

## Introduction

Last weekend we set up our Christmas tree and our nativity scene at home. Everything looks so peaceful. Jesus is so cozy lying in a comfortable, hay-filled manger. The animals, so well-behaved to let a newborn sleep. Mary and Joseph, so well-rested. The shepherds, so helpful. Everyone is so happy to be there. You just want to turn on Spotify and listen to “Away in the Manger” sound throughout your home: “Away in the manger, asleep on the hay, our little Lord Jesus, no crying he makes.”

I don’t buy it! I don’t buy it at all! It was not a pretty sight – in fact, an ugly scene. It may have been in a stable that essentially functioned like a garage, but early church tradition places the location in a cave, since many Palestinian homes had nearby stables in caves. A bloody birth onto rough, poky straw, if there even was straw, was a risky proposition. It was an unsanitary birth in a slobbering-wet feeding trough for animals. Mary and Joseph did not have a lot of wealth, and it must have been exhausting to walk the distance from here to Saginaw. The Magi weren’t even there yet to present their gifts of gold, incense, and myrrh.

Yet that dirty, dingy birth isn’t even the worst part. Every nativity set forgets one animal: a ferocious, monstrous, baby-eating dragon, hiding around the corner in a pile of straw ready to pounce on the crying baby Jesus the moment he comes out of the womb! Instead of being lulled to sleep with “Away in the Manger” followed by beautiful dreams, this is the stuff of nightmares. Today the Second Lesson from Revelation 12 takes that nativity scene and elevates it to a macro-spiritual level, to the way God the Father saw it. On our last week of Advent preparation one week before Christmas, we need to see the brutal spiritual reality behind that nativity scene:

## Let the Battle over Christmas Begin!

During our summer vacation to London, we visited a few top-notch European art museums. I do like art galleries, but I can only take a few hours at a time. So I made sure to hit the classics, including impressionists like Claude Monet. Monet’s impressionism appears blurry, because he didn’t intend to paint something exactly like a crystal-clear photograph would depict it. Instead, his impressionism accurately depicts the emotion of an event. The reality of the event is the same; the way it’s expressed is different. So in order to appreciate Monet’s impressionism, you often need to take a step back in the art gallery. Apocalyptic literature is like impressionist artwork. The book of Revelation features dramatic, symbolic scenes of the battle between good and evil. It often seems blurry and confusing, but it increases the emotion of the event. It expresses the same reality in a different way. In this apocalyptic genre of texts, the need to display a spiritual reality is greater than the need to over-scrutinize every last detail. So don’t stare at it from a foot away. Take a step back to see the big picture.

Revelation 12 features the first character in this battle over Christmas: a woman. ***A great 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.*** At first glance, she seems to be Mary. She’s pregnant. She’s shrieking in labor pains and great distress. She’s about to give birth. Her son is described in messianic terms from Psalm 2. ***She gave birth to a son, a male child, who “will rule all the nations with an iron scepter.”*** Any parent who’s been blessed with a child knows the birthing process isn’t always

pretty. This accurately describes what Mary would have gone through in the first century far away from medical care.

Upon closer inspection, however, the woman is not Mary but the church for three main reasons. (1) Although she has a crown with twelve stars, nowhere in Scripture is Mary described as the queen of heaven. In fact in her song we heard today, she admits she needs her own Savior. Joseph's dream of the sun, moon, and stars bowing down to him in Genesis forms the Old Testament background. The eleven other stars were his brothers, the other tribes of Israel. So in Revelation, twelve is a reference to the church, the twelve tribes of Israel in the Old Testament and the twelve apostles in the New. In addition, crowns are promised to believers in the church throughout Revelation (e.g. 2:10, 3:11, 4:4, 20:4). (2) The woman is pursued by the dragon and protected by God in the wilderness for 1260 days. We have no evidence Mary fled after Jesus' life. Israel's wandering in the wilderness for approximately 40 years forms the Old Testament background. It was a place of danger yet divine protection. In Revelation, 1260 days equals 42 months equals 3.5 years (or "times, time, and half a time"). Roughly speaking, they all express the same time period, when there is the constant danger from the dragon yet divine protection from God. This chapter clearly says this begins at Jesus' ascension, when he is snatched up to God's throne, and the danger won't end until heaven. Therefore, this time period refers to the entire church age from Jesus' ascension to his final coming. (3) The end of the chapter gives the clearest reason: the offspring of the woman are those "who obey God's commands and hold to the testimony of Jesus" (12:17). Elsewhere in Revelation, this is a clear reference to believers (6:9, 12:11, 19:10). If the woman refers to the church, how, then, did the church "give birth" to Jesus? It seems it should be the other way around: Jesus gives birth to the church. However, Jesus was born as a Jew from and into the believing Jewish community of the time. The Gospels trace Jesus' ancestry not simply to Mary but to believers throughout the ages, going all the way back to Eve. Mary is not completely out of the picture because she's part of the church too, but it is too narrow of an interpretation.

