

Sermon notes/follow-up

2/8/09

War in Heaven: The Politics of Epiphany

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My sermon this week borrowed from many sources.

I quoted extensively from this fabulous sermon by the PCA's "prince of preachers," Rob Rayburn:

<http://www.faithtacoma.org/content/2009-01-11-am.aspx>

A pretty good discussion of the Matt. 2/Rev. 12 relationship can be found in Dan Doriani's commentary on Matthew, vol. 1, 40ff.

A very good summary of my sermon is the lyrics of Luther's famous hymn, "A Mighty Fortress Is our God." Revelation speaks of the dragon's cruelty and hatred. Luther, echoing that those themes and pointing to Christ as the Victor, writes:

A mighty fortress is our God, a bulwark never failing;  
Our helper He, amid the flood of mortal ills prevailing:  
**For still our ancient foe doth seek to work us woe;**  
**His craft and power are great, and, armed with cruel hate,**  
**On earth is not his equal.**

Did we in our own strength confide, our striving would be losing;  
Were not the right Man on our side, the Man of God's own choosing:  
Dost ask who that may be? Christ Jesus, it is He;  
Lord Sabaoth, His Name, from age to age the same,  
And He must win the battle.

**And though this world, with devils filled, should threaten to undo us,**  
**We will not fear, for God hath willed His truth to triumph through us:**  
**The Prince of Darkness grim, we tremble not for him;**  
**His rage we can endure, for lo, his doom is sure,**  
**One little word shall fell him.**

That word above all earthly powers, no thanks to them, abideth;  
The Spirit and the gifts are ours through Him Who with us sideth:  
Let goods and kindred go, this mortal life also;

The body they may kill: God's truth abideth still,  
His kingdom is forever.

On the book of Revelation, there are a number of great resources, but I will only mention a few. Jim Jordan's massive tape series is the ultimate commentary. David Chilton's *Days of Vengeance* is certainly a masterpiece. I have just started reading Vic Reasoner's commentary, but have found it very useful. While not very exegetical, Eugene Peterson's *Reversed Thunder* is a great book on the major themes of Revelation.

While Revelation is not limited in scope to first century events, the apostolic age is its main focus. It becomes relevant to us as we are able to identify patterns in the book that serve as a model for understanding our own situation. Revelation will not be understood unless it is [a] read symbolically, using the OT as they key to unlocking it's imagery; [b] read in historical context (60s AD, most likely), in conjunction with the gospels, Acts, and the epistles. In a sense Revelation is showing us the underside and behind-the-scenes view of what's going on in the book of Acts. It also shows the transition taking place from old covenant to new covenant, hinging on the destruction of the temple in 70 AD. The main conflict in Revelation, as in the rest of the NT, is not Jews vs. Romans (the "political" preterist reading), but Jews vs. Christians (the "covenantal" preterist reading).

The N. T. Wright story I read about baby Jesus as "no threat" is taken from his book, *Matthew for Everyone*, on Mt. 2.

On enemies, Stanley Hauerwas is interesting:

<http://www.leaderu.com/ftissues/ft9505/articles/hauerwas.html>

Note that I've already preached on Revelation 12 a couple of times:

<http://trinity-pres.net/audio/sermon05-05-08.mp3>

<http://trinity-pres.net/audio/sermon05-05-15.mp3>

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The three main characters in Rev. 12 are easy to identify – the woman, the dragon/serpent, and the child.

Note how the woman in Rev. 12:1 is dressed. She is clothed with symbols from creation. The sun, moon, and stars are signs and symbols of heavenly rule. The church is God's heavenly people (cf. Gen. 15:5; Phil. 2:15). These symbols are also

found in Joseph's dream, and represent the whole covenant people (especially 12 stars; cf. the use of the number 12 in the OT and elsewhere in Revelation). Finally, this is bridal imagery, as it is found in Song of Solomon (6:4, 10).

The stars here probably refer not just to individual stars, but to the constellations of the zodiac, which are identified in the OT and were part of God's old covenant revelation.

Given other links with Matt. 2 in Rev. 12, it might not be a stretch to connect the heavenly body imagery here with the shekinah-star that the magi followed to Bethlehem (cf. Isa. 60).

