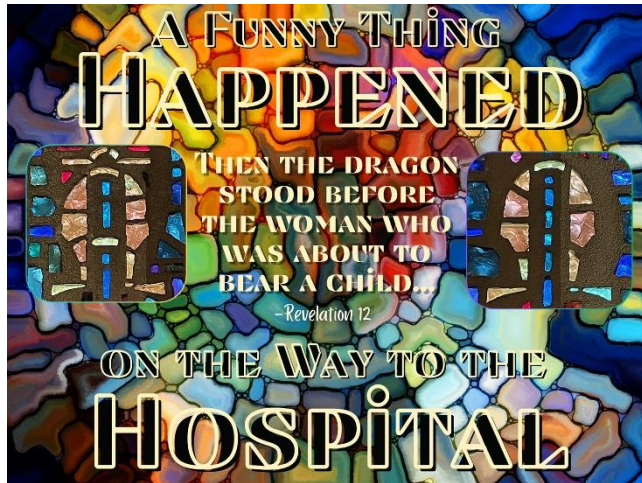




A SERMON

by Rev. Marcella Auld Glass: July 6, 2025



WE ARE IN THE MIDDLE OF A SERMON SERIES ON THE BOOK OF REVELATION, which occupies an odd place in our culture. There are references to Revelation in movies, books, and even in the news, but few of them are placed in the context of the book. Because a lot of people think they know what Revelation is about, but few of us actually read the book.

And we don't read it because it is weird. It is a genre of literature with which we are not familiar. It uses imagery that is unfamiliar to us. It talks about things in very visual and allegorical language.

It is NOT a news report. This is not literal history. This isn't literal anything. It is also NOT a fortune telling book. This isn't a book to read like a map, seeking clues to predict the future.

It is a book, perhaps surprisingly, of HOPE. Written for people who need to be reminded of God's love and care for all of creation, even when the lives they may be living can make hope hard to see.

And it is a book that is consistent with the rest of the Bible. You don't have to agree with me about my interpretation of Revelation, but I do think you need to read it with the rest of the Bible in mind. Because God creates the world and humanity in Genesis and calls it good. God cares enough for humanity to send the son, Jesus Christ, to save the world.

And Jesus, in his living, teaching, and dying, tells the world that God's kingdom is different than the kingdoms of this world. Jesus consistently refuses military power and strength. Jesus consistently shows power in weakness. So, to get to Revelation and then read it as if God is going to demolish the world God so lovingly created? To read Revelation as if Jesus is going to become just like the powers of this world he stood against? Don't fall for a gospel that wraps itself in the flag of any nation, not even ours.

On this 4th of July weekend, we give thanks for the grand experiment that is these United States of America. Our founders were imperfect men who believed, who hoped, that a nation didn't need a king, but could appeal to their own braver angels to forge a country where life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness could prevail.

Alexis de Tocqueville, a French observer of our country once said, "America is great because America is good: And if America ever ceases to be good, then America will no longer be great."

As we give thanks for our nation, we also remember our call to be good. To care for each other. To be a land of opportunity for everyone, not just for the rich and the famous. To trust in God, not for power and might, but for love and mercy. This country has withstood challenges before. We must continue to work for the ideals we hold dear.

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The word "Revelation" is the English translation of the Greek word *apocalypse*. Apocalypse does not mean the end of the world, even though it is used that way in popular culture. Apocalypse means to reveal, to unveil.

As we enter worship today, consider how open you are to a revelation, to an unveiling. Are you willing to consider that God may have something to say to you in these days?

I think I often function as if every revelation I need is in my control. I function as if I only need my own thoughts, my own ideas, my own actions, my own...gumption.

But that's not how revelation works. Alas.

I invite you to be present in your mind and body right now, for this hour. Set aside your lists of things that need to be handled, and your anxiety about the world, and your doubts and fears and distractions. They will all be there later if you want them again.

Plant your feet on the ground. Take in a deep breath and breathe in God's goodness. Breathe out your distractions and worries.

Let us pray.
Living God,
the world so often feels like chaos,
like creation itself is unraveling around us,
and everything we thought we knew turns out to be unstable illusion.
You alone have the power to save,
You alone are the peace we long for.
Gather us together today for a glimpse of your kingdom,
a foretaste of your beloved community,
a reminder that we are surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses.
Strengthen us for your work this day,
and guide and shelter us on the way.
Amen.

