

All Things New: Beastly
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March 15, 2020
Daniel 7:1-11; Matthew 24:6-8; Revelation 13

Our final Scripture reading this week is from Revelation 13. May God add His blessing to the reading of His holy Word. “And the dragon stood on the shore of the sea. And I saw a beast coming out of the sea. He had ten horns and seven heads, with ten crowns on his horns, and on each head a blasphemous name. The beast I saw resembled a leopard, but had feet like those of a bear and a mouth like that of a lion. The dragon gave the beast his power and his throne and great authority. One of the heads of the beast seemed to have had a fatal wound, but the fatal wound had been healed. The whole world was astonished and followed the beast. Men worshiped the dragon because he had given authority to the beast, and they also worshiped the beast and asked, “Who is like the beast? Who can make war against him?” The beast was given a mouth to utter proud words and blasphemies and to exercise his authority for forty-two months. He opened his mouth to blaspheme God, and to slander his name and his dwelling place and those who live in heaven. He was given power to make war against the saints and to conquer them. And he was given authority over every tribe, people, language and nation. All inhabitants of the earth will worship the beast-- all whose names have not been written in the book of life belonging to the Lamb that was slain from the creation of the world. He who has an ear, let him hear. If anyone is to go into captivity, into captivity he will go. If anyone is to be killed with the sword, with the sword he will be killed. This calls for patient endurance and faithfulness on the part of the saints. Then I saw another beast, coming out of the earth. He had two horns like a lamb, but he spoke like a dragon. He exercised all the authority of the first beast on his behalf, and made the earth and its inhabitants worship the first beast, whose fatal wound had been healed. And he performed great and miraculous signs, even causing fire to come down from heaven to earth in full view of men. Because of the signs he was given power to do on behalf of the first beast, he deceived the inhabitants of the earth. He ordered them to set up an image in honor of the beast who was wounded by the sword and yet lived. He was given power to give breath to the image of the first beast, so that it could speak and cause all who refused to worship the image to be killed. He also forced everyone, small and great, rich and poor, free and slave, to receive a mark on his right hand or on his forehead, so that no one could buy or sell unless he had the mark, which is the name of the beast or the number of his name. This calls for wisdom. If anyone has insight, let him calculate the number of the beast, for it is man's number. His number is 666.”

How many of us have received a scam email or telephone call? Probably everyone, right? It’s everywhere. Most of them, we know immediately – we hear a recording on the other end of the line or the email claims to be from the crown prince of Nigeria, and we’re tipped off. We rarely fall for those. Instead, it’s the more subtle ones that nearly get us. A friendly credit card company agent who says our card is being used and could we please give him the password to the account? A note from someone who sounds an awful lot like a relative who says she’s in big trouble and needs you to send Visa cards right away. When we’re presented with an upfront lie, it’s easy to spot...but when someone’s a master of deceit, we can get lured into their false promises more easily than we’d like to admit.

Today's passage is about the beast – two beasts, actually – both minions of the dragon we discussed last week. Parts of this passage are common knowledge even to folks who know nothing about the church, like the number 666. But there's more here than what lies on the surface, clues and symbols that point out to God's people what to look for and how to avoid being deceived when the beast comes, or when a cycle like what's described here appears.

I want us to remember just a little of what we talked about last week because it's so important. If you missed it, I encourage you to go to the website and listen to it or read it. But the final point was this: *do not fear, for Christ is near*. We are living in a time of fear, one that most of us haven't experienced since 9/11. The dragon – also known as the devil or Satan – wants to defeat us. He is doomed, and his only satisfaction comes from attempting to ruin the good work God has done before he is sentenced forever, mostly by making us afraid.

But we do not need to fear anything, for Christ is near us. Christ loved us, Christ died for us, Christ was raised for us, and Christ lives forevermore for us as our Savior, our Lord, our Brother, and our Friend. In the coming weeks, we will take precautions and be smart, but we will live as people of God, people unafraid, because God holds us and our future. Our hope is not in paper towels and toilet paper or in 200 cans of veggies in the pantry – our hope is in the Lord who provides us with our daily bread.

So at the end of the last passage, Satan the dragon was waging war on Christ's people. Not making headway, we see him at the sea summoning up a pal of his, a beast. Why is it coming out of the sea? Remember that the ancient Israelites often saw the great seas as the Abyss of judgment and punishment. The Israelites never had a navy, and their main experience with the sea was fishing in the Sea of Galilee – known for its incredibly fierce storms that could pop up at any moment. The beast is coming up from the void, the pit, the unfathomable sea.

And the beast is utterly opposed to God. He blasphemes God, he opposes God's people and conquers them – not spiritually but physically has power over them – he's a real piece of work. But before we go any further, I want us to see something important, our first take-home thought of the day: *the devil deceives people through others who do his dirty work*.

