Once upon a time and long ago a man named John was exiled to the island of Patmos because of his faith in Christ. Patmos was an isolated place, some sixty miles southeast of Ephesus where John served as pastor. John lived in a day when the Roman government didn’t like Christians. The cruel emperor—a man named Domitian—fashioned himself to be god. He didn’t just want allegiance, he wanted worship. Christians weren’t about to worship an emperor, and many paid the price for it. Some were murdered.

John was exiled—ripped away from everything familiar and comfortable and normal. Exile is hard enough on a young man, harder yet for an old man like John—probably in his 80s, stooped a bit now, he walked with a limp, shuffled really, which made it difficult to navigate the rocky island of Patmos. His once strong hands that gripped fishing nets like a vice were now knotted and crooked with arthritis. John was an old man. His face was weathered by the years, crow’s feet at the edges of cloudy eyes that still disappeared when he smiled and still retained a sparkle when he spoke of Jesus. This one time son of thunder had mellowed with age. But his mind was still sharp and his devotion to Jesus was as crisp and fresh as it had been that day when Jesus called John to leave his fishing business and take up the kingdom business. “Follow me,” Jesus said. John did. And he’d been following Jesus ever since.
And in following Jesus, John was eye-witness to so many incredible things. John, the experienced seaman, was as scared as the rest of the disciples when their boat was being swamped by wind and wave. Soaked to their skivvies and shivering in the cold, they dropped the sail and were at the mercy of the storm—the boat bobbing, weaving, rocking, tilting; the disciples green at the gills, nauseous, fearful. Drowning is such a horrible way to die. And all the while, Jesus slept. The disciples woke Him. “Master, don’t you care that we’re dying here?” Jesus roused. He stretched. Reaching for the edge of the boat, he pulled himself to his feet, and staggered to the boat’s bow working to keep his balance in that storm tossed vessel. Then, holding the forward mast with one hand, Jesus raised the other hand and told the storm to stop. And quick as a wink, the howling wind became a whispering breeze, choppy waters settled, and the disciples were suddenly more afraid of Jesus than they had been of the storm. “Who is this man that even the wind and the waves obey his voice?” John was there. He saw that.

And John was there when Jesus stood outside the tomb of His friend Lazarus, now four-days-dead. “Lazarus, get up!” Jesus shouted. Lazarus got up and came out of the grave with the stiff-legged walk of a man wrapped up like a mummy. “Unwrap him,” Jesus said, “and let him go.” John saw that with his own eyes.
And John saw the cross. He was there, right at the foot of it. Jesus even put His own mother into John’s care that day. “Woman, behold your son,” Jesus said. “Son, behold your mother.” John watched Jesus die. At the time he didn’t know quite what to make of it. “It is finished,” Jesus said just before he took his last breath. “Yes,” John thought, “it is finished. The dream is finished. Jesus is finished. I am finished.”

That happened on Friday. But come Sunday, things cleared up. Mary Magdalene gently rapped at the door of the disciple’s hideout. The door creaked as it opened just a crack, just enough to reveal the shadowed faces of Peter and John. “I have seen the Lord!” she said. Stunned by the news, Peter and John raced to the tomb to check it out for themselves. They found it empty. There were burial cloths neatly folded and in place but no Jesus. They still weren’t sure what to make of it until the resurrected Jesus showed up in their midst a few hours later. John saw Jesus die. John saw the resurrected Jesus. John saw the risen Jesus a number of times.

And John was there to see Jesus ascend into heaven, and to hear Jesus’ great commission to His followers to take the gospel to the whole world. Jesus told His followers to wait first in Jerusalem for the Holy Spirit to come. John was there when the Holy Spirit came. And John helped lead the way for the brand new church. It was costly. Along with Peter, John was dragged before the authorities, beaten, and tossed in jail. John had his scars. John even
watched his brother James die for his faith at the hands of an angry King Herod. John was not surprised by these persecutions and hardships. Nor was he defeated by them. Jesus warned them that these things would happen. Jesus said, “I have told you these things so that in me you might have peace. In this world you will have tribulation. But be of good cheer; I have overcome the world.”

And through it all—every twist, every turn, every up, every down—John kept following Jesus, loving Jesus, loving the church, loving his enemies. And now as an old man, John was persecuted once again—exiled to the lonely island of Patmos.

And Jesus met John on Patmos. In the bowels of a cave in which John sought shelter from the elements, God gave John the revelation of Jesus Christ in a sweeping panorama of history from God’s point of view. The setting of the Revelation moves back and forth from earth to heaven, from heaven to earth. It’s a story steeped in apocalyptic images of dragons and beasts and harlots and angels and trumpets and bowls of wrath.

