

Revelation 12:13-14:1 (ESV)

12:¹³ And when the dragon saw that he had been thrown down to the earth, he pursued 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 might fly from the serpent into the wilderness, to the place where she is to be nourished for a time, and times, and half a time. ¹⁵ The serpent poured water like a river out of his mouth after the woman, to sweep her away with a flood. ¹⁶ But the earth came to the help of the woman, and the earth opened its mouth and swallowed the river that the dragon had poured from his mouth. ¹⁷ Then the dragon became furious with the woman and went off to make war on the rest of her offspring, on those who keep the commandments of God and hold to the testimony of Jesus. And he stood on the sand of thesea.

13:¹ And I saw a beast rising out of the sea, with ten horns and seven heads, with ten diadems on its horns and blasphemous names on its heads. ² And the beast that I saw was like a leopard; its feet were like a bear's, and its mouth was like a lion's mouth. And to it the dragon gave his power and his throne and great authority. ³ One of its heads seemed to have a mortal wound, but its mortal wound was healed, and the whole earth marveled as they followed the beast. ⁴ And they worshiped the dragon, for he had given his authority to the beast, and they worshiped the beast, saying, "Who is like the beast, and who can fight against it?"

⁵ And the beast was given a mouth uttering haughty and blasphemous words, and it was allowed to exercise authority for forty-two months. ⁶ It opened its mouth to utter blasphemies against God, blaspheming his name and his dwelling, that is, those who dwell in heaven. ⁷ Also it was allowed to make war on the saints and to conquer them. And authority was given it over every tribe and people and language and nation, ⁸ and all who dwell on earth will worship it, everyone whose

name has not been written before the foundation of the world in the book of life of the Lamb who was slain. ⁹ If anyone has an ear, let him hear:

¹⁰ If anyone is to be taken captive,
to captivity he goes;
if anyone is to be slain with the sword,
with the sword must he be slain.

Here is a call for the endurance and faith of the saints.

¹¹ Then I saw another beast rising out of the earth. It had two horns like a lamb and it spoke like a dragon. ¹² It exercises all the authority of the first beast in its presence, and makes the earth and its inhabitants worship the first beast, whose mortal wound was healed. ¹³ It performs great signs, even making fire come down from heaven to earth in front of people, ¹⁴ and by the signs that it is allowed to work in the presence of the beast it deceives those who dwell on earth, telling them to make an image for the beast that was wounded by the sword and yet lived. ¹⁵ And it was allowed to give breath to the image of the beast, so that the image of the beast might even speak and might cause those who would not worship the image of the beast to be slain. ¹⁶ Also it causes all, both small and great, both rich and poor, both free and slave, to be marked on the right hand or the forehead, ¹⁷ so that no one can buy or sell unless he has the mark, that is, the name of the beast or the number of its name. ¹⁸ This calls for wisdom: let the one who has understanding calculate the number of the beast, for it is the number of a man, and his number is 666.

14:¹ Then I looked, and behold, on Mount Zion stood the Lamb, and with him 144,000 who had his name and his Father's name written on their foreheads...

A Trinity of Counterfeits (Rev 13)

Tonight is the final part in our three homily mini-series on Revelation, which is part of our larger Lenten Wednesday series based upon topics suggested by parishioners. This miniseries came out of the suggestion that I preach on Revelation 13 and specifically the infamous number 666 found in its final verse. And those who have been tracking with our Lenten Wednesdays know that in part 1 (two weeks ago), I talked about how to approach the book of Revelation a responsibly, which can make all the difference in whether this book has a positive or a toxic effect on our faith. God never intended this book to be taken as providing detailed predictions about the future. Instead, it communicates timeless truths

by employing symbolism related to historical events that would've familiar to its original first century audience, the seven churches of Asia Minor .