You know, the picture of the devil in a red suit and horns and a pitchfork is nowhere in Scripture. It's a portrait with bits out of Revelation, but others taken from Greek mythology and not really seen until the Middle Ages. Martin Luther suggested we beat the devil by making fun of him, and what's sillier than a guy in a red suit and pitchfork? But here's the point – if the devil showed up like that, nobody would pay him any mind. If Satan showed up as the ultimate evil in all of his cruelty and hideousness, only a few sad people would find that attractive.

But Paul tells us in 2 Corinthians 11 that Satan masquerades as an angel of light. He hides his true identity so that we don't recoil in disgust. And when he can, he hides himself behind others. He gives his power and authority to the beast because the devil knows that he must disguise what he's doing. He must have others out front convincing us.

This means that we must be on guard not just against the straightforward sins but the not-so-straightforward ones. We know from the law not to kill, not to commit adultery, not to steal. But we're rarely faced with a full-on attack to do those things. We're instead encouraged to compromise here and there. I didn't steal those supplies from work; I borrowed them and never wound up returning them. I didn't mean to lust, but those TV shows seared my conscience. I would never take a knife to somebody, but my words backstabbed somebody and wound up killing my Christian witness to them. We aren't often tempted by the devil directly, but by a sweet-sounding substitute for the truth. We know a dragon when we see one, but we fail to see beasts in our midst. It looks harmless until we get close enough to get bitten. Be vigilant.

So now we get a description of the beast with his horns and heads and crowns, with different parts resembling different animals. It sounds a lot like the visions Daniel had. And Daniel gives us the groundwork for understanding the beast. It's not literal. If I understand it correctly, the beast represents spiritual powers at work in the nations and governments of the world. The beast has some interesting parallels in an ancient cycle and a modern cycle. Remember many weeks ago we said that the happenings in Revelation often come in cycles that repeat themselves over time? This is one of them.

The first cycle this seems to apply to is the Roman Empire. Nero's fall was near the time of Revelation's writing. He was incredibly powerful, and he was the first Caesar to come down hard on Christianity. Now despite all his power, he died by his own hand as the Senate turned against him. Many thought the empire was done, finished. Yet it came back with a vengeance. And if Christians had it bad under Nero, it got far worse under later Caesars who demanded sacrifices be made to them. Rome had a fatal wound, yet it did not die. Many scholars have understood the beast to be the pre-Christian Roman Empire and its hatred of the faith.

But I want to point out some modern possibilities, and we'll put it under this second take-home point: *we must be mindful of beastly governments and ungodly movements in our own day.* I want us to think closely about what we've seen in recent years. In the last hundred years, no type of government has been more against the Christian faith and faith in general than communism and true socialism. In every place it has been tried, it oppressed and suppressed the church. It's doing so even now in China and North Korea and Vietnam.

Think back to the fall of the Soviet Union and the Iron Curtain. We thought the demise of that regime was going to spell out the end of communism as we know it. It had suffered a fatal wound. And yet, various forms of socialism and communism are making a comeback. 36% of American millennials approve of communism and 70% would vote for a socialist candidate, found a poll in late 2019. The fact that Bernie Sanders, a secular socialist who praised the Soviet Union, could come so close to the presidency twice in eight years says a great deal.

Now you might be thinking, "Are we getting political here?" Our faith informs every part of our life, so we have to think about the political systems that affect us. Now I'm not speaking out in favor of American capitalism as the best or only way to run a government. We've seen plenty of problems with it. I could go on about the problems of our system for days. It is not perfect. No earthly government can be.

But here's the key difference. Communism and many forms of socialism make government into God. They say, "The government is the answer to all your problems. We will make college free and health care free and provide you with a living wage. We will give you cradle to grave service and charge it to the rich." These systems attempt to push out faith with promises of earthly provisions. The problem is, government can't be God. It can't create enough wealth to be God. When you look at the Soviet Union, Cuba, North Korea, China, people languished in poverty while the governments told their people, "We are all you need," and imprisoning and executing those who didn't buy into the lie.

Communism has slandered and blasphemed God. Right before the Corona virus hit, lots of stories hit the Internet how churches were being shut down if they didn't replace their crosses and copies of the Ten Commandments with pictures of Xi Jinping and Chairman Mao. If that's not blasphemy, I don't know what is. Our form of capitalism has its share of blame in letting it continue, too, because we'll buy stuff from oppressive countries since we want everything cheap.

That isn't to say that some core ideas in socialism aren't right. As Christians, it is our privilege as the daughters and sons of God to love our neighbors as ourselves. We want affordable health care. We want to share what we have. We want to show mercy to the least, the last, and the lost. We want opportunity for all people under the grace God has given us. It's not about showing compassion – it's about how we go about it. Christians showing kindness has changed the world for the better, has blessed the world, far more than any earthly government. We must be careful of any government that says, "Let us handle it." Because government wants to be our God, make no doubt about it.

