

## The Christmas Story – Like You’ve Never Heard It Before

Last Sunday, we closed out our Christmas sermon series by studying one of the most unusual and important biblical Christmas passages – Revelation 12.

1. Warm-up Question: What was the best gift you gave, or received, during this Christmas season?
2. The famous hymn “Swing Low, Sweet Chariot” was written in coded language. On the surface it appears to be about transitioning to heaven. But its original primary meaning was about finding freedom through the Underground Railroad. The coded symbolic language allowed slaves to sing the song without their slave masters being aware of its meaning. The book of Revelation is similar. It was written in symbols understood by the early Christians, but not their oppressors, the Roman authorities. The entire book, including today’s passage, describes a cosmic struggle between God and Satan, between good and evil.
  - a. Famous author and psychiatrist Scott Peck tells about a time early in his career when he counseled a boy whose older brother shot himself with a .22 rifle. Even as his brother’s suicide threw him into a tailspin of depression, his parents gave him his brother’s rifle for Christmas. When confronted, the parents were oblivious, not understanding why Peck was so upset with them. Sometimes evil is so insidious, those doing the evil don’t even realize it. In your growing-up years, did your parents do or say something – maybe without them even realizing it – that wounded you?
  - b. On Sunday, Jeff ran through a litany of situations illustrating the power of evil in our world at large – things like children starving in Yemen, Christians (and other people of faith) being arrested in China, Latinos fleeing violence trapped at our southern border, hurtful names hurled at various minorities, and companies that profiteer off opioid abuse. As you look at our world today, what issue or situation strikes you as the most troubling manifestation of evil?
  - c. But evil is not just “out there.” It’s also within each one of us, as manifest in destructive impulses, negative voices in our head, words spoken in anger, hoarding our resources, seeing things only from our own selfish perspective, etc., etc. Let’s face it; we all have challenges. What’s one of the ways evil sometimes manifests itself in you?
  - d. Evil also tries to tear families apart. On Sunday, Jeff told a story about how his Mom’s side of the family ostracized one of her brothers for decades after a divorce. How has evil and war-making manifest itself in your extended family?
3. Revelation 12 sees the birth of Jesus as a dramatic turning point in the cosmic struggle against evil. Read Revelation 12:1-17.

- a. The woman described here is Mary, mother of Jesus. Later in the passage, she morphs into a symbol representing “the people of God” collectively. But at the outset of the passage, she is simply herself, giving birth to her firstborn son. On Christmas cards, we’re used to seeing sentimental pictures of the nativity coupled with uplifting Christmas Bible verses. If you got a Christmas card based on Revelation 12:1-2, what might the artistic rendering look like?
  - b. The dragon described here is Satan, and the stars he sweeps down are legions of fallen angels. If verses 3-4 was quoted on a Christmas card, what might the artistic rendering look like?
  - c. Jeff mentioned three different occasions on which Satan tried to devour Mary’s Son – (1) King Herod’s slaughter of baby boys in Bethlehem, (2) Jesus’ hometown trying to stone him to death at the outset of his ministry, and of course, (3) the Cross. Why were Satan and his angels so determined to destroy Jesus? How might the world have been different today if Satan had succeeded?
  - d. Verses 10-11 describe the results of Jesus’ birth, death, and resurrection. How would you summarize this in your own words? What did the Cross accomplish?
  - e. After the resurrection, Jesus was snatched away to heaven, and the dragon turned his ire on Mary’s children, i.e., “those who keep the commandments of God and hold the testimony of Jesus.” Revelation 12:17. Jeff compared Jesus’ birth to the Allied victory at Normandy. He compared Jesus’ death and resurrection to the Allied victory in the Battle of the Bulge. After the Battle of the Bulge, the outcome of the war in Europe was certain, yet the Axis powers continued to fight for a while, resisting the inevitable. Jeff suggested that, as followers of Jesus in our time, we are like the Allied forces fighting after the Battle of the Bulge. Jesus’ ultimate victory over evil is inevitable, but evil is still resisting the inevitable. We have to be faithful to reach a successful conclusion. Does this way of seeing things resonate with you? Why or why not?
4. Sunday’s sermon closed with two stories – the first describing the struggle of a Zambian girl named Agnes with evil. Jeff said the story reminds us that the battle with evil begins within each one of us, and can be won only if we welcome the power of Christ within us. What did you make of the story of Agnes? And how do you feel about the idea that the battle with evil begins within each of us?
  5. Read John 1:11-13. According to these verses, how do we activate the power of Christ, and his goodness, with us? In your own words, how would you describe it?
  6. The final story in Sunday’s sermon was about a man’s passion for giving to those in need at Christmas. He didn’t want gifts for himself. What made him most happy was gifts given to others. After his death, his children carried forward that tradition. This is the beauty and power of the goodness of God when unleashed within us and around us. We’ve talked a lot about evil tonight, but goodness is more powerful and will ultimately triumph. Tell us about a time recently when you witnessed the power and beauty of goodness.