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As mentioned in the sermon, the woman is both an individual (Mary) and corporate (Israel/church) sign. It's a layered symbol. We could say the woman stands for all the faithful mothers in Israel, especially those who gave birth to special sons (e.g., Sarah, Hannah, Samson's mother, etc.), leading up to Mary. But the communal dimension of the symbol is inescapable in light of Rev. 12:17.

However, the Marian link does not require us to buy into Rome's full blown Marian theology. The woman is not an object of worship, prayer, or devotion. She does not assume a special intercessory role as the Queen of Heaven. Reasoner's commentary makes the point that Rev. 12 was only mined for Marian theology beginning in the middle ages; the church fathers viewed the woman primarily as the faithful church through the ages (e.g., Victorinus).

At least a couple aspects of the passage directly contradicts Rome's theology of Mary. The woman cries out in pain when she gives birth. This is the original curse on the woman (Gen. 3). This would amount to a flat denial of Rome's doctrine of the Immaculate Conception, which supposedly make Mary free from the taint of original sin. Also, the woman has multiple children, whereas Rome claims she remained a perpetual virgin.

On the childbirth imagery, see, e.g., Isa. 26, Isa. 51, Isa. 54, Isa. 66, Jn. 16:22. Also note Gal. 4:24. Jn. 4:22 may also be relevant. Salvation is of the Jews in the sense that the Jewish line will be the instrument of bringing the Savior into the world.

The woman's flight into the wilderness obviously connects with Israel's wilderness wandering after the exodus and the exile of the prophet Elijah. Note

that Israel and Elijah were cared for in their wilderness environs (Ex. 16; 1 Ki. 19:4-8). In the NT, the wilderness is especially used to describe the church's 40 year transitional period from 30-70 AD.

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The son (or man-child) with a rod of iron is an obvious allusion to Ps. 2, with a number of other OT messianic texts looming in the background. The rod is both positive and negative. It can be used to smite and crush, or to bless and sanctify.

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A good bit of the dragon's imagery comes from Daniel 7-8. See Jim Jordan's commentary on Daniel, *The Handwriting on the Wall*.

It is very interesting to note that the holy war depicted in Rev. 12 intensifies when Jesus comes. The war is ancient, going back to Gen. 3, when Satan fell (taking a third of the angels with him? Cf. 12:4) and drew Adam and his wife into sin. Consider this fact: explicit demon possession seems to be a rarity in the old covenant (with Saul being the exception that proves the rule). But in the gospels there seems to be an explosion of demonic activity. Jesus' exorcisms are part of the battle recorded in Rev. 12 (see especially Lk. 10:18ff). When he drives the demons out, he is showing his power over Satan.

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Rev. 12 and Mt. 2 are messy in terms of the church calendar. Christmas celebrates the singular event Christ's birth. Epiphany is a complex of events, focused on the revelation of Jesus' identity to the nations. Epiphany includes events that take place over a wide span of time, including the visit of the magi (just days after his birth), his baptism (at age 30), and his first miracle (Jn. 2)

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Revelation 2:5 skips from the birth to the ascension. It covers the whole 33-year earthly ministry of Jesus in just one line. Obviously, John is not making the other events of Jesus' ministry unimportant. Revelation 12:11 points us to the cross as the key to the church's victory over the serpent/dragon. And Revelation contains numerous allusions and references to Jesus' resurrection.

John compresses the whole story because he wants to focus on its ultimate outcome, namely, the triumph of Christ over Satan. Up until the resurrection/ascension, it looked like Satan might win. The resurrection/ascension turned the tables for good. Satan can no longer attack Christ directly; he can only do so indirectly by attacking Christ's people (the woman and her offspring). Satan's hatred for Christ engulfs the church; Satan is enraged at the church not for her own sake, but because he despises Christ.

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On Satan's duplicity, I really liked this section from the Rayburn sermon (especially the Newton quote on Voltaire!)