Then last week, I let the cat out of the bag on "666", as a numeric symbol pointing to Nero, a particularly villainous Roman emperor from the middle of the first century AD. But then we got into chapter 12, which is where the vision we read about in chapter 13 really begins. You may recall that chapter 12 introduced a seven-headed red dragon who is eventually identified as Satan, stalking a woman who is in labor and waiting to devour her child. The woman wore a crown with 12 stars, representing the people of God, while the child represented Christ.

But when the child is born, the dragon's attempt to devour the child results in the child being exalted and enthroned in heaven, after which the archangel Michael defeats the dragon. All of this represented the result of Jesus' death, resurrection, & ascension. And the dragon - or Satan - subsequently has his territory limited to earth, where he then seeks to destroy the woman - now representing the Church, the saints of God - but God sustains her.

So that catches us up. And for chapter 13, I will once again be drawing primarily - and heavily - on the work of Craig Koester¹ and Charles Talbert.² But in chapter 13, the cosmic battle on God's saints continues. Chapter 12 closed with Satan standing on the sea shore. And as chapter 13 opens, we see why, as John sees a beast begin rising out of the sea. This first paragraph says,

¹ And I saw a beast rising out of the sea, with ten horns and seven heads, with ten diadems on its horns and blasphemous names on its heads. ² And the beast that I saw was like a leopard; its feet were like a bear's, and its mouth was like a lion's mouth. And to it the dragon gave his power and his throne and great authority. ³ One of its heads seemed to have a mortal wound, but its mortal wound was healed, and the whole earth marveled as they followed the beast. ⁴ And they worshiped the dragon, for he had given his authority to the beast, and they worshiped the beast, saying, "Who is like the beast, and who can fight against it?"

Now, there's a few things to note about this 'beast from the sea'. First, the beast resembles the dragon, as it was described in chapter 12 as also having seven heads and ten horns. But what I probably should've pointed out last week is that even the dragon's appearance was meant to be a perversion of how Christ had appeared in chapter 5. We've been reading a canticle the last few weeks from Revelation 5, but it hasn't included chapter 5 verse 6, which if you'll look with me for a moment (in your bulletin or on the screen) this is where Jesus is described as a "Lamb standing, as though it had been slain," but who has (Quote) "seven horns and with seven eyes, which are the seven spirits of God sent out into all the earth."³ So the first thing is that this beast from the sea resembles the dragon, whose appearance was a perversion of the lamb.

But even further, verse 3 tells us that one of the heads of this beast appeared "to have a mortal wound", but that the wound was healed. Well, this also is meant to mimic the paradox of Christ's depiction as the lamb who was slain. As the lamb was depicted as alive, despite having been slain, and therefore having defeated death, this beast appears to have overcome a deadly wound. Therefore, his appearance gives the impression that he is invincible, which is affirmed by the rhetorical question of those worshipping the beast who ask, "Who is like the beast, and who can fight against it?"

But there are even further ways this beast is a sort of demonic foil of the lamb. The people's worship of the beast here in 13:4 mimics the rightful worship of the lamb in 5:

¹ Koester, Craig. *Revelation & the End of All Things*. Second edition. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2018.

² Talbert, Charles H. *The Apocalypse: A Reading of the Revelation of John*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1994.

³ Koester: the implication of ten diadems rather than seven is that the dragon's' desire to gain sovereignty has only been heightened by being cast down from heaven in ch 12.

12 saying with a loud voice,
“Worthy is the Lamb who was slain,
to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might
and honor and glory and blessing!”

Moreover, in 5:9, it says Jesus had “ransomed people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation,” while apparently this beast is whom everyone else is found worshipping in chapter 13, as verse 7 says, “authority was given (to the beast) over every tribe and people and language and nation,⁸ and all who dwell on earth will worship it, everyone whose name has not been written before the foundation of the world in the book of life of the Lamb who was slain” #

So, as Koester observes, in their respective visions (Rev 5 & 13), both the lamb and the beast are depicted as conquering, but what is important is that their *means* for conquering are very different. The lamb ransoms a kingdom of people by sacrificing himself for them, but the beast conquers by inflicting war and death on others. The lamb’s aim is to free people from every tribe and nation, while the beast seeks to oppress people from every tribe and nation. So, as Koester explains, the reader is once again faced with a choice between the sacrificial lamb - Christ - who is attractive, while his evil counterpart - this beast - is repulsive. #

But the question remains, *who is this beast?* Who does this beast represent in the lives of these first century churches this letter of Revelation was intended for?

