

We appreciate both of these guys, the work and the ministry that they perform here among our congregation. If you're visiting with us for the first time, I think Alan did a great job welcoming you. But I just want to reiterate that we're glad you're joining us this evening on this most auspicious evening, the Advent and the immediate eve of the day that we celebrate Jesus Christ. So we are glad you're here. I hope that if you're here as a family unit or a friend unit that you take an opportunity.

These, these trees are beautiful backdrops for little family portraits. So don't leave without getting a picture taken here or. I mean, we've got Mary, Joseph and baby Jesus here and in the foyer, both perfect places to take a family picture, create a memory there. So I want you to do that. The foyer Nativity is a.

Is a longtime friend of this congregation. It was, it was part of the Christmas celebration before Sherwood Oaks actually became the, the. The lead church here. We inherited that beautiful Nativity in there. It loved The.

The palm trees are a little wobbly, so don't shake the table when you go by or the palm trees will fall. The angel I noticed the other day is missing her wings. Now, I don't, I don't know the backstory on that. I don't ask questions. I just say, oh, that looks.

That looks painful. Joseph and the shepherd, I don't know, they're sort of interchangeable in that Nativity. I, we never really know which one. I notice each Sunday, but Joseph is either kneeling or sometimes Joseph is standing with a lantern. We're.

We're never sure on that one out there. The, the camel, however, is really impressive, if nothing else. Get a picture with that camel. Here on this stage. We have.

Well, these guys, they're not, they're not fooling around. They're. They're the biggins. Right here. We.

We're showing these guys off. And I noticed that Joseph has a lantern, or I guess that's Joseph has a lantern here. So I'm going to say Joseph with the lantern. Is Joseph out there? Well, in any case, both of these nativities represent a scene from the story of Jesus birth that Luke presents.

In fact, you're very familiar with it, but we're going to read it again tonight. And this story begins in Luke, where Joseph is required to travel back to his ancestral home of Bethlehem, and he takes Mary, his fiancée, who is pregnant with a baby. Now, lest that be shocking to you, this baby is divine in nature. The Holy Spirit has caused Mary to be pregnant. But here's how Luke tells the story, beginning in chapter two, verse six.

They're in Bethlehem. And while they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger because there was no guest room available for them. And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks. At night, an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified.

But the angel said to them, do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. Today in the town of David, a savior has been born to you. He is the Messiah, the Lord, and this will be assigned to you. You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.

Suddenly, a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying, glory to God in the highest heaven and on earth. Peace, Peace to those on whom his favor rests. When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, let's go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened which the Lord has told us about. So they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph and the baby who was lying in the manger. This is the account where we find the Nativity of Jesus.

The word nativity is a Latin word, and it simply means birth. It's where we get a lot of words, including the word native comes from the word, the Latin word nativity. However, no one really knows how the tradition of a nativity scene began. We do have accounts that the ancient saint, Saint Francis, gathered some worshipers together in a cave and. And accompanied by some real livestock and a real baby lying in some hay, he told the story.

He preached the Gospel of Luke there to those who had gathered. Now, I don't know that any of us have plans to go to a cave after this service. We brought the lights down a little bit, so maybe it feels somewhat like that. But I know that many, if not most of us, somewhere in our home, have something like this. It could be a small one that we got at Walmart, or it could be something bigger that we had passed down to us from generations to generations.

But whether it came from Walmart or from our great great great grandmother, they do have some things in common. You, first of all have, have Mary and Joseph. And I think we have a picture there of Mary and Joseph. The ones that we had there, they Are. Look at that.

Yeah. Joseph's. No. Yeah. No, he's got a bag, not a lantern.

Okay, well, that's Mary and Joseph. Let's just trust that's who he is. You've got baby Jesus there, and then you have a shepherd. Most activities have at least one shepherd, although there's always

multiples mentioned in the Gospel of Luke. So I don't know why we only do one.

Shepherds would. I would think, would be fairly cheap. So I don't know why we only get one in. In our nativity sets. But there's always three wise men.

That's interesting, because the Bible never actually says how many wise men there were. There were multiples because that was the. The pronoun is plural. And there's no indication of the scriptures that they actually came to this moment. Matthew talks about the wise men, and it's probably true that they arrived much later in the scene, maybe when Jesus was even as much as a year older.

And then there's an angel. Now, this is the angel back here that has his or her wings broken off. I don't know why that angel is a woman. I don't know. You can take it up if you haven't.

