

“The One Who Is ...”

Sermon 4: “The Warrior King” (Revelation 12)

December 23, 2018

* Bring stool for the story

(Special Music by CapClty Kids; Keep ages 4-7 on stage)

Hey guys! Great singing! Did you have fun?

It is two days till what? _____ Christmas! Are you excited?

What is Christmas about? Show you some pics ...

Let's see if you know who these guys are.

- (Joseph, Mary, Jesus in a Manger)
 - Who are they?
 - Is Joseph Jesus' dad? (actually God)
 - Are they good guys or bad guys?
- (Add animals)
 - Why are they in the picture? (manger / barn)
 - Are they good guys or bad guys?
- (Add shepherds)
 - Who are they?
 - What are they doing here?
 - Are they good guys or bad guys?
- (Add wise men)
 - Who are they?
 - What are they doing here?
 - Are they good guys or bad guys?
- (Add dragon)
 - Who is that?
 - Have you ever seen him before in a Christmas story?
 - Did you know he was there too? But to us ... invisible!

You see, sometimes there are things we can't see. We know they are there, but we can't see them. And the dragon is kind of like that. He was there, but most people never notice him.

You see, God has always loved his children very much ... he still does. He loves all of us; he loves all of you! And his children needed help, so God sent his Son to help us. This is so cool: He put his Son inside Mary to be born as Jesus.

But someone wanted to stop him. He used to be the greatest of the angels. But his heart became twisted and he turned into the dragon. And the dragon hates God, and he tries to pull us away from God.

So when God sent his Son to be born in a manger, the dragon was there. He was hoping God was far away, so he could hurt the baby. But God was there too, and he protected his Son. And when Jesus grew up he fought the dragon, and Jesus won. Isn't that a cool story!

Now, look at the Christmas picture one more time? What do you see first? I know, we kind of look at the dragon. Because he still tries to get us to look away from Jesus. But you keep looking at the manger, you keep looking at Jesus. Christmas is about him. Never forget that he came to help us. And he won. And we win as long as we keep our eyes on him. ...

(Dismiss the kids)

Now, as crazy as all that sounds, I'm not making it up! The dragon was there! You see, there was way more going on that day in Bethlehem than meets the eye. There is a whole other dimension to the Christmas story; an incredible drama, with incredible stakes. You see the birth of Jesus is just part of a story that has been unfolding since ... since before creation itself. There is a spiritual story, a spiritual struggle that lays behind so much of what happens here on earth. Almost a parallel history: way more ominous, way more epic. And whether we recognize it or not, we are part of it.

So ... here is the rest of the Christmas story, the part we don't usually see. It's not the version we usually read at Christmas. It's not pictured on our Christmas cards. It's found in the book of Revelation, chapter 12, verses 1-10.

"A 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. She was pregnant and cried out in pain as she was about to give birth. Then another sign appeared in heaven: an enormous red dragon with seven heads and ten horns and seven crowns on his heads. His tail swept a third of the stars out of the sky and flung them to the earth. 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. She gave birth to a son, a male child, who will rule all the nations with an iron scepter. And her child was snatched up to God and to his throne. 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. And there was war in heaven. Michael and his angels fought against the dragon, and the dragon and his angels fought back. But he was not strong enough, and they lost their place in heaven. The great dragon was hurled down—that ancient serpent called the devil, or Satan, who leads the whole world astray. He was hurled to the earth, and his angels with him. And then John says: Then I heard a loud voice in heaven say: ‘Now have come the salvation and the power and the kingdom of our God, and the authority of his Christ. For the accuser of our brothers, who accuses them before our God day and night, has been hurled down.’”

Now that adds another dimension to the Christmas story, doesn't it? Usually we see a manger in Bethlehem. We see a sweet innocent young girl giving birth to a fragile and helpless child. We see wise men and shepherds and cattle lowing (whatever that means). But Revelation pulls back a veil. It gives us a peak at the spiritual reality behind the scenes of the human picture, events in heaven mirroring the events on earth. Things we need to know!

Now to understand the dragon and what he is doing here, we have to go back to the time before time. You see, we Christians believe that we have been swept up into an epic that began in the ancient past. We believe that wondrous and dangerous things have been unfolding for millennia, and t still are. And we learn that in this epic we have been given a crucial role to play. And we feel that this epic is the story written on our hearts, and there are echoes of it everywhere. It is a story in four Acts. It goes something like this ...