Well, one clue comes in the further details provided in verses 1 & 2 about this beast from the sea’s physical appearance. Not only did it have ten horns, Verse two says it was (quote), “like a leopard”, but with feet “like a bear’s”, mouth “like a lion’s mouth”. Well, all of this is pretty explicitly recalling the passage from the Old Testament apocalyptic text of Daniel. There, in chapter 7 that we read tonight, Daniel has a vision of four beasts rising out of the sea, where the first is like a lion, the second like a bear, the third like a leopard, and the fourth - different from all the others - had ten horns. Now, the four beasts of Daniel each represent a different worldly empire that arose consecutively to threaten God’s people: most likely the Babylonians, the Medes, the Persians, and the Greeks, though there is some debate over this. But in John’s vision in Revelation these four figures have been drawn into one single beast, as if to say that the threat to God’s people remaining faithful is not any particular empire, so much as empires in general; that while some empires are certainly worse than others, all empires at their core are essentially the same. But of course, for the first century believers in the Seven Churches John is writing to, the particular empire they are living under is Rome. So there are also allusions here to Rome in particular.

The Roman emperors were considered to be semi-divine, so they had people address them with what Christians considered to be blasphemous names (13:1), such as ‘Lord’, ‘God’, ‘savior’, and even ‘god’. And with the empire extending all the way from Asia to Europe to north Africa, its emperors certainly had authority over people of many tribes, languages, & nations. But last week I explained that the number ‘666’ at the end is a reference to the Emperor Nero, who had been the worst of all the emperors toward the Church. And this sheds light on the meaning of one of the beast’s heads having a mortal wound that seemed to have healed. You see, in 68 A.D. Nero had died by suicide, by stabbing a dagger into his neck. But for decades there were rumors widely circulating that Nero was alive and in hiding and that one day he would return. Sorta like the legends around Elvis for Boomers or rapper Tupac Shakur for Gen X. In fact, one source from the early second century reports that even then the majority of people in the empire still believed Nero was alive. And in just the 25 years between Nero’s death and when Revelation was written, there are records of three different impersonators coming forward and presenting themselves in Rome as Nero. And so, in a strange, almost ancient pop culture sorta way, Nero was perceived as like one who had a mortal wound, yet lived; and thus, from John’s perspective, as a sort of perversion of the risen Christ, an anti-christ.

And so, in verses 9 & 10 John concludes this section on the beast from the sea by exhorting believers to have endurance and faith. Since God chose them before the foundation of the world and

their names are written in the book of the Life of the lamb that was slain, he exhorts them to have endurance and faith, even if they are persecuted to be like the lamb and be willing to be slain before worshipping the empire. #

But before the chapter closes there is one more beast to appear. And this one rises out of the earth. So we now have a demonic trinity of the dragon, the beast from the sea, and the beast from the earth. This beast also imitates the lamb in a perverse way, with its “two horns like a lamb”. But verse 12 says its goal is to lead the earth’s inhabitants to worship the first beast, to worship the empire. So it plays the role of a false prophet. It performs signs. Verse 13 says it makes fire come down from heaven, so he’s counterfeiting the miracle of Elijah from his duel with the prophets of Baal in 1 Kings. And believe it or not, Talbert reports that some ancient texts indicate there were Roman emperors had some rudimentary machines that could give the illusion of miraculous signs.⁴

