

Sermon

November 9, 2014

## **Title: The Golden Calf**

**Text: Revelation 12-15**

### **Two Signs in Heaven**

#### **Meeting “The Boss”:**

If you’ve ever played video games – or watched your kid playing the games – you’ve eventually come face to face with “The Boss.” “The Boss” is the term for the biggest bad guy in the game. You know the drill: The game starts out relatively easy. You breeze through a few levels, knocking off the bad guys and scoring points and lives. But with each new level the game gets a little harder. The bad guys get a little harder to beat. The music becomes more and more ominous. The graphics become more scary. And all of a sudden there it is: The Boss. The Boss is bigger, meaner, stronger, and more resilient than anything you’ve seen in the game. But if you want to beat the game, you have to beat the Boss.

Something like this happens in the Book of Revelation. John has been telling us all along that all is not well with the Creation. It has been invaded by evil and needs to be repaired.

- Our first inkling of Creation’s brokenness comes in the letters; each one stresses some way in which our world is dangerous and corrupted.
- The 7 Seals reveal the horrors that humans unleash upon each other and their world.
- The 7 Trumpets reveal the demonic forces that corrupt humanity and seduce them to do such evil.
- Now, at the very middle of the book – and at the bottom of its great U shaped story – we finally meet The Boss.
- If we’re going to finish our Exodus Journey to the Promised Land of God’s New Creation, we will have to defeat The Boss!

#### **The First Sign in Heaven:**

The fourth vision cycle of Revelation begins with two signs in Heaven. The first one gives us a Heavenly perspective of God’s People and the part they play in God’s repair of His world:

*Revelation 12:1-2 NIV*

*A great sign appeared in heaven: a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet and a crown of twelve stars on her head. <sup>2</sup> She was pregnant and cried out in pain as she was about to give birth.*

The woman clothed with the sun represents God's people. She wears a crown of 12 stars, representing the 12 tribes of Israel and births God's long-awaited King:

*Revelation 12:5 NIV*

*<sup>5</sup> She gave birth to a son, a male child, who "will rule all the nations with an iron scepter." And her child was snatched up to God and to his throne.*

This child fulfills the great promise of a Messiah King who would rule God's Creation. He is the One who will defeat the dragon. John quotes Psalm 2, the same Psalm that is quoted at Jesus' baptism when God says:

*Mark 1:11 NIV*

*"You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased."*

In John's vision he sees Jesus' earthly mission from beginning to end, from His birth to His ascension to Heaven. God's Hero has come and is ready to act.

### **The Second Sign in Heaven:**

The second sign reveals at last the root of evil in the world – the one who is ultimately responsible for the destruction of God's Creation:

*Revelation 12:3-4 NIV*

*<sup>3</sup> Then another sign appeared in heaven: an enormous red dragon with seven heads and ten horns and seven crowns on its heads. <sup>4</sup> 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.*

The vision of a fiery red dragon with seven heads is bizarre to us, but it was a familiar image to the people of John's time. Many of the cultures of the time had stories about a multi-headed monster arising from the sea and wreaking havoc upon the people of the earth. An ivory panel from Assyria portrays a god doing battle with just such a monster.

And who *is* this monster? As the vision unfolds, we learn of a great battle between the dragon and the Angel Michael in which the dragon is defeated. It is then that we learn its true identity:

*Revelation 12:9 NIV*

*The great dragon was hurled down—that ancient serpent called the devil, or Satan, who leads the whole world astray. He was hurled to the earth, and his angels with him.*

Here, at long last, we come face to face with the ultimate enemy of God and His Creation. This is the serpent that tempted Adam and Eve to disobey God. This is the anti-God who “leads the whole world astray.” In video game lingo, this is The Boss.

We learn that he has been cast out of Heaven and can no longer *accuse* (the meaning of the term ‘satan’) believers before God. Jesus has washed their sins away once and for all. But we also learn that while Jesus has sealed his defeat and doom, he still roams the earth, a weakened but dangerous foe:

*Revelation 12:12 NIV*

*“Therefore rejoice, you heavens  
and you who dwell in them!  
But woe to the earth and the sea,  
because the devil has gone down to you!  
He is filled with fury,  
because he knows that his time is short.”*

It has taken John half of his letter to finally bring us to the place where we are ready to confront The Boss. The second half of Revelation tells the story of his defeat and our victory over evil.

## **Exodus Confrontation**

### **The Exodus Journey:**

The Book of Revelation tells the story of our New Exodus out of the slavery of sin and into God’s New Creation. As followers of Jesus we live in between the old and the new. We are like Israel traveling through the wilderness – no longer in Egypt, but not yet in the Promised Land. We have been liberated by Jesus’ victory over Sin and Death, but the Dragon is still present in our world!