Act one: God. (“Once upon the time before time”) “Once upon a time” — Those are great words, aren't they? Full of legend and mystery and promise and a sort of invitation: “Come, let me show you something.”

“Once upon a time ...” Have you ever wondered why so many of the great stories start like that? Because our story does. “Once upon a time” – “In the beginning.” It is used twice in Scripture. We find it first in Genesis: “Once upon a time (in the beginning) God created the heavens and the Earth. But the story of God, the epic, does not start there. Genesis is Act 3, that’s way into the story.

And before this? To get to the “Once upon a time before time,” the “Once upon an eternity” (if you will), we go to the Gospel of John. The first words of John’s Gospel also say, “In the beginning,” but like this: “In the (real) beginning (before Genesis, before creation) was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.” You see, God was already there, before time itself. John is peering back into the time before time. And what he sees there is a fellowship, and a deep intimacy, a relationship – and the Word was with God. John pictures what we call the Trinity: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, the eternal life of God – in intimacy before anything else was.

You see, our God is relational, and he has hard-wired that desire for relationship into our very souls. God did not create us just to exist; he invites us into community with him. You see, that’s the invitation of the gospel. Come up into this larger story – join us in this epic. You are invited into something that has been unfolding now for a long, long time. “Come,” God says, “Do life with me.” What an amazing God he is!

Act two: Lucifer (The entrance of evil). I want to ask you a question? Why do so many of the great stories have a villain? It is hard to think of a great story without one, isn’t it? Cruella, Scar, the wicked witch of the West, the dark Lord Sauron, Darth Vader, Longshanks, Commodus, the Joker, Lex Luther. So many great stories have a villain ... because ours does. But most of us don’t live like it. We don’t live like our story has a villain, and that makes life very confusing. It would be incredibly naïve to think otherwise, wouldn’t it? Just turn on the news: war, terror, treachery, betrayal, murder, greed, abuse, blasphemy. One has to admit that there is an evil force working in this world. Well ... things have happened prior to your seeing, things you must know.

In Act two, well before Genesis, God creates the Angels. Now these are not Raphael’s Angels: little children with little wings and chubby cheeks,

looking more no more dangerous than members of the local preschool. No, these are holy, dreadful, terrifying creatures. There is a story of a battle against the fierce Assyrians in the Bible where one Angel destroys an entire army. In the book of Revelation God unleashes 4 angels – just 4 – to kill a third of mankind ... billions? What kind of story is this? This story is not nearly as safe as you may have been led to believe. We humans are not the most powerful players in this epic story of God.

And standing at the head of all of the angelic hosts was a captain. His name was Lucifer: the shining one, the morning star. As glorious as the sun, he was apparently more noble and more beautiful and more powerful than Gabriel, Michael, any of the other Angels. But this is where the epic, takes its first dramatic turn. Pride enters Lucifer's heart. The noble captain feels he is somehow being cheated. He doesn't want to play just a supporting role in the story, he wants the story to be about him. He wants to be the star. He wants the glory and the adoration and the worship for himself (like we do, so often). And so he turns on his maker (like we do, so often). And there in the very courtyard of heaven, in the very presence of God, Lucifer rebels. And he convinces a third of the angels to join him in a revolt against God. And there is war in heaven. And Lucifer and a third of the angels are cast out. And their hearts are twisted. They hate God, but they can't defeat him. So they go after whatever God loves...

Act 3: Us (The Battle for the human heart). In the beginning ... in our beginning this time. Act 3 begins in darkness, darkness over the deep, and God's Spirit hovering over the waters. It is like a concert about to begin, the hush in the darkness before the first note. Suddenly God speaks a word and there is light. Another word and the great canopy of the heavens is revealed, a sky more blue than you have ever seen it. Another word and the great land masses rise out of the seas. Then forests and the meadows emerge. Linger here a moment, and feel God's delight with it all.

And then God pauses, and he does something absolutely astounding. God says, "Let us make man ... in our own image ... in our own likeness. And let him rule, over all the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and all the creatures on the earth. And so God made man ... in his own image. Male and female he created them."

And then God gives to us a freedom that just staggers us. You see, power can do everything except the most important thing: power cannot force love. Guards in a concentration camp can force you to do just about anything, but ... there is one thing they have never been able to force anyone to do: love them. Perhaps that is why God seems so shy to use his power in Act 3. God didn't create us to be puppets on a string or cringing subjects. He created us to be lovers, to be friends and allies, to join him in this grand story.

