

Beware the Beast, Not His Number
Revelation 12:7-9, 13:1-18
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Years ago I worked the graveyard shift at a diner in Georgia called the Waffle House. That ten p.m. to six a.m. shift offered its share of very interesting characters who came in for a bite to eat after being out and about doing God-only-knows what. There was the time when two rather inebriated gentlemen parked in the space reserved for people with disabilities, and when they walked through the door, I asked them, somewhat snarkily, whether they were mentally handicapped, because they sure didn't seem to have any other disability. They apologized, repented, and moved their car. Then there was the guy who literally came in every single night and ordered the exact same meal every night. And then there was the guy who absolutely freaked out on me when I presented him his check, which happened to have the relatively common total of \$6.66, due to a quirk in the percentage of the local sales tax. He insisted that I absolutely must add something else to his bill so that the total would not end up in the Satanic number of 666. And so I conveniently added the most expensive thing on the menu, and he went away satisfied.

There are people who take the book of Revelation WAY too seriously, who spend an inordinate amount of time trying to calculate the precise date of the end of the world, argue over whether the thousand years reign of Christ comes before

or after the rapture, propose that the barcode system used on almost all of our merchandise these days is the mark of the beast that will soon be stamped on our foreheads in addition to our cereal boxes, and of course, are bent on figuring out just what the curious number of 666 refers to. But there are also people who do not take the book of Revelation seriously enough, and dismiss it as a too-hard-to-understand hallucination, and who then miss out on what the book of visions has to say to us, such as how we are to hope in the midst of despair, how we can have the strength to testify to the truth even at the cost of our lives, how God has something greater in mind for us than we could ever hope to imagine for ourselves. Hopefully we are neither too obsessed with, nor too dismissive of, this concluding book of the New Testament.

But of course you *are* curious about that number, aren't you? What is that 666 all about? Well, I will leave you in suspense for just a little while we review what we've just read, to make sure the sequence of events is adding up in your mind. So first there is a dragon, which doesn't get too many words devoted to it in the thirteenth chapter, although it is an important character in the background to our reading tonight. Then there's a beast that rises up out of the sea, and a second beast that rises up out of the earth, and then an image of the first beast, and all of these combine to control the world, and force everyone, Christians and others alike, to worship them. In the midst of all the descriptions of the beasts with their heads and their horns, and all the evil that they do, there is a plainly stated "call for

the endurance and faith of the saints,” the endurance and faith needed to survive the persecution that the beasts bring on those who refuse to worship the dragon and his partners in crime. It’s pretty bizarre stuff, pretty symbolic stuff, pretty scary stuff, and we would do well to proceed in both our interpretation, and our way of life, taking the advice with which this thirteenth chapter ends: to do so with wisdom and understanding.

And so, I’m still going to keep you waiting a little longer on the 666, but we are getting closer. There are a couple of details about these beasts that will help us figure it all out. The first is that the beast that comes out of the sea has on one of its seven heads a great wound, a serious, even fatal, battle scar, which has now been healed. And the second is that the purpose of the beast that rises from the earth seems to be to be the advocate, or the enforcer for the first beast; it makes everybody worship the first beast. It is a sort of beast lieutenant, a second in command beast, and among its duties is to dupe the earth’s inhabitants to make a kind of a copy of the first beast, as if it really needed any more help. So, at the end of the day, the number of the beast is the name of the beast that comes from the earth.

Scholars and researchers far smarter than I have puzzled over these symbols for a very long time, and come up with an endless number of interpretations, but there does seem to be some consensus as to who and what might be represented here historically, since this is the way many believe God’s message to the early

church got out without causing an ever greater persecution. The symbols function like code to tell believers what is going on, or what might be coming along, without mentioning any real people, to avoid trouble. And so, most scholars believe that the entire book is talking about the Roman Empire, and that these beasts are particular people within the empire. The Dragon, we have already heard, is Satan, but the others go unnamed, and so the best guess is that the beast from the sea is the Emperor, or perhaps all of the emperors, or seven of them, and that the beast from the earth, the lieutenant beast, was a regional governor charged with keeping order for the Emperor out in the region where John is writing. So, Satan gives authority to the Emperor, and the Emperor to the Governor, but there is still the matter of the beast clone, who might be a subordinate of the regional governor, maybe even the executioner himself. Which leaves us with the famous 666. Who could it be? Well, it appears that it is supposed to be the second coming of the Emperor Nero from a few years earlier, the Nero who had undertaken the first great persecution of Christians, and had committed suicide, but who was believed to somehow be planning a return to Rome to rule again, hence the head of the beast that recovered from a mortal wound. And why do scholars believe it was Nero? Mainly, because if you assign the value of the numbers of the letters in the name of Nero, the way they do in Hebrew, all those numbers add up to 666. And so the believers were to understand that whoever was going to be ruling in the province of Asia Minor was not only a lot like the Emperor himself, but was going to be

acting a lot like Nero acted, the great persecutor of Christians, and that endurance and faith would be required to see the persecution through to less troubling times.

