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**FOLLOWING CHRIST IN A FRIGHTENING WORLD: TWO
BEASTS AND A LAMB**
Revelation 13:1b-14:5

It's interesting the things you remember from your childhood. We used to drive down to California to visit our grandparents and I vividly remember their TV shows. Perry Mason. Peyton Place. Lawrence Welk. Always Lawrence Welk. And we also used to watch the bullfights from Mexico. It was really pretty brutal. Horsemen with spears would stab the bull until he was bleeding profusely. Then would come the picadores, the men with barbed sticks who would run up on foot and jab them into the bull's back. Lastly the matador would fight the bull with his cape until finally, the poor creature stood there, blood streaming down, chest heaving, exhausted, waiting for the matador to deliver the coup de grace. You knew he was finished. But you also knew he was still very dangerous.

That is the image I have of the dragon in this morning's text. Last week we talked about the dragon, Satan. We dared to call him a loser. He is an already-defeated foe. He tried to kill the messiah baby and failed. He tried to fight the heavenly hosts and failed. He tried to kill the woman who gave birth to the baby and failed. Now, he turns his attention to the offspring of the woman...the church...us. He is bloodied, battered and furious. He is standing on the shore of the ocean. And he is about to summon two horrible allies from the very depths of hell.

Out of the depths the Dragon calls forth two assistants: a Beast from the Sea and a Beast from the Land. This all continues to sound very strange to us. But, once again, if you were steeped in the Old Testament as John was, this would have been familiar imagery. First of all, the book of Job talks about two huge creatures in chapters 40 and 41. "Behemoth," ...you've heard that word before---did you know it came from the Bible--- Behemoth is a huge land creature described in chapter 40, one that can be neither trapped nor tamed. In the very next chapter is described "Leviathan," a huge sea creature that cannot be netted or speared. Surely when John sees these two creatures, a Sea Beast and a

Land Beast rising up before him, his thoughts must return to Behemoth and Leviathan of the Old Testament. But there is more.

In Daniel chapter 7, the prophet describes a vision of four different creatures. The first is like a lion, the second, a bear and the third, a leopard. And the fourth beast is more horrifying still. It was an unidentifiable beast that crushed and devoured its victims. And it had some horns. Guess how many?

Now, let's return to this morning's text. There stands the dragon at the edge of the sea, bloodied and bruised but furious. He needs reinforcements. He looks out across the waters and we follow his gaze. Slowly rises forth a new Leviathan, a horrible monster. John's description of this creature seems to follow the order in which the body parts would have appeared as they broke the surface of the water. First we see the tips of horns coming up...ten of them. Remember, horns mean power. Ten means "a lot." Whatever this thing is, it has a lot of power.

As the creature continues to rise, we begin to see heads---plural, again. Just like the dragon, Leviathan has seven heads. And we see crowns, too. But where are the crowns? On the heads, like the dragon? No, the crowns are on the horns. Does this mean that this beast has taken great authority by force? With the crowns on the horns, it allows us to see the heads clearly. Every one of the heads has a blasphemous name written on it, a name that mocks the living God.

Now, as more of the body appears, we begin to see other body parts. It looks like a leopard...but wait...it has feet like a bear ...no, wait, its mouth is like a lion. It is like Frankenstein's monster. The dragon has taken bits and pieces from each of the creatures of Daniel's vision and sewn them together. We aren't sure whether to be afraid or laugh. He looks ridiculous. He looks like a patchwork doll.

One of the heads seems to have a fatal wound but it is healed. The whole world is astonished. "Who is like the beast?" they cry. "Who can make war against him?" Out of fear, the world begins to worship the beast. The beast utters horrible blasphemies and is given authority for 42 months...how long is that? Three and one-half years. He begins to make war on the saints.

As if that isn't enough, the Dragon calls forth another beast. This one comes out of the earth. At first, he appears harmless. He is like a lamb. Two little horns. Cute. Sweet. But it is an imposter in lamb's clothing. Because out of this little sheep's mouth comes the horrible voice of a dragon. This Earth Beast is the Sea Beast's Minister of Propaganda, as Larson puts it. If the Sea Beast is a Hitler, the Earth Beast is his Goebbels. He is Sea Beast's promoter. He is his manager. He performs miracles that mimic those of the Old Testament. He sets up an image of the Sea Beast and orders the world to worship him. He deceives the people. Somehow he causes the statue to speak. Any who won't worship the statue are killed.

