

St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church

"Revelation: Two Beasts"

Scripture: Revelation 13:1-18

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Opener: A Mighty Fortress Is Our God (1/2/3/4)

Choruses: Days of Elijah, The Solid Rock

After sermon: The Battle Belongs to the Lord

Closer: Be Still, My Soul (1/2/4)

Around the world today,
millions of our Christian brothers and sisters face danger
simply because they follow Jesus.

WATCH VIDEO

According to Open Doors,
"More than 380 million Christians suffer high levels of persecution
And descrimination for their faith."

One in seven Christians are persecuted worldwide.
One in five Christians are persecuted in Africa.
Two in five Christians are persecuted in Asia.
4,476 Christians were killed for faith related reasons last year.
(World Watch List 2025. (2025). Opendoors.org.
<https://www.opendoors.org/en-US/persecution/countries/>)

Why does this persecution happen?

There are social and political reasons.

Christianity's public witness often stands out—
especially in environments where religious conformity is expected.

In many countries, to convert to Christianity
is to break from family, tribe, or national identity.
It's seen as betrayal.

Christians are often targeted
simply because they represent a different loyalty—
and speak with a different voice.

And behind the human reasons are spiritual ones.
As Paul reminds us in Ephesians 6:
*"Our struggle is not against flesh and blood,
but against the rulers, authorities, and powers of this dark world,
and against spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms."*

Today we are continuing our journey through the book of Revelation.
Revelation is a letter from John to a group of churches
In what is now modern-day Turkey.
It helps us understand the spiritual battle behind
The persecution that Christians of every age
Have endured.

You will note that John's visions,
In particular those visions that were read today
Are vivid and fantastic.
There is a great deal of symbolism.
There is even code.

It is frustratingly difficult to read and comprehend.
But if you understand John's context of persecution
You'll realise that these visions are perfect for carrying heavy freight
While cloaking politically dangerous messages.

Just consider that mark of the second best: 666.
Many scholars believe that the number 666 refers to "Nero Caesar".

How do they arrive at this?
While John wrote his vision in Greek, he also knew Hebrew.

There would be many Jewish Christians who also knew Hebrew.
Following Gematria, the ancient practice
of assigning numerical values to letters,
When you add up the values of “Nero Caesar” written in Hebrew letters
You get that total: 666.

To John’s original listeners,
Nero was the embodiment of evil:
He burned Christians alive to light his garen.
For modern listeners he remains the perfect symbol
of all that opposes Christ and Christ’s church.

But let’s not jump too far ahead.
Today’s passage begins with a terrifying image:
a many-headed dragon standing by the shore,
awaiting the arrival of a beast from the sea.

This beast, mirrors the dragon in its heads and horns,
But its body is a chimera,
an unnatural hybrid creature.
This beast has the body of a leopard,
the feet of a bear, and the mouth of a lion.

Readers familiar with Daniel will remember these animals
—leopard, bear, lion—from Daniel’s own vision of empires.
Here, John blends them into one monstrous creature
As if to demonstrate that this beast
Is the sum total of oppressive world powers.

This beast is empowered by the dragon
Which in the previous chapter has been revealed
As “that ancient serpent call the devil, or Satan.” (Revelation 12:9)
And it is “given power
To wage war against God’s holy people
And to conquer them.” (Revelation 12:7)
The beast from the sea persecutes the church.

But this is not the only beast in the story.
We are told that a second beast comes out of the earth.
It plays the role of a false prophet
appearing innocent like a lamb
but speaking the lies of the dragon.
Through deception and coercion,
it demands loyalty to the beastly empire and punishes dissenters.

We are told that it perform signs
like calling down fire from heaven (think of Elijah)
and make an image of the first beast speak,
even as it compels the people to worship that image.