But the dominant image, the governing image, is a larger than life Jesus Christ, standing in the midst of His churches, clothed like a great high priest in a long robe with a golden sash around His chest; His hair as white as the whitest wool, whiter even than snow; His eyes aflame; His feet like fire-
tempered bronze; His voice like the sound of Niagara Falls. In His large hand He held seven stars. A sharp two-edged sword came from His mouth. And His face was as bright as a high noon sun in a clear summer sky. John was so overwhelmed by this vision of the living Christ that he fainted cold at Jesus’ feet.

But Jesus reached down with His right hand and helped John back to His feet. “You’ve got a story to tell the church, John.” And God unfolded the Revelation before John, who, with those crooked hands, feverishly wrote down what he saw. And what he saw is first and last a revelation of the large and in charge Jesus Christ. This is no Jesus meek and mild. This is the cosmic Christ: the First and the Last, the Living One, the One who was dead but is alive forevermore, the One who holds the keys to death and the grave. This is the Christ who came, who comes, and who is coming again. This is the Christ who is big enough to sustain and rescue a church that is suffering at the hands of an evil empire. This is the Christ who is big enough for a church at war.

And Revelation tells a lot of war stories. Even the birth of Jesus is cast as a war story.

The story unfolds not in a spot on the map called Bethlehem but on a cosmic stage. This war is no local shootout between Wyatt Earp’s deputies and
the Clanton brothers at the OK Corral in Tombstone, Arizona; it’s cosmic and epic, more like Luke Skywalker and Darth Vader in *Star Wars*.

And there’s *not a particular individual* named Mary in the story either. Instead, the woman who gives birth to the child is a *sign*. She’s clothed with the sun, the moon is under her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars. The number twelve in apocalyptic literature is the number of God’s people. This woman is more than Mary, larger than Mary; she is a sign of all God’s faithful people across the ages: faithful Israel and faithful church. And instead of the serene and homey language of Luke’s Christmas story—“*and she gave birth to her firstborn son and laid him in a manger*”—this woman in John’s story is “*crying out in birth pains and the agony of giving birth.*” We don’t show up to find the baby in the nursery; John takes us into the birthing room. And it neither sounds nor feels very spiritual. No epidural. No anesthetic. This is work. This is war: pain and agony, a woman’s blood-curdling screams instead of a baby’s coo. There was nothing silent about this night.

And instead of humble shepherds who came to greet and worship the newborn baby ... instead of magi from the east who came to worship the child-king and bring Him expensive gifts, in this Revelation account there is another *sign*, a huge, blood-red, seven-headed, ten-horned dragon, with crowns on every horn. This is no Puff the Magic Dragon either. No H. R. Pufnstuf. This is a monstrous, violent, angry, evil dragon with a tail long enough and wide
enough to sweep one-third of the stars of heaven and bat them down to the earth.

And this devil-dragon is **hungry**. See him there, standing before the woman, towering over her, casting her in his evil shadow. The woman is now dilated to 10; the crown of the baby’s head is starting to show. With labored breaths and screams the woman begins to push the baby into the world as the dragon waits, salivating, licking his chops with his long forked-tongue, rubbing his dragon wings together. This devil-dragon is ready to devour this child the moment he tumbles out of the womb.

But this is **no ordinary child**. This is the prophesied child, the Messiah-ruler of Psalm 2, the pre-existent Word, the Christ who was with God and is God made flesh to dwell among us. This is the child who is to rule all the nations with an iron rod. This child is the mortal enemy of the dragon and all the evil the dragon represents. The dragon could not get to Him in heaven. But now ... now that He’s come to earth, and as a helpless, vulnerable baby put into the care of mere flesh and blood folks like you and me, the dragon sees his opportunity to devour the child and win the war. How can a helpless child and an exhausted woman who’s just given birth resist the cosmic power of the dragon? It looks like all is lost.
But wait! Suddenly, “the child was caught up to God and to his throne.” And before the dragon could put two and two together, even the woman escaped into the wilderness, where God would take care of her and provide for her for a season, until it was time to engage the dragon once again.

And this is the way, John and Revelation say, “Merry Christmas!” You won’t find this Christmas story on a Hallmark card. There’s nothing sentimental about it. No shepherds. No magi. No Bethlehem. No manger. No cattle lowing in the background. No cute little Precious Moments angels singing of peace on earth and goodwill toward men. No. Just a screaming pregnant lady at the cusp of birth, a monstrous, evil devil-dragon, and a Messiah-child the dragon is committed to destroy. This is war.

