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The National Presbyterian Church

The Grand Symphony II: The Battle Won

Revelation 12:1-16:21

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In this series of sermons, we are considering the last book of the Bible, the book of Revelation. Following Chapters 4 and 5, which are two great songs, the song to God the Creator and the song to the Lamb, who has redeemed us, we find two grand chorales: the song of creation and the song of redemption. Those two great songs are at the very center of the book of Revelation. In some ways the book of Revelation is the simplest book in the New Testament because it only has two grand themes and then variations on those themes. And that's what happens from Chapters 6 through 22. This stormy part of the book is really made up of four symphonic movements, that's how I understand them.

Last week we looked at the first of those symphonic movements, Chapters 6 through 11, which are variations on the theme of the fact that the Lord of creation, the Lord of redemption is the one who gives us hope in a dangerous time. Every reader of this book of Revelation makes the discovery that John's book was written at a dangerous time in the first century. These Christians were under stress and this letter of the vision of John becomes a book of hope for them. And maybe that's one of the reasons some of the terrors are so highlighted in that vision experience that John had.

Last week we saw there are two sets of seven, and it becomes clear that the number seven plays a big part in the book of Revelation. Seven, which is the Hebrew word for Sabbath, is also the word for "cease," the word for "rest," therefore it becomes the fulfillment word in the Old Testament and the New Testament. That number seven plays a role as we saw last week,

because there are seven seals that are opened, which become increasingly terrifying up through the number six. And then when the seventh seal is opened a song is sung. The song is clear; it's a song of wonder and of God's salvation because of his grace.

Then another set of six trumpets again even more terrifying, ending up with three woes. And when we get to what will be the third woe, again there is a surprise because when the seventh trumpet is played, then again there is a song of hope. In fact, one of the best of all the songs, the "kingdom of this world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Messiah." So the song is sung of the victory of the Lamb. And now we come to the second of the symphonic movements. I'll alert you, it also has terrifying parts. But there are two things that are clear in the first symphonic movement and you'll see those themes also in the second. Even still, as awesome and powerful and dangerous as the specters are that you see in the symphonic part, they're limited, they're not as overwhelming as they first appear; they're not total. There's a sense of restraint in the four horses of the apocalypse and also in the trumpets. And the last number, the seventh of the seals and of the trumpets belongs to the Lamb. The fulfillment, the resolution belongs to the Lamb.

Now we move into the second symphonic part. It starts with Chapter 12 up through Chapter 16. We'll read some soundings from the second symphonic movement. With Chapter 12 right at the very beginning, we meet a mysterious sign. It goes like this, "A great portent or sign appeared in heaven, a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet and on her head a crown of 12 stars." Who is this woman? Some ancient commentators wondered if it was Israel itself that brings forth the Son of God. Or is it the Virgin Mary? I think this text refers to Mary, the mother of our Lord who is now being portrayed with dramatic imagery in a very dramatic way. "The woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet and on her head a crown with 12 stars. She was pregnant and was crying out in birth pangs, in the agony of giving birth" (Revelation 12:1-2). This is now a flashback in the book of Revelation from this vision of the birth of Jesus Christ in Bethlehem of Judea.

"Then another portent [this is a frightening one] appeared in Heaven. A great red dragon with seven heads, [which almost sounds like one of the hydras of Greek mythology] with seven heads, ten horns, seven diadems on his heads, and his tail swept down a third of the stars." Notice the limitation though, "not all of the stars, a third of the stars." Always throughout all of these terror passages it's never total; it's always a part but never total. "A third of the stars of Heaven and threw them down to earth and then the dragon stood before the woman who was about to bear a child, and sought to kill her" [but he can't]. (Revelation 12:1-4). He can't do it.

And now we move to verse 7. A war broke out in Heaven and Michael and his angels [now we meet the Archangel Michael, in fact one of the most common portraits in Renaissance art is of the battle of Michael, the archangel with the dragon, the devil]. "And a war broke out in Heaven and Michael with his angels fought against the dragon. The dragon and his angels fought back, but they were defeated. [This is very important.] And there was no longer any place for them in Heaven, and the great dragon was thrown down. That ancient serpent who is called the Devil, Satan, the deceiver of the whole world" (Revelation 12:7-9).