But it wasn’t just deceptive signs and wonders that John wants to warn people about. His even greater concern is for the pressure believers felt to abandon the narrow way of imitating Christ and assimilate into Greco-Roman religious practices. And these pressures were of course the threat of physical persecution, as the end of the last section highlighted and the end verse 15 repeats. Even greater and more consistent were economic pressures. Verse 16 says the beast of the land (quote) “Also it causes all, both small and great, both rich and poor, both free and slave, to be marked on the right hand or the forehead,¹⁷ so that no one can buy or sell unless he has the mark...” Now, this is not describing a literal, visible mark. Koester explains that in the Roman empire of this time, “Those who sought to advance themselves socially and economically would have wanted to participate in the local trade guilds,” but this “often included rituals and meals in honor of a Greco-Roman deity”. And “business contracts typically were given to those who were on good terms with Roman authorities, including those who were involved in the deaths of Christians.” So John is writing to many Christians who had come to rationalize that assimilation into the ways of empire were no big deal. And perhaps especially since the horrific days of Nero were over, this had become even easier to rationalize. So John shocks their conscience by connecting it back to Nero - the gematrial decoding of the number 666. But John wants his readers to understand that to sell out - to compromise - in this way is to do the bidding of the beast of the land and worship the beast of the sea; that trusting in empire for one’s security and protection is to forsake the way of the lamb.

And so, how does this message apply in our age? How can we, living not in the 1st century but in the 21st century, ensure that we whose names have been written in the Lamb’s book of life are not unwittingly worshipping the beast?

Well, to put it simply, we must work to keep God first and keep country a distant second. Our mission as Christians is not to be *opposed* to the kingdoms of this world - to be anti-empire - but to keep ourselves from making an idol of it. The New Testament is very clear that governments have a role. Without them there would be anarchy and certainly much greater oppression than there is with them. Thus, in Romans 13 St. Paul famously instructed believers to be subject to governing authorities, that they are appointed by God and that rulers are meant to be a terror to bad conduct.⁵ Similarly, Peter wrote in his first letter “Be subject for the Lord’s sake to every human institution, whether it be to the emperor... or to the governor...” whom God intended “to punish those who do evil and to praise those who do good.” He says “live as servants of God” - to “fear God, but honor the emperor.”⁶ And guess

⁴ Talbert reports that some ancient texts indicate there were Roman emperors had used machines that could simulate thunder and even lightning to wow people. Then, verse 15 talks about an image or statue - an idol - of the beast being given breath so that it can even speak. And scholars believe this may be a reference to a mechanism that had developed by this time to create a statue with hinged jaw, moved by a system of chords, and a small tube that went up to the mouth, which allowed someone behind the scenes to speak and make it seem like the idol was speaking.

⁵ Romans 13:1-7

⁶ 1 Peter 2:13-17

who that Emperor was believed to be when PEter wrote that? Nero. The limit of honoring any authority is when it commands us to do or affirm anything contrary to the faith; and it sounds like Nero did that a lot.

But passages like Romans 13 and 1 Peter 2 are meant to be held in balance and in tension with the visions of Revelation. But think about how many Christians in our country's earlier generations were post-millennialists and how many protestants now are pre-millennialists, which means they all have missed these warnings from Revelation entirely and there is no balance. So when it comes to how they relate to empire have *only* had these passages from Romans and 1 Peter. Therefore it is of little surprise that the Church in America is dealing with an epidemic right now of Chrstian Nationalism.

Now, I'm sure by now many of you have heard of Christian Nationalism, but what is it? Well, Bishop Todd Hunter of the ACNA explains⁷ that Christian Nationalism is an effort by believers to impose their understanding of Christianity on their nation. It happens when believers have fused the nation-state - in our case the United States - with the Kingdom of God have, which causes us to go beyond an appropriate love of America and to elevate our national citizenship (often inadvertently, unintentionally) to be equal to or even above our citizenship in the global people of God. And, as Bishop Hunter writes, the heretical belief at the core of this,, is that America (or any nation) could be God's vessel for bringing in the kingdom of God. That is something God is doing through Jesus and the sending of his Spirit to the Church.

