

## March 17, 2021 Homily Manuscript

### Revelation 12, 13:18 (ESV)

<sup>1</sup> And a great sign appeared in heaven: a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars. <sup>2</sup> She was pregnant and was crying out in birth pains and the agony of giving birth. <sup>3</sup> And another sign appeared in heaven: behold, a great red dragon, with seven heads and ten horns, and on his heads seven diadems. <sup>4</sup> His tail swept down a third of the stars of heaven and cast them to the earth. And the dragon stood before the woman who was about to give birth, so that when she bore her child he might devour it. <sup>5</sup> She gave birth to a male child, one who is to rule all the nations with a rod of iron, but her child was caught up to God and to his throne, <sup>6</sup> and the woman fled into the wilderness, where she has a place prepared by God, in which she is to be nourished for 1,260 days.

<sup>7</sup> Now war arose in heaven, Michael and his angels fighting against the dragon. And the dragon and his angels fought back, <sup>8</sup> but he was defeated, and there was no longer any place for them in heaven. <sup>9</sup> And the great dragon was thrown down, that ancient serpent, who is called the devil and Satan, the deceiver of the whole world—he was thrown down to the earth, and his angels were thrown down with him. <sup>10</sup> And I heard a loud voice in heaven, saying, “Now the salvation and the power and the kingdom of our God and the authority of his Christ have come, for the accuser of our

brothers has been thrown down, who accuses them day and night before our God. <sup>11</sup> And they have conquered him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony, for they loved not their lives even unto death. <sup>12</sup> Therefore, rejoice, O heavens and you who dwell in them! But woe to you, O earth and sea, for the devil has come down to you in great wrath, because he knows that his time is short!”

<sup>13</sup> 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. <sup>14</sup> 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. <sup>15</sup> The serpent poured water like a river out of his mouth after the woman, to sweep her away with a flood. <sup>16</sup> 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. <sup>17</sup> 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 the sea.

...13:<sup>18</sup> 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.

### Revelation Part, 2: 666 & The Dragon Slayer

Tonight is part 2 of what will now be a 3 part mini-series on Revelation. I keep adding parts! Forgive me! But this mini-series is part of our larger Lenten Wednesday series based upon topics suggested by parishioners. You'll recall that last week I mentioned that it was suggested I preach on Revelation 13 and specifically the infamous number 666 found in the final verse of that chapter, but we can't really understand chapter 13 without chapter 12. But I also don't want to information overload you, and really want to keep these as homilies, so this is how a 1 part homily turns into three parts.

In order to properly interpret chapter 12 or 13, it was important that we first talk about how to approach the book of Revelation as a whole in a responsible manner. So last week I explained that, although many believers are tempted or have frankly been taught to read Revelation as a detailed prophetic script (Millennialism in different forms), predicting details of the future end of the world as we know it, this future script lens is not how this book was ever meant to be interpreted or read, which is evidenced by the bad fruit such readings tend to produce including focusing on headlines more than God, tribalism, and resentment & suspicion of our neighbor that is in opposition to the love for them we're supposed to be cultivating. And whatever conclusions have been drawn on this bases cannot be considered authoritative.

Instead, I explained that an appropriate approach to Revelation comes from appreciating its genre, which is an ancient apocalyptic text, that reveals divine truths by employing symbolism related to historical events familiar to its original first century audience, the seven churches of Asia Minor. However, this does not make the book irrelevant for us. To the contrary, Revelation communicates timeless truths that are every bit as relevant in our time, which I hope to continue demonstrating tonight. This approach, which we call Amillennialism in relation to the book of Revelation, is really how we must approach all books of the bible, if we hope to interpret them responsibly.

So tonight I'm going to focus primarily on chapter 12. And once again I will be drawing primarily - and heavily - on the work of Craig Koester<sup>1</sup> and Charles Talbert.<sup>2</sup> But *first* I am going to go ahead and explain that infamous number from the final verse of chapter 13: 666.

Certainly, throughout history, there has been no shortage of speculation about what this number represents. The symbolic use of numbers, was very popular in ancient times, and we find evidence of its use all over the Bible. For example,

- The number seven has significance in scripture, as for example God created in seven days. And so, it is often seen to represent perfection.
- Also, the pattern of the number forty appears in many instances, including Jesus' forty days in the desert, which recalls Israel's forty years wandering in the desert, and also appears in reference to the amount of time between Jesus' resurrection and his ascension.
- The use of the number thousand is not believed to always be literal - for example, the 1,000 years we saw mentioned last week in Revelation 20 is not predicting some literal thousand year period, rather it is a symbolic way to say a very long period of time.

So some have speculated that the three sixes here may represent imperfection or evil, in contrast to the number seven. However, this is unlikely to be the case here, because we actually see seven being used in this same context in reference to evil things, as both the dragon and beast have seven heads, which we'll get more into.

