

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.² She was pregnant and cried out in pain as she was about to give birth.³ Then another sign appeared in heaven: an enormous red dragon with seven heads and ten horns and seven crowns on its heads. ⁴ Its tail swept a third of the stars out of the sky and flung them to the earth. 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. ⁵ She gave birth to a son, a male child, who “will rule all the nations with an iron scepter.” And her child was snatched up to God and to his throne. ⁶ The woman fled into the wilderness to a place prepared for her by God, where she might be taken care of for 1,260 days.

⁷ Then war broke out in heaven. Michael and his angels fought against the dragon, and the dragon and his angels fought back. ⁸ But he was not strong enough, and they lost their place in heaven. ⁹ The great dragon was hurled down—that ancient serpent called the devil, or Satan, who leads the whole world astray. He was hurled to the earth, and his angels with him.

A Manger to Remember

Manger scenes bring back memories. Maybe you had one that you played with as a child. We have many of them here at Christ, sometimes they're referred to as collectables rare and precious. And yet the same cast members are trotted out, shepherds, sheep, Mary and Joseph, star, angels, wise men even. The scene is serene. Even our hymns emphasize the peaceful, quiet atmosphere and how silent and holy it was. The cattle are lowing, no babies crying, only a single noise coming from a little drummer boy.

I hate to tell you this but none of that is biblical, in most cases the serenity is something we try to impose on the Christmas story so as make Jesus entrance into this world a bit more worthy of our King. However it accomplishes a little more than putting lipstick on a pig. We're still left with a pig. And John does a great job of pointing out that pig for all its worth.

In a mere five verses John demonstrates the reality of Jesus' birth. It wasn't pretty. It wasn't peaceful. There is a very real sense of urgency and danger involved as a dragon seeks to devour the Christ-child. When Jesus ascends into heaven the dragon turns on the church. It's terrifying, traumatic, and yet very much the reality of Matthew and Luke's account. God sent his Son in to this dark, dangerous world to save us from the very serpent who seeks to devour us.

I can't imagine Christmas in exile on Patmos would be at all comfortable. John was the Bishop of Ephesus. He's a pastor away from his people punished by the government. Everything John writes is being read and in some regards he writes a cryptic letter to those at home. John's nativity is lacking shepherds, sheep, carols, wise men, and Joseph. He has a woman, a child, and a dragon.

It's important to read scripture as it was intended to be read. Psalms are poetry, literal writing is literal, figurative is figurative. John calls this story a sign, it comes from a vision, this is not a literal account. On the basis of the OT symbols we can identify the this woman, not as Mary but as God's people Israel. The twelve stars symbolize the twelve tribes. The fact that she stands on the moon shows that she has been given authority. The child to rule all nations is Jesus. The dragon is satan. With seven heads he seeks to overthrow God, ten horns refers to power and the crowns refer to authority.

This isn't just a cute little dragon. He's powerful sweeping a third of the stars from the sky. That could be the evil angels who joined his rebellion. It's not a majority but it's not a small amount either. Peter writes Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour. (1 Peter 5:8). When his schemes fail to destroy the work of Jesus. He turns on the church. The persecution continues as John's vision reveals one beast after another attacking the church. Conflict surrounds John's Christmas story not carols, war not worship.

I can't imagine Christmas in exile would be of any comfort or fun. John was away from home. You probably know what it's like to be away from home for the holidays. You miss everyone, the food, the family, and the fun. One of the saddest times of the year when people go through holiday depression because they are missing out on family and friends, those who have died, and those who are still away. In many ways this manger scene is our manger scene. We are the church, this woman represents the nation of Israel, God's people. God came into this world through his people, his church.

But then we wonder why didn't he stay and protect us from the dragon? Why does he leave us to do battle on our own? We may wonder, "How has God loved us?" Our Christmas celebrations have become somewhat confused. We mix the sacred with the secular and the meaning of Christmas is all but lost. We tend to set certain expectations of what Christmas should be like and then we may even use these expectations as a set of standards to determine if God is pleased with us. Does God love me?... Let's turn to the Christmas tree, our health, or even family to find out.

The problem is we are looking everywhere but the one location we should be. The problem is we try to make Jesus entrance into this world the minor role, the little work, a small gift. Christmas isn't about family, it isn't about presents. It's about God taking on human flesh and blood to do battle with a dragon. For us to think it's not that big of a deal, he didn't suffer that much, we should

do battle with the dragon on our own. If we did we'd lose every time. This dragon devours one life after another and death comes to us all. Not because of Adam's sin but because of our own.