When Antony Flew, the life-long academic champion of atheism recently threw in the towel and argued that it was no longer possible to think that the life of the world was an accident, why didn't vast numbers of other academics join him, or, if not join him, at least spend sleepless nights agonizing over how to reconcile their atheism with nature as we know it to be? Is this belief in evolution not an instance of an almost inconceivably great credulity? I remember reading long ago the observation of someone to the effect that credulity – the capacity to believe absolutely anything, however ridiculous, – is the only raw material no country need import! But why?

John Newton, in his day, once wrote, "Perhaps such a one as Voltaire would neither have written, nor have been read or admired so much, if he had not been the amanuensis of an abler hand..." Voltaire was the unwitting secretary of Satan and his books were dictated by a greater and more powerful mind: *that* is what Newton meant. In our day we might wonder the same thing of Richard Dawkins or the late Stephen Jay Gould. Is this not the reason so many blindly, religiously believe the absurd?

Perhaps just as the Holy Spirit inspired prophets and apostles, so Satan "inspires" his prophets and apostles as well. And just as God's people, through writing and preaching, change the world through words, so Satan works to copy and counterfeit this power.

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Related to that, Hitler's rise to power provides a rather extreme example of how the Satanic principalities and powers can deceive an entire nation. Hitler

presented himself as an arch-conservative, who favored traditional family values and even Christian faith. Of course, this was empty political rhetoric. Most likely Hitler was a Nietzschean atheist who deceitfully used Christian lingo to bolster his claim to power, and nothing more. But the real question is: why didn't the German people, with heavily Christian roots see through his thin veneer of respectability to his murderous, genocidal designs? Can there be any doubt the devil himself was involved? (The Rolling Stones thought so: listen to "Sympathy for the Devil." Keith Richards claimed to have had several first hand encounters with the devil, and I'm inclined to think that's believable.)

In the same way, Satan keeps people blinded to obvious truth today. Who can doubt that our politics, our media, our education system, and so on, are under demonic influences. These are now principalities and powers we must fight against (Eph. 6). That's not to say that our nation is devoid of gospel influences – certainly not, and for that we should be thankful. But it is to say that the war described in Revelation 12 is raging in our culture in a way it never has before. Satan has gained ground. J. I. Packer writes,

During the last hundred years [in the West] he has engineered a world-wide collapse of evangelicalism in all the older Protestant denominations. The present spineless, powerless, unevangelical state of these churches, compared to what they were a century or more ago, gives heart-breaking proof of the skill and thoroughness with which he has done his job. The Bible is no longer fully believed, the gospel is no longer thoroughly preached, and post-Christian paganism sweeps through the world like wildfire. Not for centuries has Satan won such a victory.

It is foolish to pretend there is peace where there is no peace. (To cite another World War 2 illustration, think of Neville Chamberlain's "peace in our time" speech). We need to live as people at war, a people on the march, a people at arms.

This is *not* to make the culture war the primary calling of the church. The war *behind* the culture war is the *real* war we are called to fight. The culture war is merely symptomatic of the real battle, the "holy war" we wage not against flesh and blood but against the principalities and powers that lead peoples, nations, and cultures astray.

This is why the weapons of our warfare can never be merely political (in the world's understanding of politics), educational, technological, or martial. All of

these things can be used for good or evil; they can be controlled by the righteous or by the wicked.

But ultimately we fight by means of the blood of Christ and the word of our testimony (12:11). We fight by faith. We fight by praying, preaching, and singing. We fight by loving, serving, forgiving, sharing, stewarding, giving, and helping.

It sounds crazy to say we can charge the gates of hell with nothing more than hymnbooks in hand. But think of Saul and David. When Saul was tormented by an evil spirit, how did David drive it away? Through song! We can exorcise our culture – but if and only if we are willing to sing and pray our way to victory.

The testimony in view in 12:11 is not what we might think. It's not a testimony in the sense of telling one's personal experience. The point is not that we've found a way to include Jesus in our story, but that we are now included in his story.

The testimony in 12:11 actually means we bear witness to Jesus in word and deed. It means we tell his story (not our story!). It means we do evangelism. But it is a matter of *show* as much as *tell*. We not only “gossip the gospel” (as Harvey Conn put it), we also do “gospel show and tell.” We tell people about Jesus but we also show them Jesus. We embody Jesus, we make Jesus present, by living in Jesus' way before the world.

