Good morning everyone, my name is Mark, I'm one of the pastors at North Shore Alliance; it's good to be with you in your living room or wherever you are at the moment.

Last week I opened my sermon talking about how much I miss seeing all of you, even those of you who fall asleep while I preach. In response, Ben and Brenda were kind enough to send me a picture of themselves—falling asleep—during last week's sermon; it was just like old times!

Last week I also talked briefly about people's favourite Christmas movies. If you recall, the movie *Diehard* was highlighted, and Pastor Brendan sent in a personal request for me to talk about *Diehard* every Sunday—I'm seriously considering it.

And in response to my imagining of your homes, decorated for Christmas, another congregant—Tim, a science teacher—sent me a picture of his Nativity scene (**show picture**)…isn't baby Jesus cute?

Keep the texts and emails coming, both the humorous and the serious; they are a precious reminder of our togetherness. I'm praying for you and please continue to be praying for me, for our community, for our staff, and volunteers.

Last week I began a three week teaching series entitled, *A Tyrant, a Dragon, and a Baby—the Real Christmas Story*. In light of the title, and after last week's sermon, you might wonder if I have a little too much in common with the "Grinch"…full disclosure, I am wearing Grinch socks at the moment. Admittedly, I did take a swipe at what I consider to be an overly-sentimental telling of the Christmas story. Mary was in pain and afraid (like every woman in labour). Joseph was afraid too, and felt helpless (like every father who is present at a birth). They were far from home, in a stable or cave of some kind; it wasn't how they wanted to welcome a son into the world. Everything wasn't perfect, and painless, and peaceful—not in their lives, or, in the world.

In Luke 2:14, the angels sang of the peace that this child would bring, but of course, peace was still a long way off. Jesus' birth made this peace possible, but before peace there would be war.

Last week I spoke about the Tyrant King (Herod); he was paranoid, cruel, and violent. Sadly, much of the world has lived under the leadership of tyrants like Herod. At the time Jesus was born, Israel was longing for the Messiah to come, a Divine Warrior, a Deliverer, to overthrow rulers like Herod and Caesar. Jesus didn't come with an army, or the aspirations to raise one, and so, He was largely dismissed as a possible Messiah.

But Jesus did not come—primarily—to put an end to the reign of tyrants like Herod; there was a more fundamental battle to fight, against a largely unseen enemy. This enemy is known throughout the Scriptures by many names—Satan, the Devil, or, the Dragon.

No telling of the Christmas story is truly complete without mention of this Dragon; he may not show up in any of our nativity scenes, but make no mistake, he is present, and the birth of Jesus sent shockwaves through the cosmos that he felt.

When Herod heard about a newborn king, he devised a plan to have him killed. On the surface, it was simply the act of a

paranoid tyrant, but behind every act of evil, committed by humanity, stands the personification of evil—the Dragon.

This morning I want to read a cosmic account of the nativity, that doubles as an apocalyptic telling of Jesus' death, resurrection, and ascension. From heaven's perspective, that first "Christmas" was not particularly cozy; it was the beginning of **the** battle for world and all who inhabit it. If you have a Bible with you, please turn to Revelation 12, beginning with verses 1-6.

"*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.* ***2*** *She was pregnant and cried out in pain as she was about to give birth.* ***3*** *Then another sign appeared in heaven: an enormous red dragon with seven heads and ten horns and seven crowns on its heads.* ***4*** *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.* ***5*** *She gave birth to a son, a male child, who 'will rule all the nations with an iron sceptre.' And her child was snatched up to God and to his throne.* ***6*** *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.*"

I'm not sure Hollywood could do this story justice. A woman appeared in the sky, clothed with the brilliance of the Sun, and twelve stars encircled her brow; she towered in the heavens, the moon a welcome mat beneath her feet. And she was great with child, in fact, in the pains of childbirth. At that very moment a dragon appeared in the heavens—it's ugliness in sharp contrast to her radiance[1]—and the dragon had but one thing on its mind—to devour the child the moment it was born.

What the Apostle John saw in this vision was simultaneously a telling of the nativity, and, the gospel story. The child is Jesus, the Messiah, and the mother represents two realities: she is both Mary, the mother of Jesus, and, the Church, "the community of God's people".[2]

Paul Spilsbury writes, "The dragon, who is Satan, intends to devour the child, but the child is 'snatched away and taken to God and his throne' (12:5)…The reference to the Child being snatched away to God and his throne is ironic, because it refers to Christ's resurrection and ascension—events that follow his crucifixion. Those who already know the Gospel story realize that Dragon did indeed kill Jesus. But what looked for all the world like Jesus' defeat turn out to be his victory because God raised him from the dead".[3]

In one sense, the nativity story mirrors the gospel story. The child and its mother appear weak and vulnerable, an easy target for a King like Herod, and for a seven-headed Dragon. But this child is stronger

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[1] Eugene Peterson, *Reversed Thunder: The Revelation of John and the Praying Imagination*, 119.

