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**FOLLOWING CHRIST IN A
FRIGHTENING WORLD:
THE INVASION OF GOD**
Revelation 11:15-13:1

We return this morning to a text I preached on for my Christmas Eve sermon. It is the most unlikely Christmas Eve text you could imagine. When I told my pastor friends I was going to use it, they told me I was crazy. But I did it because this is a nativity text. It doesn't include the shepherds and the angels of Luke's nativity story. It doesn't include the magi or Joseph's dreams from Matthew's account. But this is still a nativity story. It is stripped of all sentimentality and coziness, as Eugene Peterson puts it. In this horrific cartoon, we catch a glimpse of the Christmas story for what it truly was: the invasion of God and a life and death battle between the forces of good and the forces of evil.

Let's first take this story at face value. We'll come back in a moment and try to interpret it. After the interlude of the two witnesses from last week, the seventh and last trumpet is blown. We are expecting, perhaps, another great plague. But we are surprised. Instead, there is this great heavenly announcement. Thunderous voices in heaven begin to speak the words that have been immortalized in Handel's Messiah: "The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ and he will reign for ever and ever." After this glorious declaration, the 24 elders join in. Falling flat on their faces, they too worship the Lord: "We give thanks to you, Lord God Almighty, the One who is and who was, because you have taken your great power and have begun to reign." (By the way, did you notice what is missing from that text? "Who is and who was andis to come!" Why is it missing? Because in this story...he comes! It isn't past tense any more.)

You would think this to be good news. Finally, our words spoken in the Lord's prayer are being answered. How many times have we prayed these words: "Thy Kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven." They are the words Jesus taught his

disciples when they asked him to teach them to pray. For two thousand years, Christians have prayed those words...waiting for them to be so. Let your kingdom in heaven take hold on earth.

Now, finally, the angels declare it to be so. God's heavenly kingdom has come. The earthly kingdom has become the kingdom of God and of his Christ who will reign for ever and ever. There is a great fireworks display in heaven. And we look around to see this great invasion of God. How will it come? Millions of warrior angels, perhaps, descending from the heavens? How exactly will this good news become a reality? How will the kingdom of the world become the kingdom of our Lord and of His Christ?

In a most unexpected way. There is a scene change. Chapter 12.1 calls it a "great and wondrous sign." It is a woman. She is glorious. The sun is her clothing. Her feet rest upon the moon indicating that she has great dominion. Her head is arrayed with a crown of twelve stars. Imagine the picture. A glorious, beautiful woman whose raiment is the heavenly universe.

And there is something else. What? She is pregnant. She is not only pregnant, she is at ten centimeters and ready to push. She is crying out in pain. The singing of the elders in the heavens are suddenly drowned out by the cries of agony as this glorious woman strains to bring a new life into existence. It is a strange and wonderful combination of images...a powerful, glorious woman in the throes of birth pangs.

Suddenly a horrific creature joins her on the heavenly stage. It is a creature of myth. A dragon. He is red to symbolize his murderous nature. This horrible red beast has seven heads, symbolizing enormous authority and ten horns symbolizing great power. Can you see this in your mind's eye? With a flick of his gigantic tail, the red dragon sweeps one third of the stars from the sky. He is an awesome, gigantic, horribly powerful creature. And where does he station himself? At the foot of the birthing bed.

As I recall being in Cyndi's birthing room, I cannot imagine a more vulnerable situation than that of a mother at the threshold of birth, can you? What she wants, as that baby's head appears, is people whom she loves and trusts attending her through the

agony of birth and escorting that little one into the world. Mothers...can you imagine if, instead of your doctor and husband, it was a vicious, barking Rottweiler who stood at the end of your birthing bed? Waiting to snatch your baby as soon as he appears...snatch it and destroy it.

Interestingly, the dragon does not attack the woman. He waits to destroy the child. But perched as he is in vicious anticipation, he is not quick enough. A baby boy is born, one who even at his birth is granted the authority to rule the nations. In that split second, the baby is snatched up...not by the dragon...but apparently by God's angels. They bear him immediately to the throne of heaven. And the exhausted woman flees to the desert, a place of refuge. For how long? 1,260 days. Three and one-half years. There's that time period again. There, in the desert, she is cared for.