And this is where our story takes its tragic turn. For evil was working in the garden. Lucifer, Satan, from Act 2, comes to us and he whispers to us the same lie he used with the Angels. He says, "You cannot trust the heart of God. He's holding out on you. You've got to reach for what you want, you have to take matters into your own hands. Rewrite the story, give yourself a better part." And we believed him... And so Paradise was lost. Something in our hearts shifted. We reached for more, and in that reaching we fell from grace. And our glory faded, as Milton said, "faded so soon." And we can feel it. We can feel that we are not what we were meant to be. We feel a brokenness we have not been able to fix. We began to realize that we needed a Savior. So God began planting clues in our story that a rescue, a Savior, was coming.

Think about it: every great story has a rescue. Jack will come to rescue Rose, Wallace will rise up to rescue Scotland, Maximus will come to free Rome, Aslan will rescue Narnia, Luke and Hans and Leia will rescue the alliance. Every great story has a rescue, because yours does. And the second part of Act 3 is about the rescue.

Kierkegaard told a wonderful parable. He says: Suppose there was a King who loved a humble maiden. Now, no King was like this king, every other ruler trembled before his power. This king had the strength to crush every opponent. No one dared breathe a word against him. And yet this mighty King was melted by love for a humble maiden. How could he confess his love for her? In a way his kingliness tied his hands. If he just comes to her cottage with an armed escort and white banners waving, it would overwhelm her. If he just took her to the palace and made her his queen, crowned her with jewels and clothed her with robes, she might stay. But would she really love him? How could he know? The King didn't want a subject, he wanted a lover. So in Kierkegaard's parable the King disguises

himself as a beggar and he comes to the maiden's door alone, to win her heart... You see, ours is the most beautiful of all love stories. The ancient of days sneaks into the enemy camp under cover of night, as a carpenter from Nazareth, to win our hearts.

And so there was the Christmas story, the real Christmas story. You see, the babe in the manger surrounded by shepherds and wise men doesn't begin to capture the immensity of the scene. Something much harder to see is happening, more ominous, more epic. We get a glimpse of this side of the Christmas story in the book of Revelation, in the verses we read earlier. A parallel history: more ominous, more epic.

(Revelation 12.1-2) It's the story of a woman, clothed with the sun, the moon under her feet, a crown of stars on her head. She is pregnant, very pregnant, crying in pain as the child passes through the birth canal. She probably does not represent Mary, the virgin of Bethlehem. She probably represents the people of God, God's faithful, God's bride, through whom and for whom His messiah would come.

(Revelation 12.3-4a) And then it pictures an enormous red dragon, with heads and horns and crowns, with a tail that sweeps the stars out of the sky. A ferocious creature, enormously powerful and frightfully ominous. Lucifer, Satan, the serpent in the garden, the dragon – who has been trying to pull us away from God since our beginning.

(Revelation 12.4b-5a) And it tells us that this dragon crouched hungrily before the woman, waiting to devour the child when it emerged from her womb. What an incredible picture. What an incredible moment. It tells us that the woman, clothed in splendor, crying in pain, gave birth to a son, a male child, a Christ child, who would rule all the nations -- every man, every woman, every child -- with a rod of iron. Not with meanness, not with tyranny, but with power, with absolute authority.

(Revelation 12.5b-6) And it says that the dragon's designs were thwarted. It says that the child was snatched at the last moment up to God and to his throne. And it says that the woman, the people of God, fled into the wilderness, to a place prepared by God, where she would be protected by his hand.

(And there was war in heaven. Michael and his angels fought against the dragon, and the dragon and his angels fought back. But he was not strong enough, and they lost their place in heaven.) And then, almost literally, hell breaks loose. And there is all-out cosmic war. Michael and his angels go to war with the dragon and his legions. And the angels press forward; and the devils retreat.

(The great dragon was hurled down—that ancient serpent called the devil, or Satan, who leads the whole world astray. He was hurled to the earth, and his angels with him.) And it says the great dragon, that ancient serpent, that deceiver, Satan, was hurled down from heaven. And it says his legions were thrown down with him.

And then John says: Then I heard a loud voice in heaven say: “Now have come the salvation and the power and the kingdom of our God, and the authority of his Christ. For the accuser of our brothers, who accuses them before our God day and night, has been hurled down.”