[2] Paul Spilsbury, *The Throne, the Lamb, and the Dragon*, 91.

[3] Ibid.

than He looks; he "*will rule all the nations with an iron sceptre* (vs. 5)."

As Revelation 12 continues, the story is told once more but from another vantage point. In this telling, we see a war being waged in heaven: the Dragon and his horde are pitted against the Archangel Michael and an angelic army; the Dragon is sounded defeated.

The Dragon is beaten but not destroyed, and with Christ crowned the Champion of Heaven and Earth, the Dragon turns his malevolent eye to those who follow Christ; he is now bent on our destruction. Spilsbury writes, "This is not a message about what might happen in the future, it is a message about what is happening, has always happened, and will continue to happen."[4] A frustrated and furious Dragon, looking to destroy what God loves; it's in the background of the nativity story, on display at the cross, and still being felt in the world today.

I want to bring us back to the beginning, to the nativity itself; *why was Jesus born?* Jesus took our humanity upon Himself, in one respect, to reveal who God is, what He loves, and what He does. But in another sense, God became human—in Jesus—to deal with what Martin Luther described as the "unholy trinity": sin, death, and the devil. Throughout the Scriptures, these three are portrayed as the enemies of God and humanity. Jesus came, as the Divine Warrior, to vanquish what plagues our world.

In Mark 1:21-28, we read an account of Jesus teaching in a synagogue in Capernaum. Reading now from vs. 22, "*The people were amazed at his teaching, because he taught them as one who had authority, not as the teachers of the law.* ***23*** *Just then a man in their synagogue who was possessed by an evil spirit cried out,* ***24*** *'What do you want with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are—the Holy One of God!'* ***25*** *'Be quiet!' said Jesus sternly. 'Come out of him!'*

26 *The evil spirit shook the man violently and came out of him with a shriek.* ***27*** *The people were all so amazed that they asked each other, 'What is this? A new teaching—and with authority! He even gives orders to evil spirits and they obey him.*'"

This story is uncomfortable for many of us in western culture, even those of us who believe in God. We believe that our unseen God exists, that He is the source of life and love, but we draw the line at evil spirits. Case in point, we would prefer it if Mark gave us a medical diagnosis for this man's condition: perhaps, instead of an evil spirit, this man had Tourette's syndrome, accounting for his loud, uncontrollable outbursts in a public gathering.[5] But that's not what Mark tells us.

You see, Jesus believes something that many do not—that evil truly exists, that evil can reside in us, and, that behind evil stands the **evil one**. It does us no good to pretend that things are rosier than they are,

[4] Spilsbury, 96.

[5] Ibid., 80.

or, that God is the only spiritual being in the universe; just as surely as there is goodness and love, there is evil.

Jesus was teaching in a place devoted to purity, but His presence triggered something in the spirit realm. As Jesus spoke, an evil spirit heard the Voice that still burned in its memory from eternity past—the voice of God. And the so this spirit cried out: *What do you want with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are—the Holy One of God!*

1 John 3:8 says, "*The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the devil's work.*" William Lane writes, "The heart of Jesus' ministry is to confront Satan and to crush him on all fields".[6] This is the same Jesus who was born in Bethlehem, meek and mild; He will rule the nations with an iron sceptre. He is loving, kind, merciful, AND, He is also a fierce, strong, Warrior. Jesus is the Dragon-Slayer and the kingdom of darkness is afraid of Him.

There is very little "grey" in Mark's account, it's all very black and white; a man cries out in a synagogue and it's evident that an evil spirit is the culprit. But in many other situations, it isn't always so clear. In Ephesians 6:12, the Apostle Paul writes, "*For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.*"

The challenge is of course that most often it seems as though *our* battle *is* against flesh and blood realities. The Slaughter of the innocents at Bethlehem, perpetrated by King Herod, was a human action. In one sense, Herod—and later Pontius Pilate—were the enemies of Jesus, but in another sense—unknowingly—they were pawns in service of another. Behind every act of evil, committed by humanity, stands the personification of evil—the Dragon.

The Dragon's work continues, as I've said, targeting this world, and seeking to destroy all that God loves. At times the Dragon's schemes are carried out by unsuspecting individuals, but at other times, governments, institutions, structures, and systems are carriers and collaborators with the demonic.[7]

There's an argument to be made that the genocide committed by Nazi Germany, Cambodia's Khmer Rouge, and the more recent genocide in Burma (Myanmar) are but human manifestations of the Dragon's influence. Apartheid in South Africa, the trafficking of women and children, and the greed of the West (that prevents a sharing of resources with those in desperate need)…governments, institutions, structures, and systems regularly collaborate—albeit it, unknowingly—with the demonic.