The dragon is furious. He chases the baby into the heavens. Biiiiig mistake. You've never seen bodyguards like this baby has. Michael, the archangel, and his warriors are standing there to battle with the dragon and his own evil warriors. And they get their rear ends whipped. They are tossed out of heaven. Six times the text says that the dragon was hurled down. In fact, the word that is used, literally, which is interpreted "hurled down" is actually "bounced." The dragon and his warriors are "bounced" out of the heavenly throne room. God's heavenly bouncers kicks them out of the club.

Where is the dragon thrown? Onto the earth. He has failed in his pursuit of the child. He has failed in his battle with the angels of heaven. So he decides to take his fury out on the woman. The woman is given two wings of a great eagle and flies into the desert. This is a repetition of what we are told earlier. How long is she there? A time, times, and a half a time. Translation: 1 plus 2 plus ½. How long is that? Three and ½.

The dragon cannot catch the woman so he resorts to an evil, filthy trick. He spits at her. He opens his mouth and lets loose with a huge gusher of spit, like a flooding river. He is going to drown her. But even the earth steps in to protect the woman. The earth opens itself up and swallows the dragon's spit. And the dragon, enraged, turns his attention to the rest of the woman's offspring. The last we see him...he is standing on the shore of the sea, panting, exhausted, failed, preparing his next

dirty trick---which we will see next week. Tune in, same time, same station.

Wow! What a story! Have you ever heard a Christmas story like that? So, what does it mean? And what is its significance for us here in the twenty-first century? Clearly, the child is the Messiah. This birth scene is the invasion of God into the world. John, in his first volume, wrote this. "And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us." Well, this is that moment. Only we don't have much dwelling going on, do we? The baby is born. The invasion occurs. And quickly we have a symbolic ascension back into heaven. John already told the story of Jesus and his ministry on earth; of his death and resurrection. This is a different story. This is the story from the heavenly perspective. It is God's great plan in shorthand. The child would be born and would vanquish the dragon and be raised up to seat in glory upon his throne.

Who is the woman? Your first response would obviously be, Mary. In a way, perhaps that is so. But the woman clearly represents more than Mary. None of the things described in this text took place. Except, perhaps, for the story of King Herod killing all the baby boys two years old and younger in order to wipe out this threat, we have no account of Mary running for her life to escape an evil force.

No...the woman is something more. She is Israel, the chosen people of God, called in Abraham to bless all nations through the birth of the Messiah. And she is the Church, facing the wrath of the dragon who has failed in his attempts to crush the child and takes out his anger upon those who remain behind.

And who is the dragon? That's easy. The text tells us who it is. Satan. Now in these enlightened times, surely we don't believe in an actual Satan? A real Devil? Surely he is as mythological as the dragon we find portrayed in this text? A metaphor for evil, right? But a real, personal spiritual evil force? Come on!

Well, before we decide too quickly to dismiss this notion, we'd better pause a moment. What do the scriptures say about it? Almost from the beginning we are introduced to the idea of an evil enemy of God. In fact, the earliest Biblical images we have of the evil one are remarkably similar to the story we just read. How is Satan first described? The serpent. In Genesis, it is the serpent who beguiles Eve to disobey God, thus bringing sin into the

human experience. And it is in Genesis that this scene which we just saw enacted for us is prophesied. Do you remember? Speaking to the serpent in Genesis 3:15 God says: "I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between her offspring and hers; he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel."

Jesus certainly believed in a real Devil. When Peter was tempting Jesus to bypass the difficult way of the cross, do you remember Jesus' rebuke? "Get thee behind me Satan." When Jesus spoke to the Pharisees in John he used the harshest words he ever spoke against them: "You belong to your father the devil. You want to carry out his desire. He was a murderer from the beginning, not holding to the truth, for there is no truth in him."

The Apostle Paul certainly believed in a real devil. "Do not give the devil a foothold," he wrote to the Ephesians. "Escape from the trap of the devil," he wrote to his young friend Timothy.

James, the brother of Jesus said, "Resist the devil and he will flee from you." Peter, the chief apostle said, "Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, looking for someone to devour."

From beginning to end, the Bible teaches us that there is an actual, evil spiritual force. He is known by many names. In fact, this passage presents him in several ways. He is called the devil, *diabolos*. From it we get the word, diabolical. The word means "accuser" or "slanderer." He is called Satan, which is translated "adversary." He is called a liar. He is the one who leads the world astray. And his red color clearly defines him for what he is: danger! He is a killer. He seeks to destroy.

