

✧ *In the Name of Jesus* ✧

Ah, Christmas—a time of peace. During World War I some of the soldiers on both sides, British and German, declared an unofficial ceasefire on Christmas Day. They played soccer and enjoyed a meal together. Just the day before they had been shooting at each other from their trenches. On December 25 they had a day of peace. On December 26 they went back to shooting at each other.

Here we are at the Fourth Sunday in Advent. We have listened (Advent 1) to the prophecies about the coming Christ. We have prepared our hearts (Advent 2). We have rejoiced (Advent 3) because Christ came to save us and is coming back again to take us to his home. Now we pause, quietly beholding (Advent 4) the Triune God put the last details into place before Christ's first coming. And what have we here before us today? A sermon text about a scary red dragon trying to eat a newborn baby! Where's the peace? Let's investigate this passage that has so rudely intruded on our sense of peace.

¹A great and wondrous 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. You gotta love Revelation. Picture language everywhere. Makes our heads spin. But if we peel back the picture language one symbol at a time, we can make sense of this marvelous message from our Lord.

Who is this woman? Some of you will think right away of the virgin Mary. After
19 December 2021 Advent 4 - C Revelation 12:1-6

all this woman ⁵*gave birth to a son, a male child, who will rule all the nations, and this male child obviously symbolizes Jesus (see also Revelation 2:27-28). But what do we do with the other symbols that describe the woman? Remember Revelation makes use of pictures that have been used elsewhere in the Bible. Where else in the Bible was Mary ever clothed with the sun? Where else in the Bible did Mary have the moon under her feet and wear a crown with twelve stars on her head? Nowhere.*

So if this woman does not represent Mary, whom does she represent? Let's start with the twelve stars. Has the number twelve been associated with anything else in the Bible? Oh yes. There were twelve tribes in Israel. Jesus chose twelve apostles. Later in Revelation the church will be pictured as a city with twelve foundations and having twelve gates. The number twelve is strongly associated with God's people. In Revelation 7 the people in heaven are numbered as 144,000—too small to be taken as a literal number. But take twelve for the Old Testament church and twelve for the New Testament church, $12 \times 12 = 144$. Ten is the number associated with completeness. $10 \times 10 \times 10 = 1000$ (completeness cubed). $144 \times 1000 = 144,000$, meaning every believer from before Christ died and every believer from after Christ died—no believer is missing. The whole Christian church on earth made it to heaven.

So this woman represents God's people, the church. She is clothed with the sun because that's a good way to make her

look glorious, as if God has shared with her his glory. And he did, when he washed her clean of all sin. Now she is holy, as God is holy. That's how God sees you—glorious. The moon under her feet shows that this woman has influence in governing nature. How does the church influence nature? Through our prayers to the Almighty. The prophet Elijah prayed for no rain, and God kept it from raining in Israel for three years (1 Kings 18:1). On Wednesday evening you asked God for safety from the storms—to my knowledge none of you were harmed. You get to influence nature through your prayers to the Almighty.

So this woman is the church. What happened next? ²*She was pregnant and cried out in pain as she was about to give birth.* Wait a minute? Are we sure this woman is the church and not Mary? Mary gave birth to Jesus, not the church. Actually, it can also be said that the church gave birth to Jesus. That was the whole point of the Lord calling his Old Testament people back to himself again and again. He wanted to make sure that the Savior was born into a believing family. The Son of God was going to set aside the full use of his power and glory and be born a helpless baby. He was going to need someone to teach him, not just his A B Cs, but who God is, and what God promised about rescuing sinners, and how to pray. Only a believing daddy and mommy could teach the Christ-child such things. The church cried out in pain as she was about to give birth to the Savior.

³*Then another sign appeared in heaven: an enormous red dragon with seven heads and ten horns and seven crowns on his heads.* ⁴*His tail swept a third of the stars out of the sky and flung them to the earth.* In a few more verses this red dragon will be identified as ⁹*“that ancient serpent called the devil, or Satan.”* Snakes are scary enough without being described as enormous or red. This serpent is especially scary—he has seven heads with which to bite you. Wait, I thought seven was the number associated with the covenant, a joining together of God's number, three, with people's number, four (3 + 4 = 7). Why does this picture of Satan have seven heads? Is he trying to confuse us? That seems to be the point. The devil certainly wants to substitute himself for God—he wants to make a covenant with people too. God's people, of course, see right through his efforts, but others get tricked into following him. So why does he have ten horns? Ten horns don't go well with seven heads—it's not symmetrical or logical. Right, as if we are being warned not to follow any of his falseness. But then this dragon has seven crowns on his heads. What's that about? This comes out in Greek better than it does in English. See Revelation uses two different words for 'crown.' When we are offered the crown of life (Rev 2:10), that's the *stephanos*, a crown given to anyone who enjoyed a victory, even in sports. The dragon, however, is wearing ten *diadema*, the kinds of crown worn by

rulers who wanted everyone to treat them as gods (such as Persian emperors and two Roman emperors Caligula, Diocletian). In the anthem our choir sang today we are pictured as having diadems because we are children of God, but then we cast our diadems of gold down before the Lamb of God on his throne because he is King of kings and Lord of lords. This red dragon wears diadems because he wants everyone to treat him as if he were God. Sad to say, some do. They're wrong. That's what Revelation is trying to convince us of: "Don't follow Satan. Follow Jesus!"

