

The Other Half of the Story
Revelation 12:1-9
Sermon by Dan Schrock
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Sunday after Christmas

A great portent appeared in heaven: a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars. ²She was pregnant and was crying out in birthpangs, in the agony of giving birth. ³Then another portent appeared in heaven: a great red dragon, with seven heads and ten horns, and seven diadems on his heads. ⁴His tail swept down a third of the stars of heaven and threw them to the earth. Then the dragon stood before the woman who was about to bear a child, so that he might devour her child as soon as it was born. ⁵And she gave birth to a son, a male child, who is to rule all the nations with a rod of iron. But her child was snatched away and taken to God and to his throne; ⁶and the woman fled into the wilderness, where she has a place prepared by God, so that there she can be nourished for one thousand two hundred sixty days.

⁷And war broke out in heaven; Michael and his angels fought against the dragon. The dragon and his angels fought back, ⁸but they were defeated, and there was no longer any place for them in heaven. ⁹The great dragon was thrown down, that ancient serpent, who is called the Devil and Satan, the deceiver of the whole world—he was thrown down to the earth, and his angels were thrown down with him. (NRSV)

I

For the last twenty years, I've read the *New York Times* nearly every day. It's not my only source of news, but it has been my main source of news. I don't read the whole paper every day because that would take too long. Instead I generally focus on national and international news, along with some of the principal columnists.

What we choose to read, what we choose to look at, and who we choose to listen to will always shape our worldview. So it's no surprise that after reading the *New York Times* for twenty years, I have inevitably begun to see the world through the eyes of its editors, columnists, and reporters. What they choose to write about is what I read; what they believe to be true is what I believe to be true; the worldview they have is the worldview that often shapes my own thinking.

I have a friend, Steve Kreider Yoder, who is one of the principal editors for the front page of the *Wall Street Journal*. A few years ago when he was in town, we had coffee at the Electric Brew. We talked for a while about the news business, and at one point he sharply criticized the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* for slanting their stories too much in favor of Democrats and the left. "At the *Wall Street Journal*," he proudly

asserted, “we craft our stories straight down the middle and don’t give preference either to the left or to the right. Straight down the middle.” I have every reason to believe Steve knows what he’s talking about. At the same time, it’s still true that what we read or watch or listen to inevitably shapes how we perceive the world. That’s true whether we’re talking about the *Goshen News*, *Fox News*, or any other news outlet. Every source of news is selective in some way, simply because of what it chooses to report and what it chooses to ignore.

You might want to consider sometime how your sources of news are shaping your worldview. In my case, reading the *New York Times* has probably given me something of a liberal, east coast, educated slant on issues like racism, gerrymandering, economic policy, refugees and immigration, tax structures, and dozens of other issues. People who watch *Fox News* are likely soaking up a very different slant on those same issues.

But here’s the thing: no matter what sources of local, national, or international news we choose, we’re still only getting half the story at best. Thomas Keating, the venerable Cistercian monk and teacher of centering prayer, once said that “The chief wound of the human condition is the monumental illusion that God is absent.”¹ News outlets generally report and interpret events in our world as if God were absent—and that’s precisely why they can only tell half the story at best. It is not good for people of faith to immerse ourselves only in the news of our world. In fact, a source of the discouragement and despair and disillusionment that we struggle with so often may be happening because we pay more attention to the news than we do to God.

Bluntly put, if we read and watch only *Politico* or *Vox* or *Fox* or *Mother Jones*, we shoot our lives of faith in the foot. We wound ourselves with the monumental illusion that God isn’t doing anything—even perhaps wound ourselves with the illusion that God is absent from this messed up, troubled, ailing world.

II

¹ Keating, “Practicing Centering Prayer,” in *The Diversity of Centering Prayer*, ed. Gustave Reininger (New York: Continuum, 1999), 16.

Now you know the purpose behind the book of Revelation. When Revelation was written in the late first century, many Christians despaired that the world was messed up, troubled, and ailing—and that God didn't seem to be doing much about it. They wondered why evil still seemed to have the upper hand. They wondered why the Roman emperors were behaving like tyrants, and largely getting away with it. Where was God's saving power? Where was God's mercy and justice, God's righteousness and peace?