Again this will cause those familiar
With the book of Daniel
Might remember how King Nebuchadnezzar set up an image of gold
And commanded all people to worship this image,
And how Sharrach, meschach and Abednego refused his demand
And were tossed into a fiery furnace. (see Daniel 3)

The second beast is fashioned as a sort of prophet
Or subordinate of the first beast.
It compels worship of that first beast
And seals people with its mark, not as a blessing
(remember God’s sealing of the 144,000)
But as a punishment for those who don’t have it.

As theologian N.T. Wright explains,
John’s readers would likely have understood what these symbols meant.

He writes:
“the Roman empire,
gaining its ultimate authority from the satanic dragon,
was putting itself about as the world ruler.
That was the first monster.

And the second, like it but subordinate,
seems to be the local elites...
City after city vied with one another
to be allowed to build yet another new temple to Rome, to the emperor
These local power-brokers are the second monster..."
(NT Wright *Revelation for Everyone* 120)

This doesn't quite map on to the Gematria
That identifies Nero as the beast from the land,
But these visions don't all have this sort of logical clarity.

But what do we know so far?
The dragon represents Satan, the power behind the persecution.
The beast from the sea symbolizes violent, oppressive empires.
The beast from the earth is a false prophet,
a mouthpiece enforcing loyalty to the empire.
Together they are a sort of unholy parody of the Trinity.

The church doesn't seem to fare well
in John's depiction of evil,
except for his passing reference
to another image, the "Lamb's Book of Life".

This Book will appear later in his letter.
What is implied in today's reading
Is spelled out further in Revelation 20
Is that the 'Lamb's Book of Life' is God's eternal record
of those who belong to Jesus Christ,
the Lamb who was slain,
and have received salvation... eternal security.

So what are we to make of this vivid and symbolic and coded
Account of these beasts waging war on God's people?

So what do we take away from all of this?
First, we're reminded that persecution isn't unexpected.
For those who follow Jesus faithfully, opposition is part of the journey.
The world's systems—political, religious, and economic—

are often manipulated by forces that oppose Christ.

Secondly, we should note that our enemies' authority is limited.
The passage speaks of the beast of the sea
Having an authority derived from the dragon,
And the beast of the earth exercising the authority
Of the beast of the sea.

The passage also describes their authority
being limited and restricted by an unnamed power.
The repeated phrase "was given" is a passive verb,
often referred to as a "divine passive."
In Jewish apocalyptic literature,
this form is a way of pointing subtly to God's permissive will
without directly naming Him.

All to say that evil powers don't seize authority—they receive it.
And that authority is limited in scope by God's sovereign will.
God remains in control.

Thirdly and connect to this acknowledgement of divine authority,
Is the recognition that this tribulation is temporary.
God's people are called to patient endurance and faithfulness
In the knowledge that Almighty God will bring rebellion to an end,
that evil will be judged
and those who trust in Jesus will be saved.
We are given hope for the meantime knowing that our names
Are already known to God.

PAUSE

According to Open Doors,
"More than 380 million Christians suffer high levels of persecution
And discrimination for their faith."

They also report that:

“While persecution and anti-Christian violence intensifies,
many believers continue to follow Jesus and share their faith,
risking their lives and freedom
in the most dangerous places to be a Christian.

Zahra, a persecuted believer in Yemen said,
“I am determined to stay here
despite the risks to my comfort and safety
because I believe everyone deserves to hear about God’s love.”

Joo Min, a North Korean believer,
got the opportunity to escape the brutal regime,
but she returned as a believer,
determined to share Jesus with others.
She said, “I felt a calling to share everything I’ve learned
with other secret believers in North Korea, my homeland.”

Their testimonies confirm scriptures in John 1:5,
“The light shines in the darkness,
and the darkness can never extinguish it.”

World Watch List: Trends. (2024). Open Doors.org. <https://www.opendoors.org/en-US/persecution/persecution-trends/>

Most of us will never face what Zahra or Joo Min have endured.
But their courage invites us to consider:
How will we live out our faith—in freedom, in comfort, and in truth?

We can be thankful we’ve been spared such trials.
We can learn from their boldness.
We can uphold them in prayer.

Thanks be to God. Amen.