Revelation 12:1-6, 13-17

A great portent appeared in heaven: a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars. She was pregnant and was crying out in birth pangs, in the agony of giving birth. Then another portent appeared in heaven: a great red dragon, with seven heads and ten horns, and seven diadems on his heads. His tail swept down a third of the stars of heaven and threw them to the earth. Then the dragon stood before the woman who was about to bear a child, so that he might devour her child as soon as it was born. And she gave birth to a son, a male child, who is to rule all the nations with a rod of iron. But her child was snatched away and taken to God and to his throne; and the woman fled into the wilderness, where she has a place prepared by God, so that there she can be nourished for one thousand two hundred sixty days.

So when the dragon saw that he had been thrown down to the earth, he pursued the woman who had given birth to the male child. But the woman was given the two wings of the great eagle, so that she could fly from the serpent into the wilderness, to her place where she was nourished for a time, and times, and a half a time. Then from his mouth, the serpent poured water like a river after the woman, to sweep her away with the flood. But the earth came to the help of the woman; it opened its mouth and swallowed the river that the dragon had poured from his mouth.

OUR TEXT THIS MORNING IS FROM THE MIDDLE OF REVELATION. This is my favorite story in the book of Revelation. The woman at the well in John's gospel is my favorite character in scripture, and this woman in Revelation is a close runner up.

I don't know about you, but this was NOT one of the Sunday school lessons I heard as a child. David and Goliath. Noah's Ark. Jesus and the little children. The woman who gives birth in space while a dragon waits to eat her baby.

In all my years, nobody has ever suggested this woman in Revelation, clothed in the sun, as a role model for us. And that's a shame.

She's amazing, and a model for men as well as women. And here's why:

She knows how to dress. Stars on her head. The moon at her feet. Actually wearing the sun. She's got style.

She's strong. She is giving birth. In space. And there is a seven-headed dragon standing there, just waiting to EAT her baby. And still she is committed to bringing life into this crazy, beautiful, and dangerous world.

That also shows the woman has **courage**. Dragon, schmagon. She is bringing a child to life who will rule all the nations with a rod of iron.

She is **resourceful**. While the cosmic forces are conspiring against her, she commandeers the moon, sun and stars as clothing. She flies with the wings of the great eagle. She gets the earth to come to her aid, swallowing up the flood.

Most importantly, she has **faith**. Faith that the dragon she sees in front of her will not have the final word. Faith that it is not up to just her. Faith that God is, even in the worst and most outlandish of scenarios, working for good in the cosmos.

She has faith to bring life into a crazy world, trusting that God will provide for her and for her child, despite the real risks that are in front of her from the dragon.

Most of the language in Revelation is intended to hide the narrative from the powers of the world. John of Patmos doesn't want his narrative being used by border patrol like a JD Vance meme to get him in trouble, as happened last week to a Norwegian tourist who was denied entry to the US because of a meme on his phone, critical of this administration. But don't get distracted by the weirdness of this narrative. Because the dragons of this world are real, even if they wear suits instead of being covered in scales.

I don't know what the seven headed dragon looks like in your life. Maybe your seven headed dragons are personal. Cancer or health problems. Financial insecurity. Family problems.

Maybe your seven headed dragons are more systemic—late-stage capitalism collapsing into dystopian oligarchy and cruelty.

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Some of us have had days, and sometimes years, when we thought we had it all in place. We were doing what we thought we were supposed to be doing, being good Christian people, and then a funny thing happened on the way to the hospital and you're giving birth in space. With dragons.

And birth and the dragon go together.

When you are bringing life into the world, the powers of darkness will rise against it.

Look at the change in the world in the past decades. We've been working on being anti-racist in our lives and in our policies. We elected an African American to the White House, and even though he wasn't the messiah, it is worth noting what a change that birthed into the world.

We just marked ten years of nationwide marriage equality. We've elected queer and trans people into congress, called them as pastors of churches.

While there is much work to do, do not ever forget how far we have come. Never forget what we have done and can do. **We are people who birth life and hope into the world.**

Dragons be damned.

And these dragons can try to keep kids from reading books about Ruby Bridges and Jackie Robinson. They can re-name naval ships and try to erase Harvey Milk's name and his honorable service from their sight, but I hope to God they have to fly into Harvey Milk terminal someday. They can pretend trans people don't exist. They can pretend immigrants are a threat to this country and not our secret sauce that makes us amazing. They can send people to concentration camps where they will die in inhuman conditions in the everglades. They can pass terrible legislation that will take away health care from old people in nursing homes and give tax cuts to billionaires.

All of the terrible things they are doing right now is dragon work. They see life coming into the world and they want to stop it. They see hope and joy and possibility and want to kill it. The Dragon is alive and well and the dragon wants us to give up, to decide that new life is too risky to venture.

Don't listen to the dragon.

The Book of Revelation was written for people like us. People who do their best to follow God and end up being persecuted by Rome and attacked by seven headed dragons.