Revelation 12 features the second character in this battle over Christmas: a dragon. ***Then another sign appeared in heaven: an enormous red dragon with seven heads and ten horns and seven crowns on its heads. Its tail swept a third of the stars out of the sky and flung them to the earth.*** The seven crowns on the dragon's seven heads is not the same Greek word as the crown the woman has. While the woman wears the victor's crown promised to believers, the dragon wears a "diadem," a crown worn by Persian kings who made divine claims. Therefore, these seven crowns refer to the dragon's blasphemous claim of trying to be like God. In the Old Testament, horns refer to great strength. The third of the stars refer to a limited, but not complete, part. It perhaps refers to how the dragon dragged the evil angels along with him, but since the twelve stars referred to believers earlier, it probably better refers to the persecution against some believers throughout the ages. Later in the chapter, the dragon is clearly identified as the ancient serpent from Genesis 3, the devil.

Let the battle over Christmas begin! ***The dragon stood in front of the woman who was about to give birth, so that it might devour her child the moment he was born.*** In the Old Testament, two armies or champions would station themselves opposite each other. Here in the nativity scene, the battle lines are being drawn between the dragon and the woman's son. He wants to devour him. From the second Jesus was born until he ascended to God's throne, the satanic dragon wanted nothing more than to breathe out fire and burn up God's plan of salvation. First, Herod the Great devised a devious plan to kill the Bethlehem infants under two years old. Then, the tempting serpent made three all out attacks in the wilderness. Then he disguised

himself in Peter's plea to Jesus, "Don't go to Jerusalem! That's beneath you!" Finally he was lurking among the crowds who were mocking Jesus to come down from the cross as he hung in excruciating pain. It's all-out spiritual war.

On a busy Saturday only days before Christmas, Briarwood Mall is packed with people doing last minute shopping. It's an absolute zoo, and one young Mom is regretting she didn't do more online shopping. As she tries to corral three squirming toddlers who see bright, shining toys all over the place, pure panic ensues. Her heart stops. She can't breathe. I can only see two of my kids! Where did the third go? He's lost! How will I ever find him? What was supposed to be fun has turned into a nightmare!

Is that how you react when Christmas comes? Pure panic at the dangerous nightmare this has turned into? I doubt it. Perhaps that reveals how you've bought into the sentimentality of the Christmas season. Not only does the nativity set appear pristine, but your spiritual life does too. Maybe that reveals a deeper problem. There's no reason to take the devil seriously, because, silly Pastor, fire-breathing seven-headed dragons just don't exist. There's no reason to take Satan's opposition against Christ seriously, because Christmas is all about love. There's no reason to talk about the devil, because that means I'd have to talk about the evil I've done in my life. Would you ever willingly let your child roam around in Briarwood Mall on a packed Saturday, only to get lost? I doubt it. Then why did God the Father willingly send his Son into this world, knowing full well a child-devouring dragon was waiting? That is how much he loved you. What highlights the depth of God's love is not the calming sentimentality of the Christmas season but the frightening danger of it. He was born in a manger knowing the dragon was waiting around the corner to pounce on him. Jesus knew that for the rest of his life in a dirty, disgusting, dangerous world he would have to dodge fiery temptations that could devour him at any moment. Yet in his birth, life, death, and resurrection, the Christchild slew the dragon. God is willing to go to any length to save you: that is how God proves his love to you this Christmas.

## **Conclusion**

Next week our banners will depict the nativity scene, as our children recount the Christmas story and we sing "Silent Night" under candlelight. Don't let the ambiance deceive you. After the dragon was enraged at his failure to wipe the woman and her son out of existence, now he's coming after her offspring. He's marching into the wilderness to make war against you (12:17). Life in the wilderness is dangerous yet rejuvenating. It doesn't mean the devil will give up tempting you; it does mean you have God's Word to deflect all the fiery arrows the dragon wants to hurl at you. Next week, recognize the spiritual warfare that's going on. Yet the battle over Christmas is assured. The Christchild will win! Amen.