And, in perhaps the best known tidbit from the book of Revelation, he causes every single human being, rich, poor, small, great, slave, free, to receive a mark on his forehead or right hand. If you don't have the mark, you can't buy anything. The mark is a number. The number...666.

And now, it appears, the dragon's war party is complete. It is an unholy trinity. The Dragon, the Sea Beast and the Earth Beast. Each of them is a parody of a person of the Holy Trinity. The Dragon is a parody of the Father; the Sea Beast, a parody of the crucified and resurrected Son; the Earth Beast is the Holy Spirit, the one who brings honor to the Son. What in the world is all of this about?

I believe this vision has both a historical element and a prophetic element. Let's look first at the historical. What was the Sea Beast? What was this great enemy that approached the Middle East from the sea? Rome. They invaded from the west over the Mediterranean. I believe the heads represent the various Roman Emperors. And what of the blasphemous names on the heads of the beast? Think back for a moment to the sermons on the seven churches. What was the single big issue facing the young Christian communities throughout Asia Minor? Emperor worship. Remember? Some of the cities were competing for the privilege of building temples to the emperors.

Some of the emperors played it down. But others lapped it up. Augustus was worshipped during his lifetime and, upon his death, declared *divus*, "one like the gods." The crazy man, Nero, had the following stamped on his coins: "Nero, the Savior of the

World.” And Domitian, the cruel tyrant who was probably ruling at the time the John wrote the Revelation, demanded that he be addressed as “Our Lord and Our God.”

Can you imagine if next January, at the inauguration of our new president, outgoing President Clinton were to declare, “I am no longer your president. I am now your God!” We wouldn’t know whether to laugh or be outraged. But for the Romans, this was deadly serious business. If you did not burn incense and declare, “Caesar is Lord,” you could be executed for treason.

What of the fatal head wound? Most commentators agree that this was Nero. He committed suicide at the age of 32. But for decades to follow, there was a rumor that Nero was really alive, in hiding and amassing an army to return and re-capture his empire.

If the Sea Beast is the Roman Empire led by its blasphemous, pseudo-divine Caesars, who is the Earth Beast that deceives the people and draws their worship to the Beast? Probably the Imperial priesthood. All across Asia Minor were huge and luxurious temples built to the glory of Rome and for the worship of its emperors. It was the priests of those temples who were responsible for leading the communities in worship, demanding the burning of incense and the declaration of allegiance and compelling those who refused to be punished.

What do we make of the mark of the Beast? 666? Perhaps the most famous series of three numbers in the history of humanity. What does it mean? Speculation abounds. There were no numbers in the Greek language. Instead, numerical value was attached to letters. Add up the value of the letters of a name and you have a number. 666. This practice was called *gematria*. For centuries people have been trying to decipher the identity of the beast whose name is 666. In John’s time, Nero seemed the most likely candidate. But every generation has had its own hypothesis. The World War II crowd thought it was Hitler or Mussolini. My generation thought it must be John F. Kennedy because he had been shot down with a mortal wound to the head and would probably rise again. Ronald Reagan was even a candidate because his three names all had six letters in them and in retirement they moved to a house in Bel Air that had the address 666.

Whatever the identity of John’s beast, either historically or prophetically, it is a mystery to us. But here is one thing that is clear. Remember, numbers in Revelation are symbols, not statistics. What does the number 7 represent? Perfection. Completion. If that is so, what does the number 6 represent? Imperfection. Incompletion. Failure. The mark of the Beast is failure three times. Failure upon failure upon failure. The Beast is a 3 time loser.

So what difference does all this mean to us? Does this vision have a prophetic meaning as well as a historical one? Many commentators believe that the Sea Beasts and the Land Beasts will be two actual persons. That’s certainly possible. But I want to pose another possible interpretation. I think there are two great warnings that issue forth from this text. Warnings that are just as important for us in this moment as they will be when the final chapter of human history is being written. First is a warning against patriotism that becomes our god. The second is a warning against religion that becomes our god. We in the United States desperately need to hear and heed both of these warnings.

The Sea Beast is an image of runaway nationalism. In Daniel’s vision, the four creatures represented four different kingdoms that would rise and fall: Babylon, Persia, Mede and Greece. In John’s time, the beast was Rome. Since that time, there have been others. Colossal national powers that have risen and fallen. The Spanish Empire. The British Empire. Nazism. Communism. The Sea Beast is an image of a colossal, coercive political power that dares to call itself God.