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Some helpful quotes:

Doug Wilson writes,

We must learn to see that public worship *is* political. The preaching of the kingdom of God does not have to be made political. It can be made apolitical, but only through compromise. The rituals of the kingdom do not have to be *made* political—they declare, in a profound and unmistakable way, that our allegiance is to the City of God, and that all kings, congresses, parliaments, churches, denominations, synagogues, presidents, ambassadors, and any other name that can be named, must make their peace with the prince of that City.

So do not isolate this part of your life from the other aspects of your life. Your life must be integrated. But do not isolate this part of your life from your citizenry. You declare, every week, that there is no king but Jesus.

You declare that His worship defines all other responsibilities. His authority extends to everything else. His power, His wisdom, His majesty, are above all.

I cannot find the source for this one, but it's good:

Unbelievers and pagans often understand the political import of Christianity more clearly than Christians. Jews persecuted the early Christians because they threatened to change Jewish customs, and thereby threatened the future of Israel. Romans persecuted Christians because they proclaimed that Jesus, not Caesar, was king. Innumerable modern believers have been slaughtered for the same reason. The gospel isn't "apolitical." It simply proclaims a different politics. Jesus called His disciples, as NT Wright puts it, to a "revolutionary way of being revolutionary."

William Willimon:

A church which has no quarrel with Caesar's definition of peace and justice, a church enabled by its culturally accommodated preachers to lessen the gap between the gospel and the status quo has no need to preach conversion. In such a church Theophilus will be told stories of people who overcome personal anxiety, who found security in conventional truth, who kept with their own kind and stayed safely home. No one needs religious conversion or cultural detoxification to be down to this church. But if the church hopes for more, for a new heaven and a new earth, for people who know the cost of discipleship and are willing to pay, then as Hans Küng says, "We are to preach metanoia. We must entice people from the world to God. We are not to shut ourselves off from the world in a spirit of asceticism, but to live in the everyday world, inspired by the radical obedience that is demanded by the love of God. The church must be reformed again and again, converted again and again each day, in order that it may fulfill its tasks...."

The overriding political task of the church is to be the community of the cross....

The moral threat is not consumerism or materialism. Such characterizations of the enemy we face as Christians are far too superficial and moralistic. The problem is not just that we have become consumers of

our own lives, but that we can conceive of no alternative narrative since we lack any practices that could make such a narrative intelligible. Put differently, the project of modernity was to produce people who believe they should have no story except the story they choose when they have no story. Such a story is called the story of freedom and is assumed to be irreversibly institutionalized economically as market capitalism and politically as democracy. That story and the institutions that embody it is the enemy we must attack through Christian preaching.

Eugene H. Peterson:

The gospel of Jesus Christ is more political than anyone ever imagines, but in a way that no one guesses. The "kingdom of God," an altogether political metaphor, is basic vocabulary in understanding the Christian gospel. It is, at the same time, responsible for much misunderstanding. . . .

Two temptations exert a powerful pull on the Christian community. One is to retain the political dimensions of the gospel and to take up the usual political means, namely, force.

Instead of riding that silly donkey, Jesus should have charged into Jerusalem on a stallion and let a few heads roll. The other is to give up the political and have a nice little fellowship-- cultivate a faith that more or less abandons the world of government, economics, culture, and society, and settle for saving a few souls.

N.T. Wright:

All power structures, ancient or modern, whether political, economic, or racial, have the potential to become rivals to Christ, beckoning his followers to submit themselves to them in order to find a fuller security. The invitation is as blasphemous as it is unnecessary. Christ brooks no rivals. His people need no one but him.

Stanley Hauerwas:

Let me assure you I am serious, I am against tolerance, I do not believe the story of freedom is a true or good story. I do not believe it is a good story because it is so clearly a lie. The lie is exposed by simply asking, "Who told you the story that you should have no story except the story you choose

when you have no story?" Why should you let that story determine your life? Simply put, the story of freedom has now become our fate.

Consider, for example, the hallmark sentence of the *Casey* decision on abortion: "At the heart of liberty is the right to define one's own concept of existence, of meaning, of the universe, and of the mystery of human life."

