

Trinity United Methodist Church

November 15, 2020

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Scripture: Revelation 13:11-18 (NIV)

11 Then I saw a second beast, coming out of the earth. It had two horns like a lamb, but it spoke like a dragon. **12** It exercised all the authority of the first beast on its behalf, and made the earth and its inhabitants worship the first beast, whose fatal wound had been healed. **13** And it performed great signs, even causing fire to come down from heaven to the earth in full view of the people. **14** Because of the signs it was given power to perform on behalf of the first beast, it deceived the inhabitants of the earth. It ordered them to set up an image in honor of the beast who was wounded by the sword and yet lived. **15** The second beast was given power to give breath to the image of the first beast, so that the image could speak and cause all who refused to worship the image to be killed. **16** It also forced all people, great and small, rich and poor, free and slave, to receive a mark on their right hands or on their foreheads, **17** so that they could not buy or sell unless they had the mark, which is the name of the beast or the number of its name. **18** This calls for wisdom. Let the person who has insight calculate the number of the beast, for it is the number of a man. That number is 666.

Sermon

Would you pray with me? Oh Lord, open our ears and our hearts. Let us hear what we need to hear and show us what we need to do to become more faithful disciples of our Lord Jesus Christ. In His name we pray, amen.

Many church members throughout my ministry have tried to pigeon-hole me, have tried to figure out, sometimes have flat-out asked—"Pastor, where do you stand politically? Who are you going to vote for?" Well, I'll tell you where I stand politically, but I ain't going to tell you who I voted for, and primarily because I want to be able to pastor all people, red and blue and everybody in between. It's that somewhere in between where I usually land, because I find that politically, when it comes to political matters, I am often rather homeless. I am much too conservative on some things for liberals, and I am much too liberal on many things for conservatives.

It's true in the life of our denomination as well. It occurred to me when I got ready to make this point at the 9:30 service, for all the mess that has happened in 2020, one of

the great blessings of it is that our denomination isn't shoving the coming split down our throats as much any more. It's been a wonderful reprieve not to be so focused on that. But it is still coming. General Conference is scheduled for May of next year. We'll see if it happens. But at some point the split will still come. It's likely that a conservative branch will break off and form its own denomination. Possible that a very liberal, progressive branch, particularly out west in the country, will split off and form their own denomination, and that the Methodist Church as we know it in the middle will somehow pick up the pieces and remain.

So people ask me all the time: "If and when we split, which way will you go, Pastor?" And the truth of the matter is, I don't know. Because once again, I'm way too liberal for the conservatives, and I am much too conservative for the progressives.

If only the true way of Jesus as I know it to be true and you know it to be true, if only the true way of Jesus lined up perfectly with *our* political party. Wouldn't that be great? Some of us think it already does. Wouldn't that be wonderful if the true way of Jesus lined up with *our* thinking? But it doesn't. It makes it hard to live as a disciple, especially in a world, in a society, that is increasingly more polarized by the day, if not the week.

And if you *think* that the way of Jesus *does* line up with the way you already think and choose to believe, watch out. It's like if the God that you pray to happens to always agree with you and your perspectives—that's not the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the God of the Bible. That's a god of our own making.

Living as a disciple of Jesus is hard. And it's meant to be that way, especially in this world. Again, we claim many times how persecuted we are as Christians, even here in America. Let me remind you that we are not persecuted as Christians here in America. Until we are threatened with bodily harm, until we are actually disowned by family and friends because of our faith, until we are threatened to the point of death because of our faith, we are not persecuted here in America. What we have experienced is a loss of privilege. If you didn't realize, we no longer live in the Christian bubble that we had of the '50s and into a bit of the '60s. We now live in a much more pluralistic society. What we've had is a loss of privilege.

The days used to be when I could go up to Cypress Creek Golf Course and say, "Hey, I'm the new Methodist Pastor in town," and they would hand me a free membership to the golf course there. That would be wonderful if I actually golfed. But it's because they know that I would likely bring some of y'all, who would *pay* for your rounds of golf there on the course, right? But it goes further than that. I can't even find reserved parking for clergy at the hospitals any more. Did you know that? They used to have parking right up front reserved for clergy so we could get right in there and get to

you in your room and so forth. I have to look for a parking space clear on the other side of Warwick Boulevard from Riverside Hospital just like the rest of you now. That's persecution! *I am persecuted!* No. I've just got to walk a little further.

We've lost our Christian privilege, and to many it *feels* like persecution, but it is not. Living as a disciple of Jesus is harder even than that, though. Our walk of faith was never meant to fit nicely into our little boxes of our own making—emphasis on “little.” After all, it's one of the themes of Revelation: Following Jesus isn't easy, in light of what has happened, what is happening, and what will happen. But take heart! Be of good courage, and do not be afraid, because in the end, *God wins*.

And that's it. I'm done. That's the sermon for the day. That's the conclusion of the series. I could sit down right now and we'd be done, but that would make too many of y'all happy, so we can't have that.

And besides, inquiring minds want to know: What is this deal with the Mark of the Beast? And how can we Christians avoid it? Of all the imagery from Revelation that people find scary or even fascinating and confusing, certainly, is this Mark of the Beast.