Brian Zahnd writes, "[Often] Satan's way in the world is not outright devastation, but is a subversive sort of destruction. This way warps

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[6] William Lane, 143.

[7] Jamin Goggin and Kyle Strobel, *The Way Of The Dragon Or The Way Of The Lamb*, 70.

what is good into something that slowly and deceptively undermines its own existence…Like a redwood that has rotted from the inside".[8]

So what are we to do?

1. First, we open our eyes to the reality around us. 1 Peter 5:8 says, "*Be alert and of sober mind. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour.*" Let's not be naive, all is not merry and bright, nor will it be until Jesus returns. We have an unseen enemy.

2. Second, we stand in the victory of Jesus. In Revelation 12:10-11 we read,

"Then I heard a loud voice in heaven say: '*Now have come the salvation and the power and the kingdom of our God, and the authority of his Messiah. For the accuser of our brothers and sisters, who accuses them before our God day and night, has been hurled down.* ***11*** *They triumphed over him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony*'."

We've all had moments in life when we compare ourselves to others and we ourselves falling short; how much more in comparison to God's perfection?! In moments like these, we accuse ourselves, but Revelation tells us that the Dragon has taken this role upon himself—to accuse us before God, to point out our every fault, and declare us unworthy of His love.

But Colossians 2:14 tells us that Jesus took all of the written charges against us, nailed them to His cross, making our sins His own. In dying for our sins, He has won our forgiveness, and more, He has "disarmed" the spiritual powers (the Dragon and his horde) "making a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross."[9]

The Dragon has not been eliminated—he can still do us harm—but his accusations carry no weight with God; he cannot wrestle us from God's hands. In Romans 8:1 the Apostle Paul writes, "*Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus*". In Romans 8:33 and following we read, "*Who will bring any charge against those whom God has chosen?…No one. Christ Jesus who died—more than that, who was raised to life—is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us.*"

When we stand in Christ's victory, we can rest securely in the love of God; I am His and He is mine.

3. Third, we celebrate in the present, and rejoice in what is to come. For now, it's important to recognize that we live in between the times. Jesus came as baby and He will return as a King. In the present, God's kingdom is both "already" and "not yet". Already, Jesus has defeated the Dragon, already people are being forgiven, set free, and transformed. But the kingdom is also "not yet". The Dragon has not yet been silenced, evil has not been eliminated, darkness and death have not yet been banished.

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[8] Goggin and Strobel, 77.

[9] Colossians 2:15.

As I said last week, until Jesus returns, we are called to be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, and faithful in prayer.[10]

The Lord's Supper: This morning, I want to invite you to hold a particular image of Jesus in your mind as we come to the Lord's Table, that of Jesus as the Divine Warrior, the Champion of Heaven.

Throughout Christian history, the Church has reflected on what was accomplished when Jesus died on the cross. As you know, the Scriptures have much to say on this matter, so much in fact, that the Church has been unable to arrive at one single answer. And so the Church has spoken about Jesus' death as satisfaction, as a substitution, as the place of God's justice, mercy, and love.

But the early Church had a particular emphasis that isn't spoken of very often in our own tradition; their emphasis is encapsulated by the Latin phrase *Christus Victor*—it means, Christ the Victor. God, in Christ, has triumphed over sin, death, and the Dragon! By defeating the powers that oppose God, Jesus has rescued humanity—and the world—establishing Himself as the rightful King. This is the One we come to meet at this Table, Heaven's Champion, Christ the Victor.

This week the Holy Spirit reminded me of something that David wrote in the 23rd Psalm. The Lord is our Shepherd, but He is also our **Host**. In vs. 5-6 David writes, "*You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies. You anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows. **6** Surely your goodness and love will follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.*"

We do have an enemy, intent on destroying what God loves, but Jesus—the Victor—sets a table for us in the presence of our enemy. Jesus feeds, sustains, and strengthens us. There is no power above, or below, that can snatch us from His hands. There is no accusation that will remove us from God's family. His goodness and love will pursue us all the days of our lives and lead us to our eternal home.

The Cross is the pivot upon which history turns. On the night Jesus was betrayed, He took bread, and when He had given thanks for it, He broke it, and gave it to His disciples saying, "*This is my body, which is given for you*." In the same way, after supper, He took a cup saying, "*This cup is the new covenant between God and his people—an agreement confirmed with my blood*."[11]

Let us eat and drink together.

Worship

Benediction

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[10] Romans 12:12.

[11] 1 Corinthians 11:24-25.