This is a very interesting passage because this passage gives us probably the most complete definition of the devil that we have anywhere in the Old or New Testament. Three names are used to describe the dragon. The word devil means literally "accuser;" this one who is the accuser. And the word Satan means "adversary." One is Greek the other is Hebrew. The Hebrew word is Satan, it means "adversary;" devil means "accuser." And then the third word is very interesting. It's the word *plano*, and it becomes the word "tempter" or "deceiver." This is a word that is used in I John when he says, "Those who say they have no sin deceive themselves and the truth is not in them" (I John 1:8). This word deceive is always put up against truth. Deception against truth. It's an interesting word choice. It's one of the words used to describe the evil one or to describe the devil, the deceiver, the tempter.

Do you know that the Greek language is used very widely for science? In fact, most medical vocabulary comes from the Greek language, when the Greeks were trying to find astronomical language to describe the sky and the sun and all the celestial bodies, they chose this word to describe the planets. In fact, this word *plano* is the root Greek word for "planet", "planets." Think about what planets are. They are deceivers. They look like stars, but they're not stars. In fact, we call Venus "the morning star." It's not a star, it's a planet. It doesn't have original light. It tricks you into thinking it has original light as it wanders. And that's another word meaning for *plano*, "wandering." As it wanders through the sky deceiving you to make you think it's a star, but it's not. It just reflects light from the sun. And so the Greeks decided to use this word *plano* to refer to the planets. They are deceivers. They're tricking us in the sky; and so the word choice used here is fitting. That word *plano* becomes one of the words for the devil.

The devil is the deceiver, the tempter. Notice however, that he's been defeated. He cannot destroy. He couldn't destroy the woman; you see a great song is sung which was just read to us just a few moments ago. There are two songs that are sung in this second symphonic movement. And the one song you just heard. After this very scene the dragon is thrown down by Michael; he is the deceiver, but listen to the song. "Now has salvation and power and

the kingdom of our God and the authority of his Messiah come to us, for the accuser of our comrades has been thrown down. He accuses them day and night before God but he has been thrown down" (Revelation 12:10).

That means the only power against us that the devil has is to tempt us. Because we are free and we are not forced to believe in God, therefore we can be tempted. The devil has no power to kill us. He has no final power to destroy us. He claims to be the destroyer but he is the deceiver. He can tempt us. He tempts us to distrust the faithfulness of God, to distrust God. And that's why the great song tells that Satan is the accuser of our comrades and of us. But he cannot destroy. He has been defeated by the great Archangel Michael.

What do we believe about the devil? I think C.S. Lewis helped me to think this through in his 1961 preface to *The Screwtape Letters*. As you know, *The Screwtape Letters* is a satirical book that Lewis wrote in 1941 about a senior devil, "Screwtape," writing to a junior devil "Wormwood." But in 1961, Lewis decided to write a second preface to his book, *The Screwtape Letters*. And in that he writes briefly about what he believes about the devil. He says the question is, "Do I really believe in the devil?" He says, "Now, if you mean by devil a power opposite to God and like God, self-existent from all eternity, the answer is no. The devil is not self-eternal from all time. This is not dualism. The devil is not equal with God, only on the negative side. The devil is a fallen angel."¹ And Lewis says, "I believe in angels and therefore I believe in the devil as a fallen angel." And that's exactly the way the book of Revelation portrays the devil.

Remember, he's called the star that fell from the sky and went into the bottomless pit and he now is an angel in rebellion and so this is the mystery of the evil one; there is this accuser, there is this deceiver, and there is this being who constitutes moral will against the will of God at the cosmic level of creation. At the angelic level he chose against God, at the cosmic level the devil is a fallen angel. And that's what the word "Lucifer" means -- the fallen angel who now challenges us. And this one has been defeated. And that has been made clear. That's why this second symphonic movement is a dramatic word of hope to these Christians who are living and are suffering at the time of the midpoint of the first century.

But the plot thickens. This evil one, the dragon, has a human ally. And so the book of Revelation in the second movement here proceeds to discuss an ally that the dragon has which is a human ally. Then it introduces us to one of the most famous texts in all the book of Revelation, one that has caused no small amount of worry for a lot of people but it should not cause you to worry. Watch, I'll show you why. It tells about the fact that the dragon has a beast that comes up out of the water and out of the ground that assists the

dragon in accusing the comrades, in accusing us.