Well, if you know anything about my approach to the study of scripture, one of my favorite words is “context.” Context is everything. One of the reasons so many interpreters of Revelation have gotten themselves in trouble throughout the years and taken us off into some weird and really unusual places is because they take these things out of the context in which it is written.

To go back a chapter—bear with me here, this is the teaching part of the sermon—we read about the dragon in chapter 12. The dragon, we're told flat out, is the devil, Satan. Michael and his angels fight against the dragon and his angels or demons in heaven. The dragon is beaten, is thrown down to the earth out of heaven, and from then on, we're told that the devil has set out to wage war against those who keep God's commands and hold fast to their testimony about Jesus. There's a reason following Jesus in this life is not easy. It's like Paul says in the book of Ephesians, that “our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the powers of this world that work against us.”

So then we get to chapter 13 and we read actually of two beasts there. The first beast comes out of the sea. He's fantastically described, with all kinds of heads and all kinds of crowns upon the heads, and so forth and so on. It's hard for us to imagine, but put yourself in the first-century context, which is a world full of Greek and Roman mythology. That's the belief system. So they would tend to “get this” a lot easier than our modern-day, very literal thinking.

But also, like much of mythology, it's all symbolic. And most scholars throughout history agree that this first beast is basically a government. It is a kingdom. It is a world power. But which one, of course? In the height of the Cold War, interpreters said that this was Russia, or maybe Iran.

But at the time, in the first-century context, it was quite clearly Rome. Later in Revelation, Rome is referenced as Babylon, that great evil empire that sacked Jerusalem in 586 B.C. and took everybody out of there into exile and burned God's temple to the ground. And that's code for Rome, who was actively persecuting Christians at the time.

Who is this power for us today? It's basically whoever is in charge at the time. Whether we live in America, whether we live in Europe, whether we live somewhere else in the world. It's whoever is in charge.

We read that people worship the dragon because he had given authority to the beast. And they also worship the beast, and asked, "Who is like the beast? Who can wage war against it?" A paraphrase would go something like, "Who is like this government? Who is like this country? Who is like this nation? Who can beat us?" And it's around this time that y'all start thinking, "Boy, you really hate America, don't you?" I love America. I love our country. I love the ideals for which we stand in our best moments. But my allegiance is primarily, first and foremost, to my God. My Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. And it's because of this book of Revelation.

The beast is given authority to rule for 42 months, which is 3-1/2 years. And numbers are really important in Revelation. And 3-1/2 is half of what number? Seven. That all-important Biblical number of completion, of perfection. This is an *imperfect* entity. It is given power to wage all kinds of wars and above all, to persecute the people of God.

So what does God do for His people? He swoops in, He raptures everybody and takes them away so they don't have to endure this, right? Wrong. We're going to talk more about that next week. But nowhere in Revelation does it speak of God snatching His people out of trouble. Rather, we point-blank read, this calls for patient endurance and faithfulness on the part of God's people. Hang in there, y'all, basically is what it says.

And then we get to our reading for today. If the first beast is thought to be a country, a national entity, then the second beast is thought to be a person. A leader within that entity, a false prophet. From the ancient church fathers, they began to call this second beast the Antichrist, even though Antichrist is nowhere in the book of Revelation. It comes from the letters of John, where John says Antichrist is actually a spirit, which any of us can have if we're ever found to be living against Christ.

But here it is personified as the second beast. And this second beast performs all kinds of signs to wow everybody. He sets up an image to honor the first beast, to honor that nation, that kingdom. And he causes all who refuse to worship that image to be killed. It also forced “all people, great and small, rich and poor, free and slave, to receive a mark on their right hands or on their foreheads, so that they could not buy or sell unless they had the mark, which is the name of the beast or the number of its name. This calls for wisdom. Let the person who has insight calculate the number of the beast, for it is the number of a man. The number is 666.”

All the superstition that has arisen around that number. In researching for today's sermon, I read that Ronald and Nancy Reagan, when they left the White House at the end of their term and they bought a house in California, they got the address changed because the street address was “666 (whatever street),” and they got it changed to “668.”

What is this mark? It speaks of economic implications. If you don't have the mark, you can't buy or sell, it says. If we don't get this mark whenever it comes around, we won't be able to buy or sell. We won't be able to go to stores, we won't be able to go out to eat, we won't be able to presumably even shop online any more, right? And it's given rise over the years to the belief—it's been long talked about, since the '80s—about chip implanting. The chip that is now in most of our credit and debit cards and so forth, that we stick into the reader. And to this day, it's do I stick it in or do I swipe? You never know, because half the time it doesn't work anyway. There's going to come a time, evidently, when we'll just bend over the scanner, because it'll be in our forehead. Or presumably, we'll swipe our hand across it. And if we don't get it, we won't be able to buy or sell because we don't have it.