This is exactly the view of freedom that John Paul II so eloquently condemns in the encyclical *Veritatis Splendor*. A view of freedom like that embodied in *Casey* assumes, according to John Paul II, that we must be able to create values since freedom enjoys "a primacy over truth, to the point that truth itself would be considered a creation of freedom."

In contrast, John Paul II, who is not afraid to have enemies, reminds us that the good news of the Gospel, known through proclamation, is that we are not fated to be determined by such false stories of freedom. For the truth is that since we are God's good creation we are not free to choose our own stories. Freedom lies not in creating our lives, but in learning to recognize our lives as a gift. We do not receive our lives as though they were a gift, but rather our lives simply *are* a gift: we do not exist first and then receive from God a gift. The great magic of the Gospel is providing us with the skills to acknowledge our life, as created, without resentment and regret. Such skills must be embodied in a community of people across time, constituted by practices such as baptism, preaching, and the Eucharist, which become the means for us to discover God's story for our lives.

The very activity of preaching-the proclamation of a story that cannot be known apart from such proclamation-is an affront to the ethos of freedom. As the Church, we stand under the word because we know we are told what we otherwise could not know. We stand under the word because we know we need to be told what to do. We stand under the word because we do not believe we have minds worth making up on our own. Such guidance is particularly necessary for people like us who have been corrupted by our tolerance.

The liberal nihilists are, of course, right that our lives are contingent, but their account of contingency is unintelligible. Contingent to what? If everything is contingent, then to say we are contingent is simply not interesting. In contrast, Christians know their contingency is a correlative to their status as creatures. To be contingent is to recognize that our lives are intelligible only to the extent that we discover we are characters in a narrative we did not create. The recognition of our created status produces not tolerance, but humility. Humility derives not from the

presumption that no one knows the truth, but rather is a virtue dependent on our confidence that God's word is truthful and good.

Ironically, in the world in which we live if you preach with such humility you will more than likely be accused of being arrogant and authoritarian. To be so accused is a sign that the enemy has been engaged. After all, the enemy (who is often enough ourselves) does not like to be reminded that the narratives that constitute our lives are false. Moreover, you had better be ready for a fierce counteroffensive as well as be prepared to take some casualties. God has not promised us safety, but participation in an adventure called the Kingdom. That seems to me to be great good news in a world that is literally dying of boredom.

God has entrusted us, His Church, with the best story in the world. With great ingenuity we have managed, with the aid of much theory, to make that story boring as hell. Theories about meaning are what you get when you forget that the Church and Christians are embattled by subtle enemies who win easily by denying that any war exists. God knows what He is doing in this strange time between "worlds," but hopefully He is inviting us again to engage the enemy through the godly weapons of preaching and sacrament. I pray that we will have the courage and humility to fight the enemy in Walter Rauschenbusch's wonderful words, with "no sword but the truth." According to Rauschenbusch, "such truth reveals lies and their true nature, as when Satan was touched by the spear of Ithuriel. It makes injustice quail on its throne, chafe, sneer, abuse, hurl its spear, tender its goal, and finally offer to serve as truth's vassal. But the truth that can do such things is not an old woman wrapped in the spangled robes of earthly authority, bedizened with golden ornaments, the marks of honor given by injustice in turn for services rendered, and muttering dead formulas of the past. The truth that can serve God as the mightiest of his archangels is robed only in love, her weighty limbs unfettered by needless weight, calm-browed, her eyes terrible with beholding God." May our eyes and our preaching be just as terrible. Indeed, may we preach so truthfully that people will call us terrorists. If you preach that way you will never again have to worry about whether a sermon is "meaningful."

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Rev. 12 is about the cosmic conflict between the politics of evil and the politics of the cross. It's Satan's politics vs. the politics of Christ's kingdom.

The politics of evil is driven by a lust for power. This is why Satan fell in the first place. He wanted a power that rivaled God's, and he tricked the woman in the Garden into wanting the same. Politics is dangerous because politics is about power, and thus brings us into contact with ultimate temptations. Those who are drawn into politics are often drawn to power, and the line between pursuing power righteously and unrighteously is often very thin. C. S. Lewis said, "The descent to hell is easy, and those who begin by worshipping power soon worship evil." Of course, J. R. R. Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* trilogy deals with this same theme, with its ring of power.