In this case, however, the number is pretty obviously an instance of gematria. Gematria (also called isopsephy) was an alphanumeric coding system that was used in Biblical times and is actually still widely used in Jewish culture, where each letter of the alphabet is assigned a number. And the Greek word translated as 'calculate' in 13:18 refers to this practice. As you can see on your insert or the screen, both the Greek and Hebrew alphabets had numbers associated with each letter. And just to give you an example, ancient Christian authors thought it was really cool that using this scheme the name of Jesus in Greek added up to 888. But to illustrate how widespread the use of gematria was even among commoners, in Smyrna - the city of one of the seven Churches Revelation was written to - archaeologists have found graffiti scrawled into a wall that reads "I love her whose number is 545".

Now, obviously the combinations of letters in any number of names might add up to the sum of 666, but given the historical context of the Churches that Revelation was written to, it is pretty obvious that the number represents the Hebrew rendering of Nero, who was the Roman Emperor - or Neron

GREEK			HEBREW		
1	A, α	Alpha (A)	1	א	Aleph (A, E) A
2	B, β	Beta (B)	2	ב	Beth (B, V) B
3	Γ, γ	Gamma (G)	3	ג	Gimel (G) G
4	Δ, δ	Delta (D)	4	ד	Daleth (D) D
5	E, ε	Epsilon (E)	5	ה	He [Heh] (E, A) H
6	Ϝ, ϝ	Digamma (V, W)	6	ו	Vau (O, U, V, W) V
7	Z, ζ	Zeta (Z)	7	ז	Zayin (Z) Z
8	H, η	Eta (Ē)	8	ח	Cheth (Ch) Ch
9	Θ, θ	Theta (Th)	9	ט	Teth (T) T
10	I, ι	Iota (I)	10	י	Yod (I, J, Y) I
20	K, κ	Kappa (K)	20	כ	Kaph (K, Kh) K
30	Λ, λ	Lambda (L)	30	ל	Lamed (L) L
40	M, μ	Mu (M)	40	מ	Mem (M) M
50	N, ν	Nu (N)	50	נ	Nun (N) N
60	Ξ, ξ	Xi (X)	60	ס	Samekh (S) S
70	O, ο	Omicron (O)	70	ע	A'ayin (A'a, O) O
80	Π, π	Pi (P)	80	פ	Pe (P, Ph) Ph
90	Ϙ, ϙ	Coph (Q)	90	צ	Tzaddi (Tz) Tz
100	P, ϱ	Rho (R)	100	ק	Qoph (Q) Q
200	Σ, σ, ς	Sigma (S)	200	ר	Resh (R) R
300	T, τ	Tau (T)	300	ש	Shin (Sh, S) Sh
400	Υ, υ	Upsilon (Y, U)	400	ת	Tau (Th, T) Th
500	Φ, φ	Phi (Ph)	500	ך	Kaph-final (K, Kh) K
600	Χ, χ	Chi (Ch)	600	ם	Mem-final (M) M
700	Ψ, ψ	Psi (Ps)	700	ן	Nun-final (N) N
800	Ω, ω	Omega (Ō)	800	ף	Pe-final (P, Ph) Ph
900	Ϻ	Sanpi	900	ץ	Tzaddi-final (Tz) Tz

**Jesus**  
*I η σ ο υ ς*  
 10+8+200+70+400+200

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

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

Kaiser - from 54 to 68 AD. Although Nero had died some twenty-five years before the time that we believe Revelation was written, he certainly would've been infamous to Christians of that time, because the revolt that ended in the Roman's destruction of the second Jerusalem temple began under Nero, but more significantly Nero was known for being the most brutal persecution of Christians among all the first Century Roman emperors. And as we look at chapter 12 tonight, we will begin to see why Nero is significant to this vision. And next week, with chapter 13, we'll see it even more.

נ	Nun	50
ר	Resh	200
ו	Waw	6
ן	Nun	50
ק	Quph	100
ס	Samekh	60
ר	Resh	200
		<hr/>
		666

So having let that cat out of the bag, let's now go back to the beginning of chapter 12. This chapter marks the beginning of the third of seven visions that comprise the heart of the book of Revelation. And the visions of Revelation employ extremely vivid imagery that many have compared to a modern movie with special effects because the aim of ancient apocalyptic texts was to frankly to startle the reader into paying attention, as it unmasks evil - portraying it so grotesquely that they might feel compelled to reject it and become more loyal to the good. And that is certainly what is happening in chapter 12.

The vision begins first with a sign of pregnant woman giving birth and a great red dragon seeking to do her baby harm. And there are actually many parallels between what's described in this vision and story from Greek mythology that was circulating in the late first century.

In that story, the goddess Leto was the mistress of Zeus and became pregnant by him, but a dragon named Python pursued her in order to kill her and her child. But a north wind rescued her by carrying her away, where the woman gave birth to twins: Apollo & Artemis. Those who were with us three weeks ago for the homily on 1 Timothy & the role of women remember Artemis, whose temple was in Ephesus. Anyway, four days after the woman gave birth to Apollo & Artemis, Apollo set off after the dragon to avenge his mother - apparently, these greek gods grew up quickly - and is successful in slaying the dragon.