But still, how do we know that such idolatry has become a problem for us? What are some signs we might've gotten unwittingly caught up in this? Well before I close, I want to share a list from Christian Sociologist Samuel Perry, who co-wrote a book on Christian Nationalism in the United States that has been endorsed by Timothy Keller⁸ titled "Taking America Back for God".⁹ He has made a list of 10 Indicators we may have been ensnared by the heresy of Christian Nationalism.

1. Having an US VS. THEM mentality instead of an "us for them" mentality. If as professing Christians we see non-Christians as enemies to be defeated, controlled, or kept separate rather than serving and loving and befriending them, we are likely thinking with a Christian nationalist culture warrior mindset.

#2 is if we find ourselves Pushing a Christian Culture over Allegiance to Christ --- as we think about the lost, is our hope that they will acquire our values, morals, worldviews, behaviors more than we think and talk about them needing a relationship with the person of Jesus?¹⁰ And this tends to play out in our political stances, because "Christian Nationalism puts stress on getting morality enshrined in the law of the land," but in contrast "Jesus calls for conversions and changed lives."

3. Third is CONTEMPT FOR THE CROSS. A part of scripture and the orthodox Christian faith that is going to feel intolerable to a Christian nationalist mentality is Jesus' command for us to take up our cross. This is going to seem like nonsense, because it's a very un-American idea. America is about winning, so Christian Nationalism has re-made the faith to be all about winning, which

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https://mcusercontent.com/947bbe13263155969627c0595/files/2591e4ea-74c5-4db6-a213-9f0b24f73ad6/Current_Issues_Bishop_TOdd_Email_05.0_Vol_V.pdf?fbclid=IwAR0MCxjcABuNtktcBckph9O6XdxT-NYgxbqV9c-0vJxFKdwgUWDBLAK1b9M

⁸ <https://quarterly.gospelinlife.com/book-review-on-the-topic-of-christian-nationalism/>

⁹ Samuel L. Perry and Andrew Whitehead, *Taking America Back for God: Christian Nationalism in the United States* (Oxford, 2020)

¹⁰ Keller: "First, it is a fusion of American identity "with Christianity (preferably Protestant), with race (white), nativity (born in the United States)...and political ideology (social and fiscal conservatism)" (ix-x). Put simply, it is a view that you cannot be a real American if you are a Muslim or a Jew, an immigrant, a non-white Christian or even a political liberal (161). Christian Nationalists believe that the federal government should declare the U.S. to be a Christian nation, put Christian values into law, and allow the display of Christian symbols and the offering of Christian prayer in public space."

frankly makes the way of Jesus - the self-sacrificial, suffering way that the Lamb conquers - feel like something for losers.

4. A fourth indicator we've fallen into Christian Nationalism is if we view America as having a special role in God's plans analogous to Israel. This view "is based on a particular understanding of American history. In this view, the United States was established as an overtly Christian nation and therefore has an almost¹¹ covenantal relationship with God." And typically proponents of this view appropriate promises that were given to Israel for America like 2 Chronicles 7:14, which reads "...if my people who are called by my name humble themselves, and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and heal their land."

So this leads naturally to a concern about the morality of the country. And yet...

(#5 is) the Christian Nationalist focus tends to be focused narrowly on the areas of religious belief and sexual purity, while caring little about justice for the least of these.

6. But despite warning or fearing that God will withdraw His hand of blessing from America for impurity, there is usually still the belief that God has a special relationship with the USA "cuz we're founded on Biblical principles". And because of this, attitudes like "America First" are justified as actually being the way God wants it.

7. A seventh indicator can be an orientation toward the CULTURE OF DEATH

This can look like fascination with guns or using the Bible to justify the death penalty or inhumane treatment of immigrants. Even an anti-abortion attitude, which can seem pro-life, may be focused on attempting to eliminate abortion by outlawing it rather than showing concern for remedying the systemic forces that may cause would-be mothers to feel they have no other choice. Instead, it's about power and controlling people.¹²

And related to the culture of death is...