The problem is that politics is inescapable. All of us have power; all of us are intrinsically political beings. Politics is simply an aspect of life in community; our politics is simply the way we relate to one another in our various relationships. (See Peterson's *Reversed Thunder*, ch. 9.)

Americans tend to think about politics like this (to oversimplify): Politics is about power; power is the key to politics and getting power is the key to implementing *my* political agenda. Political winners are those who succeed at the ballot box and political losers are those who don't. It's all about "*my* kingdom come," rather than "*thy* kingdom come."

We hide our obsession with power under all kinds of democratic rhetoric, oblivious to the fact that our power grabs all too often arise out of our sinful impulse to have and exercise power in a self-centered way. Power politics is fundamentally Herodian, it is the politics of evil.

What we must do as Christians is ask how the gospel relates to the exercise of power, in all its forms and dimensions. Look at how Jesus related to power: He resisted Satan's offer of the world's kingdoms. He used his power to do miracles not for his own benefit but to serve others. He rebuked the sons of thunder (James and John) when they wanted to call down fire on unrepentant cities, ala Sodom and Gomorrah. He commanded Peter to put away his sword in the garden of Gethsemane, and he healed Malchus's ear from its sword wound. Of course, he also threatened to bring judgment on unrepentant Jerusalem and its temple. He told Pilate that he had a kingdom, but its power did not originate from anything in this world. He reminded Pilate that his political power was given to him and not absolute, that Pilate could only have charge over Jesus because Jesus willingly gave himself up. He told his followers after the resurrection that all power in heaven and earth is now his, and all the nations are

to made part of his theocratic, cosmic kingdom (baptized, disciplined, taught his commandments).

Jesus is the only one who can exercise absolute power without being corrupted. And that's because he came to absolute power through an act of absolute self-giving love.

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C. S. Lewis wrote, "There are two equal and opposite errors into which our race can fall about devils. One is to disbelieve their existence. The other is to believe, and to feel an excessive and unhealthy interest in them. They themselves are equally pleased by both errors and hail a materialist or a magician with the same delight."

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What does it mean, "they did not love their lives unto death"? It means they willing to die for Christ. And because they were willing to die for him, they were able to live for him.

In America, Christians have not had to suffer to very much. But we should look to our suffering brothers and sisters in the past and present, and learn from their faithfulness. If they are willing to suffer in such great ways, we should be willing to suffer in small ways every day, as we seek to live lives of love and sacrificial service.

Courage is a contagious virtue. When one Christian is willing to die for the gospel, a whole army is willing to die. Of course, fear is contagious too, which is why the OT law (and wise generals) have always let fearful soldiers go home.

Most of us will not be called to die for the gospel. Maybe none of us. But, if that's the case, we are still called to be "living martyrs." We are called to take up our crosses. We are called to die to ourselves. We are called to put sin in our lives to death. We are called to be ruthless with ourselves, so that we might be tender towards others (cf. Matt. 5:29-30).

But we also should not assume we will never face suffering for our faith. All it takes is one or two law changes from Congress, and we could find ourselves in big trouble.

I think Christians in America are a bit naïve about the way the world views us. We don't think of ourselves as threat, but the world certainly does. They understand our potency better than we do. They understand the political nature of the gospel better than we do.

Non-Christians also (very often) think that we hate them. And perhaps all too often we have. Thus, we have to work extra hard to show non-Christians that we love them. They are our enemies in the great spiritual war of history – but precisely for that reason we are to love them, pray for them, and bless them, as Jesus taught us.

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Satan lives by deception. In the old covenant, on the whole, he deceived the nations (12:9). But now Satan's power in the world is greatly curtailed. His head has been crushed on the cross (at Golgotha, the place of the skull, symbolizing Satan's skull under Jesus' feet as he died). He is a defeated foe (Heb. 2). But he still writhes. He can still do great damage.

We need to remember that if we resist the devil he must flee from us. He has no power over God's people. More than that, he is now bound, so that the church's mission to the nations can go forward. He can no longer deceive the world as he once did (Rev. 20).