But actually, the Greek word here is the same as talking about marking or imprinting a coin. And Roman coins had whose image on them? Caesar. And Caesar, whoever it was; Augustus Caesar, Octavius Caesar, Julius Caesar, whoever—set themselves up as God of all the world, especially the Roman empire. The phrase, “Jesus is Lord,” was actually a direct political statement to the first Christians, proclaiming that “Jesus is Lord and Caesar is not.” But in order to “go along to get along,” they would have to proclaim that Caesar was lord. We would have to say today that whoever is in charge at the time is lord.

And what about this number? There's a field of study called numerology, which you might be familiar with. It's all kinds of complex stuff, but one of the basics of it is matching up numbers to letters in the alphabet, like a sort of simple code system by which you get to send these coded messages, like in Revelation. Remember, John is in exile. He's writing to persecuted Christians. He's not wanting to come out and say, “Hey,

watch out for Caesar.” He’s wanting to send them a code saying, “Watch out for this guy, 666.”

So if you line up the letters of the alphabet, you can come up with somebody’s name. And there’s all kinds of websites out there these days of people who have got it figured out, who this person is, because they match up the number 666 with our modern-day alphabet, English alphabet. Because that makes sense, right? If you actually use the Latin alphabet in use at the time, you can get the name of Nero, the Roman emperor who was infamous for his persecution of Christians.

But there’s another way to look at this number as well. Six is just shy of what all-important Biblical number? Seven. This person could be someone who appears perfect and powerful in our eyes. Someone who is *nearly* there, but someone who in God’s eyes falls short as an imposter.

And let me tell you, it was so hard writing this particular part of the sermon, because I typed out a paragraph and I went, “Nope. Delete. Way too political.” And I typed out another paragraph and I hit Delete. “Way too political.” I did that at least half a dozen times.” Some of you have been in Revelation Bible study with me. Every time I teach through this book, every time I speak about it, it is so hard not to get very political.

But *it is* political. The Kingdom of God is always up against the kingdoms of this earth, whatever form the kingdoms of the earth take. We can make arguments throughout history that any sitting President of the United States of America, red, blue, or whatever; that any king or queen of any country; that any leader therein could be the Antichrist. That *any* forced action upon us could be the Mark of the Beast. Some of y’all agree with me on that. Come on! That’s not what it’s about! That’s not what any of this is about!

I get passionate about this, y’all. Because here’s my take, along with so many other pastors, theologians, and scholars: Getting hung up on what is the Mark of the Beast, and who is the beast, and who is the Antichrist, and all that—*it doesn’t really matter in the long run*. Because context is king. Context matters.

Who is the book of Revelation written to? You remember? We went over it. *The churches. The church*, throughout all of history, is the recipient of this letter of Revelation. The people of God. And so therefore, who is the dragon and who are these beasts bad news for? Bottom line, the church. The people of God. That’s us, y’all.

And whoever these beasts are, and whatever their mark, it won’t be good news for the people of God, even and especially if it looks like it is. Because the bottom line is, as much as we like to be comfortable, as much as we would like to find a home in the systems of this world, as much as we would like the ways of Jesus to line right up with

our political views and parties and our national identities—the bottom line is, as followers of Jesus we'll always ultimately be homeless in the eyes of this world. The followers of Jesus will always ultimately appear powerless in the eyes this world. Following Jesus as close as we can will always mean that we will always appear to be struggling against the powers of this world. And no wonder. Because Jesus said, "Foxes have holes and birds have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay His head."

The good news is, as Paul wrote, Jesus told him, "My grace is sufficient for you, for My power is made perfect when y'all holler out, 'We're number one! We're number one! We're number one!'" Right? Nope. "My grace is sufficient for you because My power is made perfect in *weakness*. Therefore," Paul says, "I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses." Not how great we are; not how great I am. "About my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me, on us. That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then He is strong."

Jesus loves me, this I know / for the Bible tells me so / little ones to Him belong / They are weak, but He is strong.

The good news is that the beasts, whoever they are, as great as they are, as much as we might love them—they, too, will be destroyed.

"I saw heaven standing open, and there before me was a white horse whose rider is called Faithful and True. With justice he judges and wages war. His eyes are like fire, and on his head are many crowns. He has a name written on him that no one knows but himself. He is dressed in a robe dipped in blood, and his name is the Word of God. The armies of heaven are following him, riding on white horses and dressed in fine linen, white and clean. Coming out of his mouth is a sharp sword with which to strike down the nations. He will rule them with an iron scepter. He treads the winepress of the fury of the wrath of God Almighty." *Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord /* right? "On his robe and on his thigh he has this name written: KING OF KINGS AND LORD OF LORDS."

"Then I saw the beast and the kings of the earth and their armies gathered together to wage war against the rider on the horse and his army. But the beast was captured, and with it the false prophet who had performed the signs on its behalf. With these signs he had deluded those who had received the mark of the beast and worshiped its image. The two of them were thrown alive into the fiery lake of burning sulfur."

Friends, we're missing the point if we go looking for the Antichrist, because we can find him everywhere. But if we focus on God and live faithfully in Jesus, the author

and perfecter of our faith, then whoever the Antichrist turns out to be will be the least of our worries.

Always, always seek to live for something greater, with the ultimate end in mind. The end which we'll talk about next week.

Thanks be to God. Amen.