

Revelation 13:1-8

We continue today with our fourth week reflecting on the Book of Revelation, that is the Revelation as told by Jesus to John of Patmos during his vision of heaven. It is important to remember that the Book of Revelation was a letter and was written to communicate, not to confuse, and uses a literary genre not uncommon at the time. One of the main points of the book is to encourage the followers of Christ to persevere through the troubles of this world and to worship the one true God, while condemning the ways opposed to God that are characterized by violence, idolatry, and greed.

Revelation shapes the way that people understand God, themselves, and their world. The book vividly portrays the powers of evil that work within the world, powers that can lead people to despair. Yet Revelation offers an even more compelling portrait of God and Christ the Lamb, who provide redemption and confident hope that God's purposes will prevail. By warning about the power of evil and presenting the promises of life in God, the book fosters faith and perseverance.

Many people create scenarios of the future by pasting together verses taken from various parts of the Bible, but this often leads to fruitless speculation. It is best to read Revelation as a whole, as a book with its own integrity. As we move along, we note that the visions do not move in a neat chronological sequence, but often repeat and overlap, making it impossible to create a step-by-step guide to the future. Also keep in mind that *Revelation would have been meaningful to the Christians who*

first read it and by keeping their particular context in mind, we can see how Revelation addresses the real needs of people living in this world.

Revelation's vision of the beast from the land and the beast from the sea is one of the most discussed parts of the book. In the popular imagination the beast from the sea by many is envisioned as the Antichrist, although the term "antichrist" appears only in 1st and 2nd John and never in Revelation. Last week we introduced the four horsemen, and saw that antichrist was represented by the first horseman on the white horse, leading the other three riders on a black, red, and pale horse, representing evil: war, famine, and death.

Christ is the wielder of the two-edged sword, and whenever he appears with a weapon, it is a sword. But the rider on the white horse of the quartet, carries a bow which throughout the Old Testament is associated with the enemies of Israel, especially in Ezekiel and the account of Gog and his armies. The first horseman introduces Antichrist, the "arch-deceiver."

The most helpful way to think about the word pictures in today's passage is by comparing them to the word pictures used in political cartoons. In American media, for example, we find an elephant and donkey representing political parties, a bull and bear representing the stock market trends. In Revelation we find the beast from the sea and his associate representing political authority that has become as destructive as a beast. The monster is set up as the ultimate authority, a power to be worshipped above all else.

Revelation portrayed the Roman political system in this way in order to ask people about their highest loyalties. *“Who is as great as the beast?”* they exclaimed. *“Who is able to fight against him?”* These words show people thinking the destructive system has become invincible, but that is not what Revelation sees. The beast is the opposite of the Lamb, who gives people their true identity.

The beast conquers by tyranny: *“And the beast was allowed to wage war against God’s holy people and to conquer them. And he was given authority to rule over every tribe and people and language and nation.”* But the Lamb conquers by the sacrifice that frees.

The mark of the beast is described by John: *“He required everyone — small and great, rich and poor, free and slave — to be given a mark on the right hand or on the forehead. And no one could buy or sell anything without that mark, which was either the name of the beast or the number representing his name. Wisdom is needed here. Let the one with understanding solve the meaning of the number of the beast, for it is the number of humanity. His number is 666”,* (although some manuscripts read 616), is the opposite of the seal of God and the Lamb. *“Then I saw four angels standing at the four corners of the earth, holding back the four winds so they did not blow on the earth or the sea, or even on any tree. And I saw another angel coming up from the east, carrying the seal of the living God. And he shouted to those four angels, who had been given power to harm land and sea, “Wait! Don’t harm the land or the sea or the trees until we have placed the seal of God on the foreheads of his servants.”*

The imagery challenges people to ask to whom they truly belong: to the forces that destroy, or the Lamb who liberates. The writer does not simply describe reality; he provides a perspective on reality through his word pictures. When he refers to Christ, he pictures a slaughtered and yet living Lamb. Then, when he deals with political realities, he pictures a seven-headed beast intimidating people. The writer does not use pictures like a secret code in order to hide his meaning. Rather, he uses word pictures to open up ways of seeing the world, much as an artist might do with paint. It seems clear that the author does not use the Lamb image in order to convince people that Jesus really had four legs and wool. Rather, the idea is that Jesus unleashes the power of God through his suffering, and the goal of his sacrifice is to redeem others. Similarly, the beast image does not tell people to watch for news reports about a seven-headed monster crawling out of the sea in order to take over the world. Rather, the beast shows what happens when the power of the state becomes destructive.

This beast from the sea is the second vision in this section, one of the agents used by the dragon, the first vision, to attack the church. The beast is a monster of horror rising from the sea, an emblem of the influence of the world insofar as it is opposed to God. This beast, a composite of animals that symbolize four kingdoms in the book of Daniel, represents the spirit of the world that opposes and persecutes the church, the state, and the home. While the saints will be troubled and persecuted by this foe, they will be preserved.

Today's chapter continues the description of the previous chapter making the

beast a malevolent person who will embody satanic forces in controlling the final world empire - probably a revived form of the Roman empire of the past - in the role of a counterfeit Christ, who will deceive earth's inhabitants - depicted as the horseman, part of the group of four, on the white horse.