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To reiterate a point from the sermon introduction: Wars over Christmas in our culture today are just reminders that Christmas has always been about war (Mt. 2 + Rev. 12). We too often sentimentalize the Christmas story. "Silent night," "no crying he makes," and all that. Granted there is element of truth there. But does anyone think it was a silent night in heaven the day Jesus was born? War broke out in full scale. Does anyone think it was a silent night in Bethlehem when all the baby boys were slaughtered by Herod's soldiers?

I do not think public celebrations of Christmas are a huge deal for the church at the moment, even though they carry great symbolic value, and symbolism is the essence of politics. We obviously have greater battles to fight. But we should keep in mind that Christmas is not just an "Aw, how cute" kind of moment. It is God's invasion of the world. It is God's declaration of war on earth and in

heaven. As Peterson says, "This is not the nativity story we grew up with, but it is the nativity story all the same. Jesus' birth excites more than wonder, it excites evil: Herod, Judas, Pilate. Ferocious wickedness is goaded to violence by this life. Can a swaddled infant survive the machines of terror? Can promise outlast horror? We want him to live, we long for him to rule, but is it possible in this kind of world? Are not the means lacking? But we overestimate the politics of Rome and underestimate the politics of grace...It is St. John's appointed task to supplement the work of Matthew and Luke so that the nativity can not be sentimentalized into coziness, nor domesticated into drabness, nor commercialized into worldiness...It is John's genius to take Jesus in a manger attended by shepherd and wisemen and put him in the cosmos attacked by a dragon...Our response to the nativity cannot be reduced to shutting the door against a wintry world, drinking hot chocolate, and singing carols. Rather, we are ready to walk out the door with, as one psalmist put it, high praises of God in our throats and two-edged swords in our hands."

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Rev. 12:17 speaks of the devil being enraged with the offspring of the woman – that is, with Christians/disciples who keep God's commandments and bear witness to Jesus Christ in word and deed. Here's one way to think about our calling as Christians: Our job is to make the devil angry. Our job is to live in such a way that he is enraged with us all the time.

How does Satan feel when we celebrate Christmas and Epiphany? If the birth of Christ drove him mad with rage, what must the yearly remembrance of it do to him? How does Satan feel when we forgive those who sin against us? When we pray? When we sing vibrantly in worship? When we turn our eyes away from a lurid magazine cover or television commercial?

On the other hand, what happens when we give into temptation? When we pass along gossip? When we don't change the channel, but instead allow our eyes to be filled with lustful images? When we lash out at others in anger? When we cheat or steal? No doubt, the dragon dances with glee.

Much better to make him rage, and then trust God to protect us from his attacks:

And though this world, with devils filled, should threaten to undo us,  
We will not fear, for God hath willed His truth to triumph through us:

The Prince of Darkness grim, we tremble not for him;  
His rage we can endure, for lo, his doom is sure,  
One little word shall fell him.

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The book of Job sheds some light on our battle with Satan. To be sure, Satan cannot accuse us the way he accused Job because he no longer has access to heaven in the same way. But consider this: Job is at the center of a conflict between God and Satan. Both God and Satan want Job's love and loyalty. Satan is allowed by God to bring suffering into Job's life to test him. There is no reason to think this cannot happen today.

Job remains faithful throughout his trials, and thus he is victorious over Satan and God is vindicated through him. When we are suffering, we need to remember the cosmic stakes that hinge on our faithfulness.

Of course, ultimately, Job is not just a model for the Christian, he is a type of Christ. The Christology of Job is found in both the language and structure of the narrative. Job is righteous, and suffers at the hands of Satan, like Jesus. He cries out to God in agony like Jesus. He is called the servant of the Lord, like Jesus. He intercedes for others, like Jesus. Etc. Most importantly, like Jesus, he remains faithful through his suffering and as a result, Satan is defeated (that is, he is silenced – Satan means “the accuser” and while Satan speaks accusations at the beginning of the book, he has no speaking part at the end of the book – and a silent accuser is a defeated accuser).

Job is a type of Christ all the way down – indeed, the whole story is perhaps one of the best typologies we have in the entire OT. It's a death and resurrection story, in which victory is won through faithful suffering.