If you have a thought on that, you can give it to me later. But there's no mention of an angel at the scene either. But an angel seems to be always included. Now, some nativities get very elaborate. They include townspeople and multiple other little village scenes.

But these are the basic characters that we find in the nativity story. But there's one character that was there but is never included in the nativity story. Now, this is where it gets a little interesting. You see, you don't see it on your mantle, and you don't see this character here at the church. You don't even find this character in Matthew's gospel or Luke's gospel.

But he's there. To find him, you've got to turn to the very last book of the Bible, the book of Revelation. And there in chapter 12, we find out who else is at the birth of Jesus. Now, hold on, because this is gonna get weird. It was a dragon.

A dragon. I tried to get Bo to find me a good dragon picture, but I couldn't find a dragon that was suitably evil enough looking. They all looked too sympathetic. You know what I mean? Like, I'm a fan of dragon stories.

Toothless in how to train your dragon. Anyone? Anyone? Love Toothless. Love Toothless.

This is not a toothless dragon. This is a dragon that is set on destruction. And not just destruction, because that's what dragons do. They breathe fire. But destruction, because this is not just a dragon.

This is the devil. Now, let's read how the book of Revelation describes this scene. It's found in Revelation, chapter 12. And here's how John the Revelator describes what he saw. A great sign appeared in

heaven.

A woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet and a crown of 12 stars on her head. She was pregnant and cried out in pain, about to give birth. Then another sign appeared in heaven. An enormous red dragon with seven heads, ten horns, and seven crowns on its head. 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. Now, if you're familiar with the book of Revelation, you know that John is an artist. John paints pictures like an artist would paint pictures with oil. John uses words to paint a picture of the end.

And here he's doing exactly that. He's painting a woman clothed with sun and moon and crowned with stars. Now, some people believe this is Mary giving birth to Jesus. I definitely believe this is Jesus. But I think because she's crowned with 12 stars, that this is the nation of Israel.

It's a prophetic picture he is painting here. But despite what you may think about who the woman is, what's very true is that there's a dragon right there, ready, pounced, ready to destroy the child she is going to give birth to the moment he arrives. Verse 9 says this. That ancient serpent, that dragon, is called the devil or Satan, who leads the whole world astray. It's the same ancient serpent that we learned about several weeks ago that led Eve astray in the garden and attempted to destroy her and everything that mattered to her, including her relationship with God.

And now here is the same dragon waiting, ready to pounce, to destroy the Messiah, the one who will ultimately break his power over the world. Which brings us back to the baby in the manger. You see, the baby in the manger is the one God promised to Eve, the one who would ultimately and finally destroy the one who tried to destroy her. You may remember this passage in Genesis, chapter three. Genesis, chapter three.

15 says, God says to Eve, I will put in enmity between you. He tells us to the serpent, between you and the woman and between your Offspring and hers. He will crush your head and you will strike his heel. So this baby, sleeping peacefully in the straw, is none other than the warrior who will once and forever destroy this dragon and his works. So what does the dragon do?

Well, the dragon does his very best to destroy Jesus, just as he did his very best to destroy Eve. And he does his very best to destroy us.

First of all, if you read the Gospel of Matthew, you will learn that this serpent tried to. Tried to have him killed by Herod. We talked last Sunday.

Zara read beautifully. This picture, this narrative of Mary being awakened by Joseph saying, we've got to get out. Jesus's life is in danger. We've got to escape. Mary and Joseph escaped to Jesus, to Egypt.

They raced to Egypt to keep Jesus safe. Others were not so fortunate. If you read the good Gospel of Matthew, you will learn about that. But when that direct approach failed, Satan was not discouraged. He was not deterred.

Instead, he waited a while. And if you read the Gospels again, you will come across an account where this dragon meets up with Jesus in the desert. Anyone familiar with that? And in this moment, the dragon tries to seduce Jesus to come to the other side. Well, that doesn't work, of course.

Jesus refutes the dragon. He slinks away in defeat. Not quite. He's not done yet. Because in the distance, this dragon sees a cross.

And the dragon believes this cross is going to destroy Jesus once and for all. He watches with glee as the one who came as the light of the world is seemingly overcome by the darkness of death. Sean Green, who leads our congregations in Bloomington, says the cross was supposed to be the knockout blow, the final punch. Satan thought he had won, but really all he had done was strike at Jesus heel. As he struck the heel of the Messiah.