People who live the best lives they know how to live and are waking up today seeing the rule of law being discarded to protect us from made-up threats.

And once the government stops following the law, none of us are safe from the overreach. If they can kidnap American citizens and detain them in prison camps because their skin color made them look 'suspicious', tell me why they couldn't just decide race isn't the only disqualifying factor to being safe from being kidnapped? They have already suggested women should not have jobs. That queer people are a threat.

The dragon is alive and well and causing a lot of damage in our world today.

A few weeks ago, I was in Berlin for a class on the pastor and theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who quickly realized the Nazi regime was opposed to the gospel and that the church needed to resist. For his opposition to Hitler, he was imprisoned and murdered in a concentration camp just before World War 2 ended. You'll be hearing more about him in the coming weeks. But we also went to the home of Martin Niemöller, another German pastor who was imprisoned by Hitler.

Unlike Bonhoeffer, Niemöller voted for Hitler. Niemöller was a submarine officer in World War 1. He was an ardent nationalist and, like many Germans, felt the Treaty of Versailles had been an unfair response to Germany's involvement in the Great War. He was also, like many pastors of his day, antisemitic. While Bonhoeffer argued the church should be taking a clear stand against the Nazis, Niemöller first said that the church's sphere was not politics but only matters of faith.

Niemöller quickly changed his mind about Hitler and the Nazis when they started intervening in the church, saying that Jews who had converted to Christianity were not members of the church and were not able to receive sacraments or be pastors. He also ended up being an ardent opponent of the Nazi regime and was in a concentration camp for 8 years, before his camp was liberated by the Allies.

I mention Niemöller here because if you have heard of him before this sermon, it is likely because of this quote:

First they came for the socialists, and I did not speak out—because I was not a socialist.

Then they came for the trade unionists, and I did not speak out—because I was not a trade unionist.

Then they came for the Jews, and I did not speak out—because I was not a Jew.

Then they came for me—and there was no one left to speak for me.

—Martin Niemöller¹

Both Bonhoeffer and Niemöller were like our woman in Revelation. When faced with danger and dragons, they continued their work of bringing life into the world.

The dragon is here. But new life is also waiting to be birthed into the cosmos.

How do we do the work God has called us to do, seeking to be faithful in unfaithful times? How do we be like the woman in this story, as we seek to bring life into a world that seems to be clamoring for death?

First, we keep looking to God, trusting that while things may be beyond our control, they are not beyond God's.

Our woman hands the baby—this new life she has worked so hard to bring into the world—she hands him over to God, who takes him away and keeps him safe at the throne. A dragon may show up on the moon, but even a seven-headed beast KNOWS he can't get at the baby in the throne room.

Then the woman flees to the wilderness, where God has provided for her. She will be there for a time, for times, for a half a time.

In scripture, the wilderness is often an uncomfortable place, a place of temptation. The Israelites wandered in it for 40 years. After Jesus is baptized, as soon as God says, "you are my beloved child, in you I am well pleased", Jesus is whisked away for 40 days of temptation in the wilderness.

I find some comfort in the fact that Jesus was God's beloved and was still sent into the wilderness. By the Spirit, no less. And it was the beasts and the angels who took care of him.

So, the wilderness is sometimes the place we wander for 40 years, or only 40 days if you're Jesus. And the wilderness is also the place we are intentionally sent by God for our own safety and for our nourishment. For a time, and times, and a half a time.

¹ <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/martin-niemoeller-first-they-came-for-the-socialists>

And I recognize that what is wilderness to me might be someone else's walk in the park. But whether our wilderness is the relatively tame foothills of the Presidio or the untamed deadly alligator Alcatraz in the Everglades, God is with us. Perhaps that is easier for me to say than for some others, but it is, nonetheless, what I know to be true.

As the writer of Revelation shows us, in his somewhat metaphorical way, there is a battle being waged. In the cosmos. On earth.

And the dragon is fighting so hard and causing so much chaos, not because it thinks it can win. But because it knows it has already lost. The battle has already been won. Not by us. Not by our brilliant thoughts or plans, but by Christ, the lamb on the throne.

God chose to defeat even death itself by dying on a cross.

We stand against the dragon. We resist the dragon. But it is God who defeats the dragon.

I know this to be true. And the rest of the book of Revelation will show this to be true as well.

Friends, there are dragons on the loose. And their danger is not metaphorical. But God is also here with us as we face the danger, and God's hope, and love, and justice are not metaphorical either. And so do not be afraid to birth life into the world. Bring innovation and art and music and joy and hope and laughter into the world. Seek and build community that will give you support and hold you accountable. May the hope that comes from Christ give you the strength to face your dragons. For a time, and times, and half a time.