Now this wasn't just some fairy tale for entertainment. No, Roman emperors put this myth to use by associating themselves with Apollo, whose defeat of the dragon was said to have ushered in a time of peace and prosperity. So Caesar Augustus, who reigned when Jesus was born, was hailed as the new Apollo who would begin a period of great peace (the Pax Romana). And Nero even presented himself in the likeness of Apollo, imprinting his image on Roman coins looking like Apollo.

So returning to Revelation, John's ancient readers would've heard echoes of this mythological tale. However, instead of the woman in labor being a greek goddess, she represents the people of God; the child is not Apollo or the emperor, but Christ; and the dragon represents the forces of evil opposed to christ and his church. The Woman is described in verse 1 as beautiful and wearing a crown of victory. And the child to whom she gives is described as the messiah is described in Psalm 2 that we read tonight, as verse 5 says He will rule all the nations with a rod of iron. Meanwhile, the red dragon is grotesque, with seven heads and seven diadems and ten horns; and his desire to make a meal out of the newborn is meant to repulse the reader.

However, the dragon's attempt to devour the child backfires, as it instead results in the child being enthroned in heaven, just as the crucifixion of Jesus' backfired, resulting in his resurrection and ascension. This recalls for the reader when something that appeared like a triumph for evil - the cross - actually resulted in evil's downfall. And similar to Leto in the greek myth, the woman is able to flee.

But what follows in the next paragraph is not peace, but an epic battle in heaven, between the dragon and Michael, known to first century Christians as the commander of the Lord's angels. In verse 9, Michael defeats the dragon, who is now identified as Satan. And this results in Satan being thrown down to the earth. Now, this is not to be confused with the original fall of Satan from being an angel of the Lord.<sup>3</sup> Rather, this communicates what happened as a result of Jesus' death, resurrection, and ascension: that Satan was banished from heaven. Koester explains that Satan had access to heaven and earth before this war with Michael, but now he only has access to earth - using the battle metaphor Satan has lost half his territory.

And the message of this vision to the seven Churches receiving this letter from John is twofold:

1. First, while it may seem to the believers in these seven churches that evil is triumphing - that things are getting worse for believers, "from a heavenly perspective... evil is raging on earth not because it

<sup>3</sup> K120FN

is powerful, but because it is vulnerable. As the end of verse 12 explains, “for the devil has come down to you in great wrath, because he knows that his time is short!”

2. But many of their fellow believers may have already been martyred, which must’ve seemed like a triumph for evil. And yet, just as such unjust execution of Jesus turned out to result in evil’s demise, the martyrdom of these believers contributed to evil’s downfall in the same way. As verse 11 explains, “they have conquered him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony, for they loved not their lives even unto death.” In other words, the message here for the Seven Churches was that Satan would be conquered in their time by Christians being like Christ, by being willing to die rather than sin.

So just imagine what an encouragement this vision would’ve been for believers to remain faithful and loyal to Christ.

Well, in the final paragraph of chapter 12, now that he is confined to earth, Satan - the dragon - is going after the Church. The woman, who many have mistaken as more narrowly representing Mary, actually represents the people of God:

- in Israel, who gave birth to the Messiah, as the first paragraph depicted
- and then in the final paragraph the woman represents the Church, who after Jesus’ enthronement in heaven has to contend with a Satan who knows his time is short and is now confined to earth

Verse 13 says “when the dragon saw that he had been thrown down to the earth, he pursued the woman, but thankfully the woman has help. Verse 14 says she was given two wings of a great eagle, which was a biblical metaphor for God’s help,<sup>4</sup> that allows her to fly into the wilderness. But nonetheless, in verse 15 the serpent is said to pour forth water like a river from his mouth to sweep her away in a flood. But yet again, but here God’s creation comes to her help, as the earth opens its mouth and swallows the water up.

This conclusion is filled with Old Testament imagery, not only the eagles wings, but imagery from the story of Israel in particularly of the wilderness, and God nourishing her, as he did the people with manna in exodus, and the earth opening up as it does in the book of Numbers.<sup>5</sup> And so, the invitation for believers living not just in the first century Rome, but in any era before Jesus’ return is to identify our own story generally with this imagery of the woman, who despite enduring enormous challenges is sustained by the Lord. And next week, in chapter 13, we’ll explore more deeply the particular sins Revelation was seeking to warn first century believers against, as they lived under the rule of what at the time was the most powerful empire the world had ever seen, and we will consider how those might relate to similar temptations and pressures we feel in our 21st century context, and therefore serve as both a warning and encouragement to us.

In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, Amen.

---

<sup>4</sup> Isa 26:17-18 LXX

<sup>5</sup> Numbers 16:32 & 26:10