If you choose to disbelieve in an actual Satan, you do so against the council of the Old Testament, against the testimony of Jesus, against the writings of his apostles. And you do so against the plain evidence of your own experience. How else can we account for the horrible, horrible evil that runs rampant in this world? How else but the fact that we have an enemy? He is an accuser. He spends his time telling us we are unworthy of God's love; that we ought to continue to live in guilt because we are nothing but dirt. Have you ever heard that voice

whispering to you? That is the accuser. He is the liar. He spends his time telling us that the things that will destroy us really aren't so bad for us after all. Go ahead. One more drink. Take that drug. Just a little more debt. You've got to have it to be happy. He is the adversary. He is the one who stands against us. Who stands in our way. Who seeks to block our path to eternal life.

We have an enemy. He is real. The Bible calls him Satan, the devil. And he is doing all he can to mess up this world and mess up your life. Why? Because he is ticked! That's how Darrell Johnson puts it. The Devil is ticked. He is furious at the child, furious at the woman, furious at God and furious at the church. Did you see that reference in verse 17? After he has failed in his attempt to destroy the child, in his attempt to destroy the angelic hosts, in his attempt to destroy the woman, to whom does he turn his evil attention? The rest of the woman's offspring. Who is that? Us! We are the woman's offspring. We are the children of the church, the brothers and sisters of the child who invaded this world and now sits in heaven.

Our enemy, the Devil, is ticked. He is mad as mad can be. And why is he so mad? Because he is a loser. He has lost. He has lost at every turn. And he knows it. He has been overcome. How, according to the text? By the blood of the Lamb. Remember the first scene in the heavenly throne room back in chapter 5? Who is it that appears and is worthy to break open the seals on the scroll of human destiny? The Lamb of God. The Lamb that has been slain. It is because of the sacrificial death of Jesus that Satan knows he is lost.

Here are two important things for you to take with you. First, I want you to take the Devil seriously. He is a liar, and accuser, a slanderer, an adversary, a stealer of health and life. All that we see that is bad is an outgrowth of this enemy as he pours out his contempt for God and his creation. The Apostle Paul warned us to remember that we wrestle, not with flesh and blood, but against spiritual powers. The devil still spits on us. He pours out a flood from his rancid mouth, trying to engulf us; trying to drown us. Every time you feel yourself being engulfed by a temptation to lie; every time you feel yourself being engulfed by a temptation to sleep with your boyfriend; every time you find yourself being engulfed by the temptation to hate yourself,

to be disgusted with yourself, to view yourself as wretched and worthless...you need to remember that the devil is spitting on you. You need to recognize it for what it is, a spiritual battle, and fight it as a spiritual battle.

And here's the other point. As much as I want you to take the devil seriously, I don't want you to take him too seriously. The only thing worse than not believing that the devil is powerful, is believing that the devil is too powerful. Because...and here's the really important thing to take away from this sermon...the devil is a loser. He is a defeated enemy. He could not destroy the child. He could not destroy the angelic hosts. He could not destroy the woman. And try as he might, he cannot destroy the church either. Because he has already lost the war. He is the serpent. Jesus has chopped his head off. He can still bite. He is still poisonous. But his days are numbered and he knows it. He knows his time is short.

My brothers and sisters in Christ, you are the redeemed and protected children of the eternal God. You are the spiritual

brothers and sisters of the victorious God-child. In Christ, the victory over your enemy has been won. Isn't it time you started living as if that were so? Go out today in the boldness and power of the victorious Christ.

SERMON DISCUSSION QUESTIONS
THE INVASION OF GOD
Revelation 11:15-13:1

Pastor Mark Toone
12 March, 2000

- Read 11.15-19. What would you expect to read after the seventh trumpet is blown? Instead, what do you find? How does this text prepare us for chapter 12?*
- Read Chapter 12. Describe the three scenes in this story in your own words. Who is the woman in this story? The*

child? The dragon? How does the visual imagery help to bring the story alive?

- What do you think is the basic point of this text? Why is the dragon mad? Towards whom? What is our hope?*
- Think back to your own background. Were you raised to believe in a real devil or not? Explain. Can you cite examples where the scriptures seem to speak of a real devil? Why is it important to affirm the reality of an evil spiritual force in this world? Why is it important to not give the devil too much power? Can you think of examples in which this takes place?*
- What is a healthy attitude of balance regarding Satan? How should we live in light of this?*
- Pray for each other, your church, your leaders.*