John's Christmas Nativity is packed with history. John puts more than just Christmas into his manger scene. There is the birth, the battle, and the ascension all rolled into one. *Jesus is snatched up to God and to his throne.*

Christmas according to John is not a cute little baby being born. No Hallmark moments but war. This was a battle over good and evil, light vs dark. This baby is at the center of it all. He's the cause. He's the victor. He's the gift. Just think of what God sent into this world. Jesus is described as the only begotten son. The son of God. The only son. The son he loves. When your child is in danger how do you feel? It makes my stomach sick to think of little Thea playing out on Lower Sacramento as cars fly by. When your child is sick or in danger, your heart stops. We do all we can to protect our children. God willingly put his only child into this dangerous world so he might bring us into his family.

What Jesus received may not have been death at the hands of the dragon but in reality it was much worse that being devoured at birth. He was devoured for our sin and guilt. He he was devoured not by the dragon but by God's perfect law that demands satisfaction. He was consumed and cut off by the wrath of God because of our sin. That's the Christmas story. That's part of the story. It didn't end on Christmas, it didn't end on Easter. Jesus rose. "*Will rule all the nations with an iron scepter.*" This child will be powerful. Iron was the strongest metal in the world and a scepter is a symbol of great power used by the ruler. Jesus ascended into heaven and with all power and authority he evicted the accuser and hurled him down to earth. He binds the dragon with his Word.

He now rules, forgives, and restores his church. The woman *flees to the wilderness to a place prepared for her by God, where she might be taken care of for 1,260 days.* He has prepared a place in the wilderness for us where we are taken care fo for 1,260 days. That's a number that appears in many locations in Revelation. It's referred to in many ways, "A time, times, and half a time," 42 months, or 1260 days. That's 3.5 years. Half of 7. Half of history. God is with his church till the end of time. That's Jesus' promise to his disciples as he ascends into heaven. God has provided for his church. Later on in Revelation 12 John writes,

14 The woman was given the two wings of a great eagle, so that she might fly to the place prepared for her in the wilderness, where she would be taken care of for a time, times and half a time, out of the serpent's reach. 15 Then from his mouth the serpent spewed water like a river, to overtake the woman and sweep her away with the torrent. 16 But the earth helped the woman by opening its mouth and swallowing the river that the dragon had spewed out of his mouth. 17 Then the dragon was enraged at the woman and went off to wage war against the rest of her offspring—those who keep God's commands and hold fast their testimony about Jesus.

That doesn't mean life will always be comfortable in the wilderness. John is on the island of Patmos. He's in exile. Much of the church suffered and still suffers. You can only imagine the early Christian Church reading "Theology of Glory" quotes. It just doesn't work. It's not Christian. If Christianity promises the same thing the devil uses a Jesus temptation you should probably listen to Christ.

God has prepared a place for us. He prepares us for that place. On Christmas John points us to the lamb who took on our greatest enemy, the devil, death, and won. There is no sentimental Christmas story here, no cozy fires, hot cocoa, or Christmas carols - only a fire breathing dragon, seeking to devour the Christ child while sweeping his tail across the heavens. Don't be distracted by the roaring lion or even the dragon at the manger scene. Christmas is about God who became man to live and die the life you haven't and to do the death you deserve. Christmas is about God giving up everything to save you. It's about his love, his sacrifice, his gift to you. It's a done deal and accomplished fact. You are forgiven. You are forgiven for looking to the "little gifts" of this world and not the greatest give he gives, his son.

So sing, "Silent Night," on Christmas Eve and remember the peace you have with God. And then sing, "Onward Christian Soldiers" as you struggle against sin and temptation. There is good news in his continued care while we roam in "the desert." a place prepared by God, a place where we can serve him and one another until we join him in heaven. Won't always be comfortable. Christmas is also D-day, an evil empire is about to fall.

It is only when we remember how dangerous it was for Jesus the second he entered the world, that we realize what he was coming to do. The size and the scope of gift we've been given. Imagine the dragon when he looks into the nativity. He's upset, understandably, because he's already lost. All things are working together for the good of the church. While many interesting character appear in manger scenes around the world but unlike elves, flying deer, and fat men in red suits, the dragon is actually part of the Christmas story. But Christmas isn't about the dragon, it's about the Christ. Amen.