P.A.X.: Into the Battle Memory Verse: Rev. 12:5

Dec. 4th, 2022 Advent Reading: Isaiah 11:1-10

**SLIDE 1 – Title Slide**

We are into the second week of Advent. It is time of preparation, a time of anticipation, a time of expectation. Unlike the rest of the world, Advent declares, Christmas has not come…not yet. Wait for it… We mentioned last week how our observance of Advent makes us strange and different in this culture. Throughout this Advent season, we as a church are being challenged to live into this idea of expectation. That’s the idea behind the term P.A.X., prayer awakens expectation, which is the name of our current series. Expectation is the work of those who wait, and to be people of Godly expectation is to be people of prayer.

**SLIDE 2 - PAX**

So we are starting up P.A.X. teams and we want each of you to join one. I believe that the majority of those of us sitting here are people who believe in prayer, I believe we engage in prayer, but I also believe that we would do well to do so together and on purpose. We need to come before God on behalf of this church to seek His blessing and His guidance. We do so because we expect God to do great things! So join up with a P.A.X. team! There are several options from which to choose.

Last week we talked about Simeon, an old man who lived in the expectation of seeing God move to restore his people. Simeon was a man of faith, and prayer, a man Luke refers to as “filled with the Holy Spirit”. Because of his posture before God, Simeon was able to see Jesus himself in the midst of the normalcy of his world.

Well, where Simeon’s story was pedestrian and largely unspectacular, today we are going to take a turn that you probably would not see coming during a time like Advent, and I really went back and forth about taking this route, but it is, surprisingly, quite fitting. Today we are going to jump into the book of Revelation.

**SLIDE 3: Revelation**

How many of you have read through Revelation? Okay, now, every pastor has that certain section of the Bible that he would rather not tackle and, I will admit, Revelation might be mine. If you have read it you know that Revelation “reveals” or pulls the curtain back on the spiritual realm. And so, it is filled with fantastical imagery that doesn’t make any sense, at least not to us. It is not written in a straightforward way and it seems to bring about more questions than answers. The Bible is God’s word, but no one ever said it was going to be easy. However, we are going to take a peak into the confusion because it is in Revelation 12 where we find a third account of the Christmas story. That’s right, Matthew and Luke tell their version and there is another one here toward the end of the whole thing.

Now, let me set this up a little bit…Revelation is a series of visons that the apostle John experiences. And because of the nature of these visons, proper interpretation can be very tricky. It’s hard to know what should be taken as symbolism and what should be taken more concretely. We do know however that John’s fellow Christians, for whom the book was written, were living under intense and persistent persecution. To proclaim Jesus meant putting your life at risk. So John message to them is one of perseverance and to highlight the fact that Christ has achieved the victory. John’s audience would have been able to pick up on his references and symbology…we are just a couple millennia out of that loop. Another great rule of thumb with Revelation, is to look closely at the hymns, the poetic sections. They help to bring some clarity to certain narratives that are just so hard for us to follow. So in chapter 12 we have a story about a woman, her child and a dragon.

**SLIDE 4: -Dragon**

That’s right a dragon. We are coming up on Christmas, and I am talking about a dragon. I’m aware of how that sounds…but bear with me. What we are about to read is the behind-the-scenes view of what happened on that Christmas morning. And like much of scripture, Revelation is meant to be read aloud. It is meant to be experienced rather than analyzed. So I am going to read a pretty long section here, and I just want to encourage you to take in the weirdness and experience this passage. While the gospels explain what happened in the physical realm, Revelation is going to let us in on what went on in the spiritual realm.

**SLIDE 5-8: Revelation 12:1- 17 Then 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 she cried out because she was in labor, in pain from giving birth. 3 Then another sign appeared in heaven: it was a great fiery red dragon, with seven heads and ten horns, and seven royal crowns on his heads. 4 His tail swept down a third of heaven’s stars and threw them to the earth. The dragon stood in front of the woman who was about to give birth so that when she gave birth, he might devour her child. 5 She gave birth to a son, a male child who is to rule all the nations with an iron rod. Her child was snatched up to God and his throne. 6 Then the woman fled into the desert, where God has prepared a place for her. There she will be taken care of for one thousand two hundred sixty days. 7 Then there was war in heaven: Michael and his angels fought the dragon. The dragon and his angels fought back, 8 but they did not prevail, and there was no longer any place for them in heaven. 9 So the great dragon was thrown down. The old snake, who is called the devil and Satan, the deceiver of the whole world, was thrown down to the earth; and his angels were thrown down with him. 10 Then I heard a loud voice in heaven say, “Now the salvation and power and kingdom of our God, and the authority of his Christ have come. The accuser of our brothers and sisters, who accuses them day and night before our God, has been thrown down. They gained the victory over him on account of the blood of the Lamb and the word of their witness. Love for their own lives didn’t make them afraid to die. Therefore, rejoice, you heavens and you who dwell in them. But oh! The horror for the earth and sea! The devil has come down to you with great rage, for he knows that he only has a short time.” The dragon pursues the woman. 3 When the dragon saw that he had been thrown down to the earth, he chased the woman who had given birth to the male child. 14 But the woman was given the two wings of the great eagle so that she could fly to her place in the desert. There she would be taken care of—out of the snake’s reach—for a time and times and half a time. 15 Then from his mouth the snake poured a river of water after the woman so that the river would sweep her away. 16 But the earth helped the woman. The earth opened its mouth and swallowed the river that the dragon poured out of his mouth. 17 So the dragon was furious with the woman, and he went off to make war on the rest of her children, on those who keep God’s commandments and hold firmly to the witness of Jesus.**