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After the sermon, I was asked about limits placed on Satan's power in the new covenant (Rev. 20). Here is part of my response:

I think talking about Satan's power being limited is certainly true, but it's also a relative thing. Limited compared to what? Certainly compared to what it was in the old creation. Rev. 20 says he is bound *with regard to*

*deceiving the nations* (cf. Rev. 12:9). Thus, we know he cannot stop the mission of the church to disciple the nations. He cannot deceive the nations as he did *en masse* before Jesus came. But he certainly can make the church's mission much more difficult in various ways. His two strategies are seen in Rev. 12 – persecution from without and heresy from within.

Certainly, Satan is defeated in principle, and Christ is subduing the principalities and powers to himself (that is, the false gods/demons, and the pieces of creation they are able to use to mislead human beings and human culture). But if Satan was essentially powerless today, I don't think Paul would identify him as our main enemy in Eph. 6, or list him as one of the enemies trying to separate us from God's love in Rom. 8, etc.

I'll have a lot more to say about the principalities and powers in the future. Suffice it to say for now that I think unpacking what Paul means when he speaks about the principalities and powers is the key to understanding Satan's activity in the present age.

I don't think we should go looking for a devil behind every bush, or blaming everything that goes wrong on demonic activity, or live in constant fear of demonic attack. That gives Satan too much credit, and people not enough blame. Satan has no power over Christians. He can tempt us (like he did Jesus), but if we resist him, he has to flee from us. No Christian can be demon possessed, and God promises that as we are faithful, we will trample the serpent underfoot (Rom. 16).

However, Satan is quite active in the world at large, and I think Rev. 12 (as well as Eph. 6 and other texts) show us that. There are a lot of references to demonic activity in the NT epistles when you start to look closely, so whatever Rev. 20 means when it tells us Satan is bound, it cannot exclude our ongoing warfare with Satan and his ongoing interference with cultures and nations. I think Rayburn is right that we need to do justice to the superhuman evil we see at work around us in various ways, and then we need to respond accordingly (e.g., exorcise the world by singing God's praises the way David did with Saul).

That being said, I don't think we can give any good explanation of exactly *how* demonic forces work in our world today. Nor can we explain how demonic evil and humans' innate desire for evil interact. Certainly, we do not have to choose between saying a sinful action was the work of a

human person *or* a demon. Obviously, in the case of Herod's attempt to kill Satan, it was both his sin, as well the work of the dragon. Same when Jesus was crucified – see 1 Cor. 2:8.

The lyrics of A Mighty Fortress are actually a great summary of the sermon – especially the third verse.

A mighty fortress is our God, a bulwark never failing;  
Our helper He, amid the flood of mortal ills prevailing:  
**For still our ancient foe doth seek to work us woe;**  
**His craft and power are great, and, armed with cruel hate,**  
**On earth is not his equal.**

Did we in our own strength confide, our striving would be losing;  
Were not the right Man on our side, the Man of God's own  
choosing:  
Dost ask who that may be? Christ Jesus, it is He;  
Lord Sabaoth, His Name, from age to age the same,  
And He must win the battle.

**And though this world, with devils filled, should threaten to  
undo us,**  
**We will not fear, for God hath willed His truth to triumph  
through us:**  
**The Prince of Darkness grim, we tremble not for him;**  
**His rage we can endure, for lo, his doom is sure,**  
**One little word shall fell him.**

That word above all earthly powers, no thanks to them, abideth;  
The Spirit and the gifts are ours through Him Who with us sideth:  
Let goods and kindred go, this mortal life also;  
The body they may kill: God's truth abideth still,  
His kingdom is forever.

Also, Rayburn included this line from John Newton, describing where the atheist philosopher Voltaire got his inspiration and popularity:

John Newton, in his day, once wrote, "Perhaps such a one as Voltaire would neither have written, nor have been read or admired so much, if he had not been the amanuensis of an abler

hand..." Voltaire was the unwitting secretary of Satan and his books were dictated by a greater and more powerful mind: *that* is what Newton meant. In our day we might wonder the same thing of Richard Dawkins or the late Stephen Jay Gould. Is this not the reason so many blindly, religiously believe the absurd?