Who is this beast that comes up? In Chapter 13, the beast is identified to us. Notice in the text: "This calls for wisdom. Let anyone with understanding calculate the number of the beast." Actually, John who writes this book tells about how this vision is inviting us to interpret this part of the imagery. Now watch. "This calls for wisdom, let anyone with understanding calculate the number of the beast for it is the number of a person. It's a human being. And his number is six hundred and sixty-six" (Revelation 13:18). The number 666. So many people are frightened by the number 666, they don't want it in their phone numbers, they don't want a house that has 666 in it. No! This riddle is meant to comfort the Christians of the first century.

Who is 666? Well, I'll tell you there are many, many speculations but I'm going to share the one that's probably the most helpful. Hebrew, you know, is an alphabetical language, unlike Egyptian hieroglyphic. It's an alphabetical language, starting with *aleph*. And Greek is an alphabetical language, starting with *alpha* through to *omega*. And in both Greek and Hebrew each letter has a number. If you take either the Hebrew alphabet or the Greek alphabet following the 666 model you come up with the name "Nero Caesar;" so most interpreters believe that this is a hidden reference to the Roman Emperor Nero. Notice, John is writing this from a prison island and if one of the Roman CIA agents were to pick up his letter and try to figure out what is John saying to his friends at Ephesus he would be very careful about clearly naming the emperor.

So John does not mention Nero by name, and you'll see in the next week when we look at the third symphonic movement we're going to meet Babylon. Well Babylon, fallen Babylon is our enemy too? Babylon has long since been destroyed by the Persians. But Babylon was the nation that destroyed Jerusalem in 586 B.C. But then seventy years later they were destroyed by the Persians. There's no more Babylon, it doesn't even exist anymore. Alexander the Great also conquered Babylon. The Romans conquered Babylon. So why Babylon? It becomes clear that Babylon refers to the Roman Empire. But again, he doesn't directly say the Roman Empire, but he mentions Babylon that lives on seven hills. Ah, that's the Roman Empire. Everyone knows that Rome is on seven hills. So you'll see that next week.

But right now the number 666 is a person, 666. Nero is the emperor from 54 to 68 A.D., during the time this book was written. So it's probably a reference to Nero. But even if it isn't, it's still good news. Remember that the key number in the book of Revelation is seven. All these sixes build up to a seven and the seven always belongs to Christ, the seventh belongs to the Lamb. And a song of triumph is sung at the seven.

So what of 666? Don't be frightened of 666. I don't care how many sixes you pile up, they're still less than seven. You can have one million sixes and they're still less than seven. Seven is the key number. It's the number of triumph. It's the number that belongs to the Lamb. And so all the sixes should not frighten you. I hope that I have now taken away any fear that you might have of 666. Go ahead and use the number, it has no fearful or mystical value.

But the book is not over. Following that, we come to another sequence of sevens. And the sevens now are going to be seven bowls that are poured out. There will also be another song sung before that, and that song will be a song of Moses. It's interesting when Moses led the children of Israel out of Egypt and when they were finally safe from the Egyptians he sang a song. You can read it in Exodus 15. And so in the book of Revelation we have it repeated, it's titled for us as the "song of Moses." And notice again, it's a song of triumph. This is the song just before the bowls are poured out. "Great and amazing are your deeds, Lord God Almighty, just and true are your ways, king of the nations, the Lord who will not fear and glorify your name for you alone are Holy" (Revelation 15:3-4). Notice over against the deceiver who is false -- you are Holy. So that song is sung as well.

Now, there are seven bowls that are poured out, and they build up again with intensity and danger up until the number six. And that will be now in Chapter 16. Up through number six these bowls are poured out and then finally we hear, "See I am coming like a thief, blessed is the one who stays awake and is clothed and doesn't go around naked for they assemble them at a place that in Hebrew is called Armageddon" (Revelation 15:16). I have to tell you about Armageddon. If many people are frightened of 666, I know even more people who are frightened of Armageddon.

Armageddon means literally the hill of Megiddo. Where is Megiddo? Megiddo is a city, actually an ancient site, 60 miles north of Jerusalem. I've been there, I've seen it. It's one of the most important archeological sites today because there were more battles fought at Megiddo, than any other site in the ancient world. It's on the plain of Jesrael, underneath Mount Carmel; and every single army that ever marched from Egypt to the north, to Assyria, or to Babylon, or to the land of Persia, all had to go through that plain. So it has a few early glorious memories for the Jews, but very brief ones. All the later memories are disastrous. Joshua won a battle there against the Canaanites; then Deborah won a battle there. And then David won a battle there; and Solomon actually built stables there, some of the famous stables of Solomon were found at Megiddo, enough for five hundred horses. So that was the high water mark of Jewish glory.

