begin in which the dragon would be hurled down from heaven?

(Yet to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God— 1.12)

Who could have known that the fate of every man, every woman, every child would depend on whether ... we will bend our knees before the baby of Bethlehem, the Word of God?

You see, Revelation gives us a very different perspective on the Christmas story. In reality, our greatest enemies are not Isis and radical Islam, or Iran, or North Korea, or Russia, or China or secular humanism, or religious extremism. They are all speed-bumps. We believe a usurper has taken God's rightful place in our world. We believe that we Jesus followers are the resistance, living in occupied territory. We believe the usurper is trying to take as many of us down as he can; at the same time we are trying to rescue as many as we can.

Have you ever wondered why God just doesn't stop it? Why he waits to throttle Satan? Why he lets us struggle now in a world still rattled by Satan? Perhaps ... perhaps because he wants lovers, not subjects. Perhaps he wants to give us time to choose for him when choosing against him would be so much easier. Perhaps he is giving us Jesus followers time to drag as many with us as we can. Maybe even ... perhaps he is even giving Satan time to repent. I don't know.

What I do know is that God sent Jesus into occupied territory to take us back. We believe that, in reality, Christmas was an invasion. God enters into our world and plants his flag. In Jesus the decisive battle has already been fought, and won. And now He stakes a claim on my soul, and on yours. He gives us a decision to make – surrender totally to Him, and you

have already won; or push him away and you have already lost. That's the choice we make, a choice that will determine our ... eternity.

I love the way C. S. Lewis pictures the real Jesus, in the figure of Aslan; and how he pictures the choice every one of us has to make.

- “Are you thirsty?” said the Lion.
- “I’m *dying* of thirst,” said Jill.
- “Then drink,” said the Lion.
- “May I — could I — would you mind going away while I do?” said Jill.
- The Lion answered this only by a look and a very low growl. And as Jill gazed at its motionless bulk, she realized that she might as well have asked the whole mountain to move aside for her convenience.
- The delicious rippling noise of the stream was driving her nearly frantic.
- “Will you promise not to — do anything to me, if I do come?” said Jill.
- “I make no promise,” said the Lion.
- Jill was so thirsty now that, without noticing it, she had come a step nearer.
- “Do you eat girls?” she said.
- “I have swallowed up girls and boys, women and men, kings and emperors, cities and realms,” said the Lion. It didn’t say this as if it were boasting, nor as if it were sorry, nor as if it were angry. It just said it.
- “I daren’t come and drink,” said Jill.
- “Then you will die of thirst,” said the Lion.
- “Oh dear!” said Jill, coming another step nearer. “I suppose I must go and look for another stream then.”
- “There is no other stream,” said the Lion.