Now, that whole theory could be dead wrong. But for tonight, let's go with it, and ask why it is in there. Why does the Bible have this bizarre story of dragons and beasts and a myth about the return of a dead Roman emperor? As I mentioned earlier, one reason is so that the early church could receive an undercover message from God without having to worry about provoking the civil authorities. Some people have likened the songs sung by the slaves in the United States to these visions, that as the slaves sang, they also communicated information about the underground railroad that offered the possibility of escape, or about what was happening on other plantations where slaves had family members, but also about the plans God had in mind for them, plans which included freedom and dignity. There are some things you just can't talk about in the open without feeling the wrath of those in power. But they need to be said, and so God provided.

Another reason, one with more continuing relevance to us today, is to remind us that Nero is always right around the corner, which is to say that there will always be those earthly rulers who wish us to make them divine, and who will punish us when we refuse. It reminds us that in every age and every generation, evil will raise its ugly head, that we will be called upon to adore something unworthy, and that it is our job to be ever vigilant about what that is, in our own lives, in the church, in our culture. Thankfully, we are not generally in the same

position as our ancestors in the faith who were subject to the violent whims of kings and emperors, but we still receive pressure to exalt things and ideas that are simply not divine, there is often still a cost if we don't. Remember that the main problem Christians had in those days was that they refused to consider the emperor God. They knew their God was the author of creation, and not simply this week's ruler of the Roman Empire. They knew that the peace of Jesus Christ was more enduring and authentic and compassionate and just than the famous Pax Romana, as successful as that two hundred year period of relative peace and stability may have been. They knew that in Christ there are no second-class citizens, but only brothers and sisters. They knew that the one worth acknowledging as Lord was the one who went to his own death rather than seeking their deaths. They knew that five loaves and two fishes fed five thousand people, but that all the wealth of the empire still left millions starving. They knew the difference between divine justice and Imperial might. And so they chose, and so they suffered. And so God reassured them that it would not always be that way.

Nero is alive and well and demanding your allegiance. But Jesus Christ is also alive and well, and he demands more than mere allegiance. You see, offering allegiance is easy. Living faith is hard. Empires know that the best they can get out of you is allegiance, but Christ knows you have so much more to offer, that you'd gladly share your love and compassion and generosity. Empires are content to let you do your own thing as long as you don't cause them any trouble, but Christ

invites you to cause trouble so that empires can't do their own thing. Empires rely on violence to maintain the illusion of their superiority, but Christ exhorts us to demonstrate the certainty of our equality by not simply refraining from violence, but by turning our cheeks for yet another blow.

Through the centuries, there have been countless attempts at relating the people and institutions of the day to these beasts, an exercise I always thought was as silly as changing a restaurant check just because the total came up to \$6.66. Upon further reflection, however, although I still think that guy should have been more focused on the beast and less on the number, maybe he wasn't entirely on the wrong track. Perhaps there is some value to taking a look around at the beasts in our midst, if it helps us to be mindful of their role in our lives. In fact, if I were to describe today's beasts in the style of the book of Revelation, I'd have to say that the first beast rises up, not out of the sea, but out of a sense of insecurity, holding a golden statue in one hand and a promise of everyday low prices in the other. And a second beast rises up from the middle school playground and is given authority to bully the children who do not conform to the image of the first beast. "Here is a call for the endurance and faith of the saints." I invite you to ponder how you see the Empire of your generation, but know this: that these days it is not so easy to identify the beasts that would control us. They don't have as many horns as they used to, nor as many heads. Indeed, they rarely appear with the fearsome attributes of leopards, lions, and bears. Now, they are better hidden, better funded, and better

at monitoring and controlling our lives than Nero ever was. But you can spot them by how they act, and what they demand. But you also know how Christ acted, and what he demands, and that he gives you both endurance and faith to keep those beasts at bay, and live securely no matter in what empire you may find yourself.

Amen.