Okay, so admittedly, there is a lot there and frankly, a lot that we simply can’t address here. A lot of strange numbers and images and battles and beasts, but in spite of what we are unsure of here, let’s take a look at what we do know. I have mentioned the main characters: the woman, the son and the dragon, who is also referred to in verse nine as “the old snake.” So where does that take you? Back to the beginning right? Way back to the Garden of Eden in Genesis chapter 3:15. This is after the fall. Adam and Eve have eaten from the tree they were told not to and as God sort of doles out punishments, he begins with the snake, the tempter, the liar and he says, “I will put contempt between you and the woman, between your offspring and hers,” Okay, so there is the son coming into the story, “They will strike your head, but you will strike at their heels.” So right from the get-go, a battle is being set up here between humanity and Satan. And who is going to win that fight? Satan will every time. We are sinful and broken. We are already bent toward evil right out of the gate. We are just no match. What we need is a warrior who can take on our enemy, someone with power and authority, someone who can save us! As we know, Jesus is born to be that Savior, he is born right into the midst of the battle! But notice, even here in Genesis, the outcome is already determined. God has said, that even though Satan gets a bite, he will strike the heel, Satan is the one who will have his head crushed. Can you imagine, in the picturesque scene of Mary holding her newborn in the soft light of the moon, what is actually occurring is the beginning of the end for Satan. The first cry of our Savior as he is laid in the manger was the sound of a dragon skull starting to crack under the foot of the authority of the Son of God.

**SLIDE 9- His tail swept down a third of heaven’s stars and threw them to the earth. The dragon stood in front of the woman who was about to give birth so that when she gave birth, he might devour her child.**

 If we go back to Revelation and look at verse 4 we see the dragon all set to devour this son immediately after he is born. This is outlandish imagery, but we cannot forget how literally true it was. Indeed, at the time of Jesus birth, a paranoid and jealous Herod made orders to have all the babies born in Bethlehem, aged two and under killed for fear of the prophecies concerning a coming King. Herod, here, puts into place nothing short of a Satanic plan to irradicate this son, because, as I stated before, Jesus was born in the midst of a battle.

**SLIDE 10 – 12:6 Then the woman fled into the desert, where God has prepared a place for her. There she will be taken care of for one thousand two hundred sixty days.**

 In Revelation 12:6, after giving birth the woman flees into the desert. We see this happen in Matthew’s text as well as Joseph is told in a dream to take his family to Egypt. He does so and in this way Jesus is “snatched up” out of the mouth of the dragon. It says he is “snatched up to God and his throne.” We can see this correlated in Luke chapter 1 verse 31 when Gabriel speaks to Mary. He says, “Look! You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you will name him Jesus (which means ‘God saves’). He will be great and he will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of David his father. He will rule over Jacob’s house forever, and there will be no end to his kingdom.”

 Jesus was born in a stable in the podunk little town of Bethlehem. What seemed like a silent night here on earth was actually the turn of the tide in the battle the rages for this child was born a warrior king. This child came to crush the enemy and set the captives free, and it is important for us to understand this dimension of the nativity because we are locked in the very same battle. When Jesus was snatched from the jaws of Satan, he simply turned his sights onto us. By faith in Jesus, by choosing to follow Jesus, we are the consolation prize.

**SLIDE 10 – Revelation 12:17 So the dragon was furious with the woman, and he went off to make war on the rest of her children, on those who keep God’s commandments and hold firmly to the witness of Jesus.**

Look at verse 17. We are the target of an enraged dragon. One commenter, Eugene Boring, whose writing is actually quite good, likens this enraged dragon to a brutish, sore-loser football team. They realize that they have lost the game, but there is still time on the clock so they have determined to injure, to bring harm, and to utterly destroy the opposing team with absolutely no regard for the rules. Victory is not possible for them, but much damage can still be done. So we need to be aware of this fight and this mentality of our enemy. And, we need to participate.

 Which leads to another sports metaphor that fits well here. Have you ever been to a soccer game for really young kids. There will always be one of two kids on the field, in the game, but they are busy picking dandelions or staring up into the clouds. They are not engaged in the game that surrounds them. And so the coach and parents try to encourage the child to pay attention and get in there and get the ball. Imagine a soldier on an actual battlefield behaving in that way. It’s almost impossible to imagine, because a soldier understands his duty, he know that life and death are at stake. Church, I want to drive home to you that, as Christians, we are not playing soccer. We are on a spiritual battlefield where the stakes truly are life or death. We must engage. We must fight. And we do this through the practice of prayer. This is how we fight our battles. Our victory is in Jesus’ name!

**SLIDE 11- Our victory is in Jesus’ name!**

 Now you may be thinking…if Jesus is victorious, and if the dragon has been crushed, then why is there still a battle? Well that is part of what the book of Revelation addresses. Yes, it is true the dragon still prowls around, standing on the shore waiting to devour the followers of the King, but we wait…we wait in expectation, we wait for the King’s return when he will deal the final crushing blow to the old snake. It is then that Jesus will establish his eternal kingdom. But until that final day, we fight by praying in expectation, by claiming his kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven, by tearing down the strongholds that Satan has set up in our families and neighborhoods.

**SLIDE 11- Title**

If you are feeling a little sleepy this Advent, prayer awakens expectation. If you identify a little too closely with the distracted child on the soccer field, prayer awakens expectation. If it seems like you have nothing to look forward to in the coming year, prayer awakens expectation.

 Let us join together in prayer this Advent. Let us join together with our victorious Savior ans take up arms against our ancient foe. Let us join together in this battle as we wait with expectation for the return of our coming King! Amen.