Remember when last fall we looked at the Old Testament before the New Testament and we saw that from David forward, the whole story of Israel and of Judah is a downward spiral? There is no glory after David. Everything is downhill. After Solomon, Megiddo was not a site of glory. It's a site of horrible defeats. In fact, the last of the good kings of Judah was Josiah and he was killed at Megiddo in 609 B.C. by Pharaoh Neco in a battle. And then the Babylonians came there, the Assyrians came there, the Seleucids came there; everybody fought battles there and in each instance won against the Jews. Never again did the Jews win a battle at Megiddo. It was only a hill of defeat. And then the Romans came; Pompeii came, defeat again. Alexander the Great had come through before that. Did you know even Napoleon stopped at Megiddo? Everybody stopped at Megiddo. There's more archeology there than anywhere in most of the ancient world because of all the battles that were fought at Megiddo. *Armageddon* means "Hill of Megiddo."

And we're told now that a battle is raging at Armageddon. Now read, listen to what happens. The seventh bowl is going to be poured out. That's the key, remember seven. "And the seventh angel poured out his bowl into the air, and a loud voice came out of the temple from the throne saying, 'It is finished', done. And there came flashes of lightning and rumbles and peals of thunder and a violent earthquake which has not occurred ever before" (Revelation 16:17-18). What is Megiddo? What is the battle at Armageddon? I don't think it's a future battle. Many interpreters have said foolish things about Armageddon. Some feature Russia and China, even the European Common Market, and everybody else coming there for a battle. That's not what this scene is about.

The battle of Armageddon I believe refers to the cross of Christ. And I think I can prove it to you. The Hill of Megiddo is a hill of defeat, not of victory, except for that brief time when David had won a victory there. From then on though, it's all defeat. And now think of Mount Calvary in Jerusalem. It was a hill of defeat. Jesus Christ was slain at Mount Calvary. And remember the song that we sang in the fifth chapter of Revelation? "Worthy is the Lamb who was slain." That defeat at Mount Calvary is how the victory was won. It is at the cross where Jesus Christ disarmed sin, disarmed death, and disarmed the power of evil by taking them to himself at the cross; that is how he did it, and that's Armageddon. And I can show you a marker in this text.

John says that when the seventh angel pours out the bowl, a voice says, "It is finished." Do you remember the last words of our Lord? Just before Jesus said, "Father, into Thy hands I commend my spirit," the sixth word before the seventh word, according to the gospel accounts in Matthew, Mark and Luke, Jesus gave a great shout. But John tells us what he shouted. John in his gospel as he narrates the last words of Christ says this: that before Jesus

said "Father, into Thy hands I commend my spirit," he shouted "Finished" (John 19:30). And that's what the book of Revelation picks up. Finished. It's over. No more crucifixions. No more death of Christ. No more victory of death. Christ has won, and on Easter morning we'll know it's once and for all. I think that's the battle of Armageddon. It's a battle already over.

This book is a book of comfort. Because of this comfort we can live in the world knowing that the devil doesn't have the last word, we don't have the last word, Nero certainly doesn't have the last word, nor does ancient Babylon. Rome doesn't have the last word; the last word belongs to the Lamb. That's the seventh word. And that's how we can make it. That's how a young woman like Corrie ten Boom, a young Dutch girl, could survive in a German work camp during World War II and could share her faith even with guards, even with others that were there, because they didn't have the last word.² The last word belongs to the gospel. And that gives hope. That's why the book of Revelation is not a book that should frighten you; it's a book that should comfort you.

Heavenly Father, thank you for this text; thank you for the way Luther puts it in his hymn, *A Mighty Fortress*: "The devil rages but we do not fear the devil, for one little word shall fell him." And that one word is Jesus Christ, the Lord of seven is his name. Lord, may we trust you and know your faithfulness. In Christ's name we pray, Amen.

¹ Lewis, C.S. *The Screwtape Letters*. Harper Collins, 1941.

² ten Boom, Corrie and Elizabeth and John Sherrill. *The Hiding Place*. Chosen Books (Baker Publishing Group), 1971, 1984, and 2006.

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Sunday Worship at 8, 9:15 & 11 a.m.
Classes for Adults, Youth, and Children at 9:15 a.m.

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