

Sunday, 8 January 2017

### Epiphany- The Christmas Dragon

Isaiah 60:1-6; Psalm 72:1-7, 10-14; Ephesians 3:1-12;  
Matthew 2:1-12

There's a little known Christmas story that I would like to share with you. It is from Revelation chapter 12.

“A great 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 its heads. Its 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 it might devour her child the moment he 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 wilderness to a place prepared for her by God, where she might be taken care of for 1,260 days.”

It is not the sentimental picture we are accustomed to seeing. We are not accustomed to associating so much danger with the birth of Jesus. However, danger is always looming. With the birth of Jesus power will shift. The messiah will bring with him a kingdom and that kingdom will push into enemy territory.

In this little known Christmas story the dragon is threatened by the power of Christ, and attempts to eliminate the child. The powers of this world are not comfortable with Jesus. The Pharisees are

bothered by him. The priests, the Sadducees, and eventually the Roman Empire represented by Pontius Pilate are all disturbed by the presence of Jesus. Those who have power in this world do not want to give it up.

Jesus will deal with constant opposition from the powers in this world and we see the beginning of this in our Gospel reading. King Herod was a bit of a puppet king placed in power under the Roman Empire. One of the things rulers like Herod are most paranoid about is loss of their power. Herod even killed three of his own children for treason near the end of his life. We see this same sort of paranoia in Pharaoh in the Exodus story when he commands the killing of the Hebrew children for fear of a future slave revolt if their numbers were too large. In Herod we see a man with great power who is paranoid about the potential loss of it. He realizes how fragile his power actually is. And so, when he hears about the birth of a particular child, he is especially afraid.

Strangers arrive in Herod's kingdom. They are stargazers or magicians, and somehow from a distant land they noticed something that has happened right under Herod's nose. A new king of the Jews has been born. And of course where else would the king of the Jews be born but in the powerful city of Jerusalem, so that is where they go to look for the child. Herod, the present "king of the Jews" hears about the newly born 'king of the Jews' from strangers, who arrive from another land, and who are foreign Gentiles. When King Herod hears this news he is frightened. When you are ruled by a tyrant and your tyrant becomes afraid, you become afraid as well because you know what a fearful tyrant is capable of.

Herod gathers his scholars to find out where Scripture says the child would be born- that is where the Messiah was supposed to be born.

His scholars report to him that the Messiah is to be born in Bethlehem. Herod then secretly calls the magi to him to pass on the information. The last thing he wants is for the people to flood into Bethlehem and replace him with a mere child. So he secretly calls them to himself and after finding out how old the child would be according to when the star appeared to the magi, he sent them off saying, "Go and search diligently for the child; and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage." And when we hear Herod say this we should hear the hiss of the dragon in Revelation. He has no plans to pay homage. He sees the child as a threat and would have the messiah killed to protect his fragile throne. He would use the magi to find the child, but when the magi escape Herod's manipulative tactics he turns to violence, killing the children 2 years old and younger in and around Bethlehem.

And that is the kind of world Jesus is born into. Jesus is born into a world where a powerful king will kill children out of fear. Jesus is born into a world where children are killed to protect the power and control of tyrants. He is born into a world where the powerful get their way- regardless of right and wrong.

The bad news is that we still live in a world where the powerful get their way. Even killing children who threaten their power, control, and ideals. We look back to Nazi Germany and we see Jewish children being killed for the ideals of Naziism. More recently we can look back to the genocide in Rwanda where children were slaughtered over the ideals of an ethnic group. In China there have been strict and brutal policies set concerning who is allowed to have children and how many. If the child does not fit into the government's ideal of the 'one child policy', or the ideal of having sons rather than daughters, then the child may be sacrificed.

Herod lives inside us as well. We can abuse what power we have, overlooking the vulnerable. Our culture can sometimes place our ideals and sense of control over those that aren't deemed as productive members of society. Sometimes we put our ideals ahead of life, and sometimes people who are innocent suffer because of our desire to maintain a certain vision of our life. The homeless, those with mental illness, the elderly, those who are severely disabled, children, and the unborn are all potential victims when people try to hold onto a particular type of power. These individuals are often powerless to fight back when confronted with oppression or even abandonment. When we place ideals ahead of people that can't defend themselves this exposes the Herod within us. If we were to follow the Christian ideal of love, our ideals would always embrace the person that was created in God's image.

The good news is that there is someone to challenge those who use their power to get their way despite right and wrong. The child Jesus and the movement he starts will challenge the power of tyrants. Jesus is born into a world of violence and manipulation. Jesus is born into a world that needs his salvation. The dragon is very real, and it knows the power the little baby Jesus has. It will do everything it can in order to consume him. But within Jesus is a greater power. The power of Jesus breaks that law we live with that says that the powerful always get their way.

When the magi were searching for truth. God gave them a sign in the sky. King Herod tried to manipulate the magi to help him find the Messiah in order to kill the baby who is his competition. However, God used King Herod and his scholars to point the magi in the right direction using the Scriptures. It is God's will that prevails, not the tyrants. God then uses a dream to protect the wisemen. And then

another dream is given to Joseph, the baby's father, which thwarts Herod's plans to kill the messiah. God's will prevails.

Eventually, the child is ready to face the dragon. Jesus chooses to stand before the dragon. The dragon pours on Jesus all the brutality it can muster. The powers of the world torture and kill Jesus on a cross. And when the dragon is tired and relieved that the threat of Jesus is behind him, three days after the battle Jesus comes out of the tomb, dusts himself off and asks, "Is that all you got?". And it is. It is all the dragon has. Jesus took it all on himself. Jesus went right to the limit of the dragon's strength- a humiliating tortured death on a Roman cross. And he came back standing and the dragon had nothing else to throw at him.

The power of tyrants has a limit. But the power of Jesus works differently. Jesus' power is of a completely different order. His is the power that created the stars and keeps them in existence. Though, he was not born in a place of power like a palace in Jerusalem, it was more humble, in the less important city of Bethlehem, and he was placed in a manger used for feeding animals. He will eventually enter Jerusalem on a donkey, not a war horse. He will rule, but it will not be the rule of a Tyrant. Jesus will rule like a shepherd who loves his sheep. He will choose followers, but they will not be Herods, or Pharoahs, or Roman Emperors, each with an army; The followers he chooses will be fishermen, tax collectors, and ordinary people- like us. The kingdom Jesus sets up is an alternative power- its people work differently, its politics function differently. In the kingdom power is not used to crush the defenseless. Jesus even says that it is in the least that we find him and serve him.

Jesus's kingdom and his people cannot be destroyed because that kingdom is Jesus himself and the people are the Body of Christ, which though they may lay in the tomb briefly, will eventually rise again. We, as the followers of Christ, will stand against Tyrants who

use their power to kill toddlers to protect their fragile throne.

Herod is dead. The Roman emperors are dead. The Roman Empire is no more. Jesus is alive. His followers are alive and active in the world. We are still confronted by powers that threaten the defenseless- greed for wealth and power are alive and kicking in this world. But, Jesus is still stronger. The power of his love is stronger. His love can transform the Herod we all have within us. His love knows no limits. His love reaches even to the Gentile star gazing magicians- to draw them to himself.

In a world where the powerful seem to always get their way, we can be assured that there is a power that is stronger. It is a power that identifies with the weak and defenseless rather than crushing them or ignoring them. Tyrants will come and go, but the presence of Christ will remain and his followers will remain. Christ and his people will outlast the dragon. Thanks be to God.