Now that, my friends, ... is the Christmas story! We see a manger, we see a sweet innocent young girl giving birth to a fragile and helpless child. We see wise men and shepherds and cattle lowing (whatever that means). Revelation pulls back a veil. It gives us a peek at a spiritual reality behind the scenes of the human picture. It's not a sweet and sentimental picture. It's an invasion, a great invasion. It's a raid by God into the stronghold of evil. It is a decisive blow in a cosmic war. Folks, without some sense of this part of the story, what is pictured on our post-cards, and in our manger scenes, and in our Christmas carols -- is sentimental deception, it is pious fantasy.

You see that first Christmas may have been one of the two the most deceptive events in history. He looked like a baby -- and he was. He looked so fragile, so helpless -- and he was. Who could have known that this teenage peasant had born the long-expected Christ child? Who could have known that the dragon looked on anxiously waiting to devour the child? Who could have known that a cosmic war was about to begin in which the dragon would be hurled from heaven? Who could have known that the fate of every man, every woman, every child -- your fate -- would depend on whether ... we will bend our knees before the baby of Bethlehem, the Word of God?

You see, Christmas is about an invasion. God enters into our world and plants his flag. He stakes a claim on my soul, and on yours. He gives us a decision to make – surrender totally to Him, through the Word, or go to war. Don't be deceived by the baby in the manger. Don't be fooled by the sweetness, the sentimentality of the story. The only way we truly honor the baby in the manger – Jesus, the Messiah, our Savior and our Lord – is to bend our knees in surrender. Anything else is inadequate.

(To the Advent Table – Joy)

Today we light the fourth of our Advent candles. Remember, we light one each week for the Sundays leading up to Christmas: a candle of hope, a candle of peace, a candle of love, and a candle of joy. We will light the center candle, the Christ candle tomorrow, at our Christmas eve service tomorrow.

Hope, peace, love ... and joy. This last purple candle represents joy. The angel said, "I bring you good news that will bring great joy ... to all people." The Christ, the Messiah, the Savior is here! And that didn't finish it. You see, we believe the Christ, the Messiah, the Savior is coming back. That will be ... Act 4, the final act in the Epic.

Here is what's coming ... Act 4: The kingdom restored. In Act IV the kingdom will be restored, paradise will be regained. At the end of Revelation Jesus promises something absolutely wonderful. He says, "Behold, I make all things new." You see all of the miracles of Jesus are illustrations of the coming kingdom of God. What happens to the blind when they come into the kingdom of God through Jesus? They see. Suddenly the beauty of this world opens before them for the very first time. And the deaf, what happens to the deaf when they come into the kingdom of God through Jesus? They hear – they hear music and laughter, they hear their children's voices for the first time. And the lame get up and start dancing and the dead are raised. Do you see the point? These are not just random proofs that Jesus is the Son of God, they are illustrations of something grand. Jesus is trying to show us what it will look like when he makes all things new: a new heaven and a new earth. Heaven is not some eternal church service in the sky. We get the kingdom back. That is our happily ever after. Good news, of great joy!

And yet there is a sobering truth, more sobering than we can imagine. Not everyone lives happily ever after, not in any tale. If you'll remember back in Eden, God gave us a choice. God gave us freedom to choose for him or against him. God says, "I have set before you life and death." And it is here, it is now, that we choose.

What he offers is real life. Jesus says, "I have come that you might have life, and have it to the full." The apostle John says, "God so loved us that he sent his only son so that whoever believes in him would not perish but have life ... real life ... forever." There is no more beautiful or simple way to describe Act IV than this: it is the restoration of life as it was always meant to be. It the life we have dreamed of. You see, right now, in Act 3, our life is a story of high-stakes and frequent danger. But a day is coming when we go ... home. And all that we long to be we can finally be. And all that we long to see we can finally see. And all that has ever wounded us will be swept away, if ... And then, real life begins.

The Lord's Supper is a looking back, and a looking forward. He said, Eat this bread, and drink this cup, and remember me – who I am, and what I did for you. And each week we do. But he also said that it is an anticipation of that time when we will eat at table with him – with him – when he comes back.

Our worship team is going to sing a Christmas song for you. You may never have heard it before – so you can just listen if you want. It's about the hope God gave us that first Christmas; and it's about the hope we have for what's coming.

After that song, if you are a Jesus follower, you are invited to go to one of the worship stations eat the bread and drink the cup ... to remember, and to dream of what's coming.