John's writing makes numerous allusions to the book of Daniel, especially its seventh chapter and the description of the beast. The seven heads represent seven consecutive world empires: Egypt, Assyria, Babylon, Medo-Persia, Greece, Rome, and the empire of the beast, of which Daniel's four beasts include Babylon, Medo-Persia, Greece, and Rome. The seven kings that come a little later represent these empires. The ten horns, the same as those of Daniel's fourth beast, portray ten kings who will act as simultaneous subrulers under the beast's authority.

A close reader of the Hebrew Scriptures would see that John was invoking prophetic images to interpret the conflicts of his own time, just as the prophets Isaiah and Jeremiah had interpreted the Babylonian War around six hundred years earlier. The ancient prophets had drawn upon what is perhaps the oldest story in the bible, one that can be traced to ancient Babylonia, where priests inscribed it in cuneiform on clay tablets more than 2,500 years ago - a story probably told for hundreds of years before that. The story tells how, "in the beginning", or even *before* the beginning of time, God fought against a great sea monster, the dragon of chaos, to bring forth the world. The Babylonian version tells how the sun god *Marduk* fought his mother, the great female dragon Tiamat, and her army of monsters, who embodied the ocean depths, the dangerous power of chaos. When Tiamat opened

her huge jaws to devour him, Marduk drove the four winds into her mouth, distending her body, then split her in two “like a shrimp” to create from her the earth and sky, and placed them under her own dominion.

Nearly three thousand years ago, Israel’s poets and storytellers, familiar with such ancient stories, began to tell how Israel’s God, like Marduk, fought against a many-headed dragon, a sea monster whom they called by such names as *Leviathan* and *Rahab*. Some said that, only after crushing and killing such monsters, could God, like Marduk, establish the world and deliver it from the powers of chaos. Thus the author of Psalm 74 praises God for having vanquished Leviathan:

God, my king, is from old, working salvation in the earth. You divided the sea by your might; you broke the heads of the dragons in the waters; you crushed the heads of Leviathan; you gave him as food for the creatures of the wilderness.

John’s visions of such monsters, then, are modelled on creation stories even older than those in Genesis. Many scholars have pointed out that the opening chapters of Genesis were written considerably later than many other biblical writings - probably about four hundred years later than the chapters that follow - and later than some of the psalms. Yet whoever wrote the opening of Genesis probably knew the ancient dragon story, for Genesis says that even before God created the world, he began, not with “nothing”, as Jewish and Christian theologians and philosophers later claimed, but with a formless void, chaos wind, and “deep waters”.

Some people thought that this ancient story implied that God's power is limited, since it suggests that God, like Marduk, had to contend with a supernatural antagonist *before* he could create the world. Israel's storytellers, perhaps to reassure their hearers that God's power is uncontested, morphed the sea monster Tiamat into *tehom*, the Hebrew term for "the depths", the primordial sea over which they say that "wind from God" moved "in the beginning". Then, to show that no sea monsters lurked in those primordial waters, the Genesis account says that Israel's God actually "created the great sea monsters" - and did so only *after* he created all the other sea creatures, on the *fifth* day of creation. While the Babylonian story pictures the great sea monster as a *female*, the "mother of all monsters" and of all gods. Hebrew storytellers often speak of Leviathan as male. Others suggest that when God created these sea monsters on the fifth day of creation, he made them, like the sea, and *Behemoth*, a male monster from the land - apparently a version of the story that John of Patmos adapted to tell, in his Revelation, explaining how the dragon's two allies emerged: first the "*beast from the sea*" and then the "*beast from the land*".

While we think of dragons as creatures of folktales and children's stories, Israel's writers conjured them as images of forces of disintegration and death that lurk in the background of our world and threaten its stability. Poets and prophets took these images seriously - although not literally - to characterize Israel's enemies in war.

Because John offers his Revelation in the language of dreams and nightmares, language that is "multivalent", countless people for thousands of years

have been able to see their own conflicts, fears, and hopes reflected in his prophecies. And because he speaks from his convictions about divine justice, many readers have found reassurance in his conviction that there *is* meaning in history - even when he does not say exactly what that meaning is - and that there *is* hope.

John was not the only prophet at the time offering “revelations” warning of divine judgment and announcing the coming end of time. But, to John’s dismay, the majority of Jews, and later Jesus’ Gentile followers as well, would continue to “follow the beast” and to flirt with “the whore” called *Babylon*, that is, with Rome and its culture. Instead of sharing John’s vision of the imminent destruction of the world and preparing for its end, many other followers of Jesus sought ways to live in that world, negotiating compromises with Rome’s absolutist government as they sought to sort out, in Jesus’ words, what “belongs to Caesar” and what “to God”. Realizing this, John decided that he had to fight on two fronts at once: not only against the Romans but also against members of God’s people who accommodated them and who, John suggests, became “accomplices in evil”.

The book of Revelation calls Christians to remain faithful to God and Christ, and to resist the powers of evil in the conviction that God will prevail and bring salvation in the new Jerusalem. The book consists of six cycles of visions, each of which warns of the dangers arising from sin and evil. Yet each cycle concludes by showing readers the glories of worship in God’s presence, which gives reason for hope. The visions make vivid contrasts between Christ the lamb and Satan’s agent, the beast. The visions help to alienate readers from powers of idolatry and

oppression, while strengthening their faith in the salvation God provides.

Amen.