You may wonder how this is war since we never really saw a battle: the hungry dragon waits, the child is born, and is caught up to God and the throne. Where’s the war? It’s in between the birth and the ascension of Jesus. John doesn’t give us the details of the battle, but remember: this is Revelation, this is apocalypse, this is cosmic, sweeping literature. Revelation just cuts to the chase and declares Jesus the victor!

But it wasn’t as easy as it looks in our story. War never is. You don’t get from Pearl Harbor to V-J Day without a lot of blood, battles, and death in between. You don’t get from D-Day to V-E Day without the bloodbath on
Normandy’s beaches and the horrible casualties of the Battle of the Bulge. And Jesus didn’t get from birth to ascension without battles and bloodshed either. The devil-dragon made war on Jesus from the moment Jesus made His beachhead in Bethlehem.

- **Herod** tried to slaughter the child Jesus by running a sword through every crib and playpen in Bethlehem. Herod missed.

- When Jesus grew up and was baptized by John, the devil-dragon tried to **tempt Jesus** in the wilderness to do things the devil-way rather than the God-way, the way of sensationalism rather than the way of sacrifice. The devil lost this battle too.

- And then there was the time when the devil-dragon tried the very same ploy by putting words in the mouth of Jesus’ own disciple Peter who told Jesus that this suffering Savior stuff should *never* happen to Jesus and *would* never happen if Peter had anything to say about it. Jesus won that battle too. Said Jesus to Peter, “Get behind me, Satan,”

- And then there was Gethsemane, the Alamo of Jesus’ resolve to finish His mission by dying on the cross as a sacrifice for our sins. That was a battle all right. Jesus was so agitated and agonized He sweat drops of blood and took three rounds of prayer to steel himself for the suffering
and the cross that was just hours away. Jesus stayed the course, and the devil lost that one too.

But this was no easy victory for Jesus. The devil-dragon took his shots at Jesus. The Roman flogging which rips skin from bone left Jesus’ back and ribs looking like uncooked hamburger. The long iron nails driven into Jesus’ hands and feet shattered bones and tendons. And there has never been a death more slow, excruciating, humiliating, and suffocating as death on the cross. Jesus didn’t just “hang out” on the cross; Jesus died on the cross. He died miserably, suffering in his body, suffering under the greater weight of our sins. “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” Jesus cried. The devil-dragon took his shots.

But the devil-dragon couldn’t defeat Jesus and he can’t defeat Jesus’ people either. It’s not for lack of trying. The devil-dragon harasses and makes war on the church as many ways as he can. His arsenal includes persecution, Christ-hating governments, Christ-hating religions, and the devil-dragon can even go after Jesus’ people through family members and others who are close to us. He tried to get to Jesus through His own disciple Peter. The devil has a lot of weapons at his disposal. He is cunning. He is relentless. He is a deceiver, a destroyer, a liar and the father of lies. And sometimes he even appears to us as an angel of light. He will win some battles. Some of John’s other Revelation-visions spell that out.
But here’s the good news: the devil-dragon will not win the war. The war is already won. The Christmas child, grew up, did His work in the cross and resurrection, and was caught up to God and to His throne. The Christmas child came to destroy the works of the devil, and He did and He does. And through the presence of His Holy Spirit in our lives, Jesus is as present with us today as He was when His feet walked the earth. Jesus is Emmanuel, and that means “God with us.” Jesus came to us in Christmas. He comes to us in His Holy Spirit. And as the Revelation reminds us at the end, this same Christ is coming back to earth. But are things ever going to be different this time around!

- This time He will come as no helpless, dependent child but as the full-grown God-Man that He is.

- This time He will come not quietly in some dinky little town like Bethlehem, but He will come with trumpet blast and angel shout and every eye will see Him.

- This time He will come not through a mother’s womb but on a white stallion wearing the names King of Kings and Lord of Lords.
• This time He will come not alone but with all the saints and hosts of God to make visible on earth what is already true in heaven.

• This time He will not suffer so much as a hangnail, but those who oppose Him will suffer and be destroyed at His righteous judging hand.

• And this time the devil-dragon won’t get off a single shot against Jesus. This time the devil will be thrown into the lake of fire where he will be tormented day and night forever and ever.

And what about God’s people? What will become of them at the end of this war? What will become of us? Revelation makes that clear too: God has prepared a new heaven and a new earth for us where old things like death and sickness and suffering and evil pass away, and all things become new. And you know what becomes of all God’s people, don’t you? It’s the way every good story should end: all God’s people live happily ever after … forever after. Amen.