The Messiah and all the power of God came stomping down and crushed the head of. Of the serpent, as Jesus claimed. Ultimately, the victory of sin, death and hell. And the war is won. And everyone cheers.

Finally. Not yet the war is won, but this battle still continues. Because while the cross might have landed a mortal blow to the enemy, the dragon is not dead yet. The war may be won, but this dragon is not giving up so easy. So where does he slither off to strike next?

Well, look at Revelation 12:17. The dragon was enraged at the woman and went off to wage war against the rest of her offspring. Now, who is the rest of her offspring? Well, John tells us those who keep God's commands and hold faith fast. Their testimony of Jesus.

You see, Satan slithered off and slithered up to us. Satan is after you and me. He prowls like a lion, looking for what he can kill, steal and destroy. And whether you believe it or not, you have an enemy. The same enemy that lied to Eve now lies to us.

Remember what he said to Eve? Surely God didn't. And he lies to us saying, surely God can't. God can't love you. Not after what you've done, not after where you've been, not after what's happened to you.

You should just abandon hope. What was it the old sailors used to say? Abandon hope. There be dragons here.

Satan, that dark and deceptive dragon, is seeking to divide and destroy. But Jesus, the light and the lamb of God has come to seek and to save. See, not only did Jesus come as God in human form, to bring us back to God. Starting out as a helpless baby, he promises to return as a conquering king, claiming once and forever his victory over the ancient foe, that old dragon, the devil. In fact, that's the point of the great classic Christmas hymn, Joy to the World.

That song is not really about Jesus coming as a baby. That song is about Jesus coming as conquering king, once and forever claiming us and claiming this world as his own, and destroying what John says, the devil's work. In fact, let's just read it first. John 3. 8.

The reason the son of God appeared was to destroy the devil's work. The reason Jesus came was to destroy Satan. The reason we have a nativity is not just to remind us of a beautiful moment. The reason we have a nativity is because Jesus came to destroy the dragon and he has done it. Revelation goes on to say, I heard a loud voice in heaven saying, now have come the salvation and the power and the kingdom of our God and.

And the authority of his Messiah for the accuser of our brothers and sisters who accuse us. And before our God, day and night, that old dragon has been hurled down the accuser. Man, I don't know where you are, but I. I hear his voice in my ear a lot. I can guess there's quite a few of us in this room that do the same.

And that voice of accusation might. Might make you feel really, really far from God. You may feel chained to things you did or things done to you that make you feel unworthy of God's grace and love. And if that's you, that dragon has his talons in you and he has his chains around you. That's what he wants.

He wants to imprison you in a dungeon of fear and Shame. But I want you to know tonight, this is not the end of the story. It's not the end of your story. And thankfully, it's not the end of God's story. So if that's you tonight, I want you to turn your attention back to that baby in the manger.

Isaiah said his name will be called Immanuel, which means God with us. God in flesh and blood. Because there, in that straw, is the weapon God will use to destroy Satan. The infant child is the only plan God has to make breaking free from the talons of the dragon possible.

Jesus became flesh and blood.

So as Hebrews says, by his death he might break the power of sin, break the power of him who holds the power of death, that is the devil. I love how John finishes this little song in his book. In chapter 12, verse 11, says, those who love God, those who follow his commands, well, look what happens. Says they triumphed over him by the blood of the lamb and by the word of their testimony. Satan's chains are powerless against the grace and mercy of God demonstrated on the cross.

A grace and mercy that can be yours by simply rejecting the lies of the dragon and being released, cleansed and renewed by the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. Tonight, as we prepare for a time of communion, these simple reminders of juice and bread remind us of the power of God's love and grace to destroy the works of the enemy in our lives. Maybe that's why we don't include a dragon in our nativities. Because the truth is, he is powerless. For those of us who have accepted Jesus as our savior, let's pray.

Heavenly Father Jesus, because you so loved us, you took on flesh, you took on blood, and you entered into our world as a baby. A very unlikely hero in this mission to destroy our greatest enemy.

The dragon lurking behind the scenes, invisible in this nativity scene is defeated when we turn to you. And when we turn to you, we find that you free us from the talon death grip of sin and you bring us into the light of your love. Father, this evening, if there's any who have not received you pray that tonight they would open their hearts to receive Christ the Lord, the newborn King. I pray this in Jesus name. Amen.

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