8. SELECTIVE BIBLE QUOTING

Christian nationalism commonly appeals to Jesus expelling money changers, to justify unrighteous anger and violence, which is the very opposite of the intention of Jesus' actions; of course, Romans 13; and passages about forgiveness & not-judging rather than passages about accountability when preferred leaders are caught in immorality.¹³

9. A LACK OF CONCERN FOR "WITNESS"

This is being resigned to a dynamic of being hated by nonbelievers and hating them right back, and therefore preferring to dominate them rather than love them.

¹¹ Keller: "(and many drop the 'almost')"

¹² Keller on Perry & Whitehead: "They tell us, first, that the influence of Christian Nationalism matters because it supports authoritarian rule and because it can justify violence by using the trappings and rhetoric of religion and of the sacred. "It co-opts Christian language and iconography in order to cloak particular political...ends in moral and religious symbolism" (153). This means it undermines commitments to patience, respect, and civility toward opponents, to freedom of speech, debate—all things necessary for a free, democratic society.

¹³ Keller: "Christian Nationalism, to the degree it is influential, means the death of Christian witness. The ethos of Christian Nationalism is to not in any way try to persuade, win, or evangelize their opponents. Their attitude toward unbelievers is: "They are evil—what does their opinion matter? Sure they hate you—just hate them right back. Own the libs." The motivation of witness—a desire to see all people come to know Christ—has been completely eradicated in Christian Nationalism, which proves that it is not ultimately a religious movement at all, just one more political movement using the power of religious language.

10. And finally, Perry suggests that a propensity toward CONSPIRATORIAL VICTIM MINDSET may be an indicator of Christian nationalism, When one's whole reality is culture war & "us vs. them," it's easy to start believing that everybody in power (media, scientists, certain politicians) are lying & out to get you.

Now truthfully many or all of these indicators I just listed could pass for being Christianity - even mainstream Christianity - in America today. These perspectives may be what we find on christian radio and Christian TV and even be widespread in American Christianity. The problem is that none of it - none of it - reflects the way of the lamb who was slain and the way he conquers. Instead it all reflects a worldly mentality of the way empire conquers. **And every one of us should feel challenged by this, but how are we going to respond? Are we going to go to God's word in pursuit of the truth (whether we like it or not) or are going to respond from our feelings?**¹⁴ These are false paths, with frustrated endings, that grieve Jesus and detract from his kingdom.

And yet, if we have gotten caught up in this, bullied into this by powerful people in our lives or taught that this is the way of Jesus, we must be gracious to ourselves. Some of us may have grown up in authoritarian households and so this Christian Nationalist way of understanding the faith and viewing the world just seems normal to us; we've been blinded to see anything wrong with it and never been able to imagine anything different. But I'm here to tell you, as humbly as I can say this, that this is the primary way the mark of the beast is manifesting in the lives of believers today. And yet, there is grace at the foot of the cross. Can we begin to say enough is enough? You may have held to some of these ideas for decades, but it's never too late. We only get to live once, and none of this is doing anybody any good; it only gives short term pleasure to our flesh and brings untold harm to others. And it is all worth counting as nothing in comparison to the Kingdom way of living that Jesus is inviting us into. Amen.

¹⁴ Keller on Perry & Whitehead: "the more Christians engage with the Bible and prayer in community, the less they move toward Christian Nationalism. "Put simply, Christian Nationalism does not encourage high moral standards or value self-sacrifice, peace, mercy, love, justice..." Americans who engage in more religious practices "are less likely to ostracize immigrants, less likely to espouse anti-black prejudice or fear Muslims. Here, however, we find the opposite. As Americans exhibit higher levels of religious commitment...they are more likely to desire more traditional roles in the home, oppose same-sex marriage and transgender rights, or have more negative views of divorce" (142).