It is easy for us to look at other fallen regimes and say, “Yes, that applied to the Nazis. Yes, that applied to the communists.” But do we dare ignore the warning ourselves? Are we in the United States not facing the very same peril? This country was founded on Christian principles by, primarily, Christian men and women. I know that the historical revisionists want to tell us that they weren’t really Christian but, with a few noteworthy exceptions, our founding fathers were devout Christian men who were seeking religious and personal liberty. I believe that the remarkable blessings we have experienced as a young nation of 225 years are due to the decidedly Christian nature of the origins of this nation.

And what are we doing with our spiritual legacy today? We are running away from it as fast as our secular legs will carry us. We can teach kids to put condoms on bananas in our schools but we dare not post the ten commandments on the wall. We dare not pray at a baccalaureate service or after a ball game. Recently there has been controversy about the denomination of the House chaplain. Frankly, I’m surprised that we still even have chaplains in the Senate and in the House. It’s only a matter of time before that institution comes under fire.

Our spiritual credentials as a country are in serious question. We still kill more than 3000 babies every day. Thousands of families continue to be devastated by the tragedy of divorce and there is no statistical difference between Christians and non-Christians. We are the most drugged-up country on the faced of the earth. Many of the movies that we taut as Oscar candidates are complete trash. We continue to charge ourselves deeper into debt believing that the next new “thing” we buy is what we’ll need to make us happy.

I am a pretty patriotic guy. We proudly fly a flag from our home. We teach our children that the United States is the greatest nation on this earth. And I believe it. But I am also aware of how patriotism can become idolatry. I know people whose religion is a crazy combination of God, patriotism, and fraternal organizations. There is nothing necessarily wrong with being an Elk or a Moose or a Rotarian. There is nothing necessarily wrong about being a patriotic American. But we have a higher allegiance. A greater calling. We are, first and foremost, children of the king.

Some has asked why we don’t always display the American flag in our sanctuary. Here is my answer. As much as I love my country, I don’t want us to ever reach the point where we think that the empty cross of Jesus Christ and the American flag deserve the same devotion. They do not. We fly our flag proudly outside the church. We display our flag on special occasions. But we will not mislead people into believing that our flag is a symbol of Christian worship deserving of the same honor as the cross of Jesus Christ. Our first allegiance is to Jesus. And when we uncritically embrace our political structures or those of any other

land, we have succumbed to the temptations of the Sea Beast. Our country has become our god.

Here is the other great warning that issues forth from this text. Beware of the religion that becomes our god. The Land Beast was a deceiver. With trickery and evil power, he deluded people into false worship. Do you remember back in chapter 7 what God did to insure that his followers would be protected during the tribulations to come? He put a stamp on their foreheads. He put his own mark of ownership and protection upon them.

Now comes the Land Beast. The deceiver. He performs miracles. He causes people to worship the Sea Beast. He, too, marks people with the mark of the beast...a mark on the forehead and on the right hand. Only those who are followers of his religion will be accepted in society. Only they will be able to buy, sell, survive.

The Land Beast is false religion. It is a godless religion. A religion with all the trappings and none of the truth. We are a nation that is full of religious structures and institutions. We are a nation full of religious people...church people...who do not realize that church membership without a personal faith in Jesus is idolatry.

This morning we received 40 new souls into our church. Every one of them heard the same message. Being a member of Chapel Hill will never save you. Being religious will never save you. The only thing that will save you is the mark of Jesus Christ upon your soul. Do you bear the mark of the savior?

By the way...do you know what the numerical value of the name "Jesus" is? 888. The name of Jesus is matchless. It is more perfect than the perfect 777. Do you bear that name upon your soul?

SERMON DISCUSSION QUESTIONS FOR TWO BEASTS AND A LAMB *Revelation 13-14:1-5*

*Pastor Mark Toone
19 March, 2000*

- *Review together. Who is the dragon? Why is he frustrated at the beginning of chapter 13? What are your general impressions of the two "assistants" he calls forth to aid him? What are they going to try to do?*
- *If these three, represent an "unholy trinity," which character represents which person of the godhead? Why do you think so? Find examples in the chapter where Christian faith and teachings are parodied.*
- *Some Christians believe that the Church will be raptured (instantly taken to heaven) before the Great Tribulation occurs. How does verse 7 impact that idea? How does 10b speak to that concept?*
- *What role does the Land Beast play in relationship to the Sea Beast? Pastor Mark has suggested that the Sea Beast represents unbridled, godless nationalism and the Land Beast, godless, institutionalized religion. Are we in danger from either of these threats in our country and time? Why or why not?*

Please pray. Pray for the lost of our community. Pray that God will use us to reach them with the great hope of Jesus.