This red dragon wants everyone to see him as powerful. Actually he is powerful. ⁴*His tail swept a third of the stars out of the sky and flung them to the earth.* Satan is not an entity we want to trifle with. Don't play with a Ouija board or Tarot cards or any of the things associated with Satan.

Why not? Because he kept trying to destroy Jesus or undermine his work or prevent Jesus from carrying out His mission to save us sinners. Our text pictures Satan this way: ⁴*The dragon stood in front of the woman who was about to give birth, so that he might devour her child the moment it was born.* We can easily see Satan behind Herod the Great, stoking his jealousy over anyone who dared claim to be King of the Jews (see Matthew 2). When Herod learned from the Magi how long they had been following the star from the East to

Jerusalem, and then the Magi did not return to give Herod a report on the child born King of the Jews, Herod ordered all the baby boys two years old and younger in the vicinity of Bethlehem to be killed. Good thing the Lord's angel warned Joseph to get up and take Baby Jesus and Mary to Egypt. But then think how Satan tempted Jesus in the wilderness: "Make bread, hungry Jesus. Jump off this high point of the temple, Jesus" (see Matthew 4). Historians report that around the time of Jesus, the incidents of demon possession went way up. Those evil spirits tried to make Jesus look bad every chance they got. Think of Peter trying to talk Jesus out of being the kind of Savior who would suffer and die for us—Jesus told him, "Get behind me, Satan" (Mark 8:33). Think of Judas' betrayal—Satan is said to have entered Judas (Luke 22:3). Look at him, this enormous red dragon poised to pounce on Baby Jesus just as soon as the church gives him birth.

⁵*She gave birth to a son, a male child, who will rule all the nations with an iron scepter* (See Psalm 2). Ok, he will rule someday, but for now he's just a helpless little baby. What happens to Baby Jesus? *And her child was snatched up to God and to his throne.* Safety! Just like that! Our heavenly Father was never going to let Satan destroy His one-and-only-Son. God had promised to send the serpent-crusher (Genesis 3:15), and he was going to keep his promise. The people to whom the Book of Revelation was first

written already understood that Jesus had won the full victory. In fact the picture of the child being “*snatched up to God and to his throne*” would have gotten them thinking about how Jesus ascended to the right hand of God. That’s what Revelation is trying to convince us of. Satan has lost. There’s no way he can beat God’s Son. Silly serpent, **DEFEATED DRAGONS DON’T DEVOUR DEITIES.**

Not only did the one dragon not devour the one Son of God, he didn’t get to devour the woman who gave birth to the Son of God, the church. She sensed the danger. *“The woman fled into the desert to a place prepared for her by God, where she might be taken care of for 1,260 days.* The desert can be an uncomfortable place, unless someone takes the time to prepare. This verse reveals that God prepared a place out in the desert for the church, to take care of her and feed her for a whopping 1260 days. That’s 42 months or 3½ years. Why such a short time? This length of time keeps coming up in the Book of Revelation. It seems best to take this as a symbolical length of time. Three and a half years is substantially long, but it’s also relatively short. It will come to an end. So this verse points us to the care God is going to provide to his church for the whole time that the church is waiting for Jesus to come back the second time. While this world may be hostile to God’s message of full forgiveness for all sinners in Jesus, God has provided his church

with a place of safety. Jesus promised that the gates of hell will not be able to destroy his church (Matthew 16:18). On the night Jesus was betrayed, he prayed, *“My prayer is not that you take [my followers] out of the world but that you protect them from the evil one”* (John 17:15). Whenever the church has been persecuted throughout the New Testament times (the 3½ years or 1260 days), God’s people could easily wonder why he did not deliver them from their suffering by snatching them also up to heaven. Here God reminds his people that he will take care of them while they are out in the desert, like he took care of Elijah during the three-year drought (1 Kings 17). He will take care of us. Certainly he feeds our bodies, but Revelation is almost always more concerned about the welfare of our souls. We don’t suffer severe persecution in our body for belonging to Christ, but we feel it in our soul. It’s not fun to be made fun of. It’s not enjoyable to be referred to as “so-called Christians” when we stand on the unpopular teachings of the Bible. Where is our safe place? In God’s Word. That’s our place of safety, the place where we will be fed while we wait out in the desert. Whenever we take our stand on God’s Word, we can repeat what we said before. Silly serpent, **DEFEATED DRAGONS DON’T DEVOUR DEITIES.** And you don’t get to devour us either, not as long as the Holy Spirit keeps us connected to Jesus through God’s Word.