Also hear me – I am not saying that any country is Beast #1 or Beast #2 in Revelation that attempts to finish what the first beast started. I am not saying that these are signs of the end times. I expect the Coronacrisis we are in will make a lot of people more receptive to an all-encompassing government promising to take care of everyone's needs. But even then, we might just be in another cycle and another could be still to come.

Just be mindful of what is asked of you and what you are asked to give up for safety and security. Listen to this warning from Isaiah 31 when Israel was considering on calling up Egypt for help: "Woe to those who go down to Egypt for help, who rely on horses, who trust in the multitude of their chariots and in the great strength of their horsemen, but do not look to the Holy One of Israel, or seek help from the LORD... the Egyptians are men and not God; their horses are flesh and not spirit. When the LORD stretches out his hand, he who helps will stumble, he who is helped will fall; both will perish together."

We might think, "I'd never worship a government." But remember, whatever you trust to rescue and protect you, whatever you rely on in times of crisis, whether that's money or government or your own wits or your toilet paper supply or God, that is what you worship. When this passage says that all will worship the beast except the ones already sealed to God, it doesn't mean everyone will bow down at an altar. It means that their ultimate trust is in something other than the Creator of the Universe and His son Jesus Christ and His Holy Spirit.

The last thing I want us to think about this morning is this: *the beast is a counterfeit of the true Christ, but we can have the genuine article forever and ever.* Have you ever heard that imitation is the sincerest form of flattery? In the miserable case of the dragon and the beasts, their imitation of God only points out God's greatness. God's enemies attempt to pass themselves off as legitimate, but they just succeed in being a mockery of what's holy.

The beast resembles Christ a little. Jesus is the Lion of Judah. The beast has a mouth like that of a lion, but the rest doesn't remind you of Jesus at all. The beast – the government, the mouthpieces of deception – is authoritative like Jesus but doesn't sound or act like Him. The beast recovers from a fatal kind of wound. The beast comes back in a pale imitation of Jesus' resurrection, but it doesn't have the eternal life Jesus has when He returns from the grave.

Look at the end of the passage, where we see no one able to buy and sell without the mark of the beast. In our day, people think this means we'll have a chip in our hand or something. But I don't think that's what this is about. This again is cheap imitation. What were the ancient Israelites told to do? Deuteronomy 6 told the people to teach their children the commandments and talk about them all the time. In verse 8, it says, "Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads." Some observant Jews do this literally, even today, with what are called phylacteries that they wear during their weekday morning prayers.

The mark of the beast isn't necessarily a physical sign. It's an imitation of the seal that believers have from God of their salvation. It's the deceiver demanding his people act and behave like him. You don't have to go very far to see people who hate religion, who are pagan. But not all who claim Jesus are saved, either. Once again, who do you really trust for salvation? What is it that consumes your thoughts? If someone were to put you on trial for being a Christian, would there be enough evidence to convict you? You're under the claim of either the dragon or the true Christ. Your life bears the mark of the one you belong to. Which one is it?

And even the beast's number, 666, shows off the pale imitation of evil to try and be like our redeemer. We've seen earlier in Revelation that 7 represents perfection and completeness. A triple repetition is another sign of those things. The only attribute of God repeated three times in Scripture is *holy*. His perfection is thorough. The beast, on the other hand, is imperfection magnified, 6s instead of 7s, always trying to usurp God's place, but never measuring up.

A slogan began appearing in advertising in the late 1800s that has been used ever since: *accept no substitutes!* You want the genuine article, the real deal, Coke not Pepsi, Charmin not Angel Soft (though these days we'll take whatever we can get). When it comes to our beliefs, when it comes to our faith in what will save us, accept no substitutes!

Whatever you do, don't accept the substitute of the beast, the promise of earthly comfort and decadence that just isn't true. But also don't accept the substitutes that go under the name Jesus out there that are actually tricks of the dragon instead. Don't accept a substitute Jesus that hard-nosed and angry with no love for sinners or grace, a Pharisee disguised as Jesus. But also don't accept a substitute Jesus that just wants you to be happy and gives you whatever you want and allows you to do what you want without discipline or consequences, a senile Santa Claus disguised as Jesus.

Only accept the true Jesus, the Jesus of Scripture – the One who both comforts and confounds us, whose both rescues us from sin but also convicts us of those sins so we don't repeat them, who both disciplines us and delights in us, who both deeply loved the sinners who came to Him and overturned the seller's tables in the temple in His righteous anger. Accept no substitutes but the real God – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. And they will be yours and you will be theirs forever.

Friends, we live in interesting times. Parts of Revelation look to be speaking to us now, especially in a time of fear and uncertainty. But do not be afraid. Be mindful of the schemes of our enemy, knowing that the devil is a liar and will seduce us if we let our guard down. But know too that if you believe in Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord and show that belief to be true through faithful actions in your daily life, if you've accepted no substitutes, no matter what the enemies of God can do, our eternity is safe and secure in His arms no matter what beasts pop up along the way.