In a context very much like ours, the author of Revelation wants to show the other half of the story—the half we miss when we only pay attention to the news on earth. By writing this book, John of Patmos wants us to see what God is doing beyond the ordinary surface of our world. In short, he wants to give us hope, because once we understand what God is doing and how God is doing it, then our spirits can lift and our hearts can rejoice.

Revelation is a visual book, perhaps more visual than any other book of the Bible. Think of it as a movie to watch on a movie screen, with astonishing images, dramatic conflicts, vivid colors, and memorable characters. The book's method is not really to instruct us, but to inspire us. It doesn't really teach us as much as show us. That's why it's called "Revelation." It reveals the truth about God's reality that we would otherwise miss. In the darkness of the movie theatre, it uses a bright light to project God's activity onto the screen. It shows us a really real view of the world—a world in which God is a highly active and creative force for good. It reports on stories and people the *New York Times* never will.

The movie-like character of Revelation means we'll be better off if we do not approach it with a literal mind. Instead, we're better off if we can approach it with an artistic, creative mind.

III

In today's text, the movie has just two scenes. The first scene, verses 1-6, shows us two characters: a pregnant woman and a red dragon. The pregnant woman symbolizes the people of God. Why? Because she wears a crown of twelve stars. The number twelve,

of course, calls to mind the twelve tribes of Israel and the original twelve disciples of Jesus. She symbolically represents God's people in both the Old Testament and the New Testament.

The most important thing about this woman is that she's pregnant with a child destined to rule the nations of the world. The author wants us to think of the child Jesus, born a Jew, a member of God's own people, who is destined one day to rule kingdoms and empires and democracies.

The other main character in this first scene is the red dragon. The color red might make you think of blood and killing and war. As for the dragon, the movie gives us a little more help. Verse 9 explicitly says the dragon, that ancient serpent, is the Devil, Satan, the deceiver. The dragon symbolizes all that is violently opposed to God and to God's people.

This dragon wants to eat the baby. This dragon may partly symbolize Herod the Great, who tried to assassinate Jesus shortly after he was born in Bethlehem. By extension, the dragon may also symbolize every ruler, from emperor to premier to president, whose policies thwart God's wishes for the world. As you can imagine, it would be a great victory for the dragon and its forces of evil if it could snatch that baby Jesus up in its jaws, chew him to pieces, and swallow him. After all, Jesus is the manifestation of God, the very focus of God's work in the world. If the dragon could eat the baby, then the dragon would win! Evil would win! And God would lose!

However, the dragon does not succeed. The child is snatched away to a safe place where the dragon cannot go, while the woman flees into a wilderness for safety and nourishment. Think Jesus and Mary and Joseph being snatched away to a safe place in Egypt, where Herod the Great cannot go.

That was scene 1.

Scene 2 happens in verses 7-9. In this scene, a vast war breaks out in heaven. On one side fights Michael and his fellow angels, who represent the forces of God. On the other side fights the dragon and its angels. However, the scene does not dwell on the details of the battle. Here there is no gratuitous gore, no details about bloody limbs and dying soldiers. In fact, we cannot be sure that this so-called "war" actually kills anyone.

The movie merely says that the dragon and its angels were “defeated” and “thrown down” from heaven to earth (v. 9). Perhaps we are to imagine that the dragon and its angels are simply dislodged, displaced, removed from the heavenly territories. In any case, the end result is that God limits some of the dragon’s power.

This is what the book of Revelation wants to show us: that God limits the power of evil. In both the first and twenty-first centuries, John of Patmos wants us to see that God is working behind the scenes. Here we learn the other half of the story. Thanks to the book of Revelation, the curtain is whisked aside and we see what we normally cannot see from any of our usual news outlets. God is not asleep. God is not idle. God is not absent. Instead God is working to limit, to thwart, and ultimately to prevail over evil. Take heart, for God has not forgotten us.