

Based on Revelation 12:1-6. Protecting and Nurturing Hope

A supernatural sign appears in the sky:
A pregnant woman clothed with the sun,
standing on the moon,
wearing a crown of stars,
crying out in the torturous agony of childbirth.

Another supernatural sign appears in the sky:
A huge fire-colored serpent,
with seven heads and ten horns
and seven royal crowns.
His tail sweeps across the stars
and casts a third of them to the earth, in cosmic upheaval.

Then the serpent lies in wait as
the woman labors,
ready to devour her child as soon as it is born.
But as the woman gives birth to her son -
the one who will shepherd the world with divine strength -
the child is rescued safely to the throne of God.
The woman flees into the wilderness,
where God prepares an oasis to nourish her
until evil is defeated.

What do we do when evil, in all of its violent ugliness, explodes before our eyes, with no seeming end to the aftershocks? That was the question before us, this day, more than two decades ago, as the towers fell, and with them our sense of safety and security and innocence in this world.

What do we do in the face of evil?

The human instinct is to fight back. To “hunt them down.” To make them pay. Which we, as a nation, have surely done.

But for John of Patmos, who authors our Lesson today, the response to evil is open-eyed radical resilience. A steadfast commitment, even with a clear unabashed understanding of the worst that humanity can do - and *does* do - to instead hold on to the hope of a peace that passes understanding, in covenant love with God and community.

As a persecuted prophet, exiled far from home, John of Patmos practices radical resilience by, of all things, going to church. Pretty much the same as what we are doing right now. In the face of evil, John practices radical resilience through this weekly ritual touchstone of worship. John practices radical resilience with this re-set button that gets us ready for the week ahead. John practices radical resilience by setting aside this brief moment in time that in some mysterious way invites us to live for a brief moment *outside* of time, from the perspective of eternity.

Lo and behold, one Sunday as John is practicing radical resilience, right there in the pew he gets caught up in a mystical moment. A vision trance of sorts. A dreamlike state revealing fantastical images of a cosmic battle between good and evil, replete with multi-headed beasts, a lamb with seven horns and seven eyes, and a dragon seeking to destroy the earth.

As a dream, neither he nor we take this images literally. They reveal instead the archetypal truth of life as we know it. Saying, make no mistake. A present and powerful evil is on the loose. You are right to be afraid.

But the vision does not end there! A woman, clothed with the sun, radiant in cosmic glory - and pregnant! - takes center stage. Like Beyonce at the Grammy awards, morphing into a golden goddess in a floor-length shimmering gown that highlights her baby bump, singing to the audience, *I want you to feel the love that's growing inside me*.

I want you to feel the love that is growing inside me, says the woman clothed with the sun.

I want you to feel the love that is stronger than the sword, the love that is deeper than the hole in our hearts dug by the massacre of innocents, the love that is steadfast and loyal and never ever ever quits. I want you to know a love that is protected and spared and nourished for flourishing, by us and for us, as John describes in his vision. And at the end of the day, John continues to reveal, as violent and destructive as evil becomes, *that love wins!* And there will be no more night. And we will need no more light of lamp or sun because the love of God will be our light forever and ever.

The moment fades, of course, as mystical moments do, and John comes back to his Sunday morning reality on Patmos, with the rest of us mere mortals. But the vision remains, which John shares with his friends in the letter that becomes our Lesson today.

The vision itself is enough to keep us going. To continue in a covenant of compassionate resilient love, in the face of stark evil, with God and one another, trusting love to win out in the end.

But John does not stop there. Any psychologist will tell us our dreams are reflections of our own psyche, beyond any revelation of the world as it is or even could be. Which means the vision of John's dream reflects the battle between good and evil in his own soul, and by extension, that same battle in your soul and mine.

Which is why John takes the vision one step further in his letter, warning the churches, in their resistance of evil, that the same capacity is within them, with their all too human instincts toward power and privilege. Just as it is for us.

Which means for us, as we gather around this vision today, in our own practice of covenant resilience, clothed with the sun of our own warming cross, may heed John's warning, even as we turn toward the hope of this heavenly vision.