John’s description of the woman who gave birth to the Messiah shows her to be in just such an in-between place and time:

*Revelation 12:13-17 NIV*

*<sup>13</sup> When the dragon saw that he had been hurled to the earth, he pursued the woman who had given birth to the male child. <sup>14</sup> The woman was given the two wings of a great eagle, so that she might fly to the place prepared for her in the wilderness, where she would be taken care of for a time, times and half a time, out of the serpent’s reach. <sup>15</sup> Then from his mouth the serpent spewed water like a river, to overtake the woman and sweep her away with the torrent. <sup>16</sup> But the earth helped the woman by opening its mouth and swallowing the river that the dragon had spewed out of his mouth. <sup>17</sup> Then the dragon was enraged at the woman and went off to*

*wage war against the rest of her offspring—those who keep God’s commands and hold fast their testimony about Jesus.*

This vision is filled with references to the Exodus Story:

- The dragon pursues the woman, just as Pharaoh pursued Israel.
- The woman is given eagle’s wings, just as God said that He had carried Israel “on eagle’s wings.” (Exodus 19:4)
- The earth swallows up the torrent from the dragon, just as God dried up the Red Sea.
- God cares for the woman in the desert, just as He had done for Israel.

John finishes the vision by reminding us that *we* are her offspring, and are ourselves living the same wilderness experience.

### **The Seduction of Evil: Part 1**

It is here, in the wilderness place, that the People of God face their greatest test: will they remain faithful to God or will they fall back under the power of the Dragon. John sees the dragon as he summons a monster from the chaos realm of the sea:

*Revelation 13:1 NIV*

*13 The dragon stood on the shore of the sea. And I saw a beast coming out of the sea. It had ten horns and seven heads, with ten crowns on its horns, and on each head a blasphemous name.*

John goes on to describe a person who fills the world with wonder and amasses a huge following. He has been given the dragon’s “power and throne.” He is to Satan what Jesus the Messiah is to the Creator God. He conquers the world and torments God’s people. He is even worshiped as a god.

John models his description of this beast or monster after the emperors of Rome, especially the notorious Nero. Nero is the emperor who paraded himself around as Apollo, executed Peter and Paul as well as many other Christians, and who eventually took his own life by slitting his throat. After his death, however, legends sprang up that he was still alive and would come again to rule over Rome. John even gives us his name in code: 666. The numbers represent the Hebrew for “Kaisar Neron.”

What’s important to remember is that (1) the beast is an incredibly seductive creature – powerful, intriguing, charismatic, and (2) that the beast is present as Satan’s ruler in every age. Nero was simply a powerful symbol of a person used by Satan to rule the world.

### **The Seduction of Evil: Part 2**

John tells us that a second monster, or beast, emerged from the earth. This person functioned as a false prophet -- or "unholy spirit" in Satan's counterfeit Trinity. Very likely, John's readers would have thought of the temples in their cities where the emperor -- the Beast -- was worshiped as a god. In each temple there were priests, men of the highest social status and influence, who compelled the populace to worship Caesar. To not do so was to risk being ostracized, to be unable to buy or sell, and in some cases to face imprisonment or death.

Again, John's description -- so apt for his time -- is symbolic of the power of world systems that seek to control humans. John describes the ruler and the false prophet as "beasts" to shock his readers into seeing behind the façade of glamour and power. These all-powerful men were actually monsters acting on behalf of the dragon.

## **The Golden Calf**

### **The Golden Calf:**

The Exodus Story will eventually bring us to the place where each one of us comes face to face with The Boss. When that happens, we will have to choose which god we will serve.

For Israel this moment came at Mt. Sinai. It was there, while Moses met with God high up on the mountain, that they gave in to the temptation to go back to the idolatry they had left behind in Egypt. Note: Satan did not come into the camp with pitchfork and horns. No, the temptation was far more subtle than that. It came in the form of wanting an image of God that they could make with their own hands. It came in the form of a pagan celebration that quickly turned into debauchery. Somehow, a golden calf became their "beast," and the high priest, Aaron, became their false prophet.

### **Battling the Beast:**

The visions of this cycle conclude by showing us what it means to stand strong against the Beast -- to beat The Boss. After describing those who have been faithful to God, he says:

*Revelation 14:12 NIV*

*<sup>12</sup> This calls for patient endurance on the part of the people of God who keep his commands and remain faithful to Jesus.*

It is in the wilderness that we will be tempted to craft our own golden calf -- and perhaps even give it God's Name! No wonder, then, that John reminds his readers to be faithful and patient. The world in which they lived was filled with luxury and power. Caesar, after all, had conquered most of the known world. And Caesar demanded complete devotion. Your own god always came in second to him. In the face of such a seductive temptation, John

says: “Look again, from Heaven’s perspective.” “See the system for what it truly is – a monster puppet of Satan himself.”

We make our most important life choices when we are in the wilderness. The wilderness is a place that leaves us uncomfortable, unsettled, and often unsure of what’s next. It’s a place where we discover *who we really are*. Am I truly an honest person? It’s probably when the bills are piled high and I am tempted to pocket a little extra income without reporting it to the IRS. Am I truly faithful to my marriage vows? The test may come when I’m having a bad day – or night – and the computer screen offers some temporary, nameless gratification. Am I a truly loving person? How do I handle being falsely accused by someone I thought was a friend?

### **Victory:**

John closes the vision cycle with a picture of our ultimate victory:

*Revelation 15:3-4 NIV*

*<sup>2</sup> And I saw what looked like a sea of glass glowing with fire and, standing beside the sea, those who had been victorious over the beast and its image and over the number of its name. They held harps given them by God <sup>3</sup> and sang the song of God’s servant Moses and of the Lamb:*

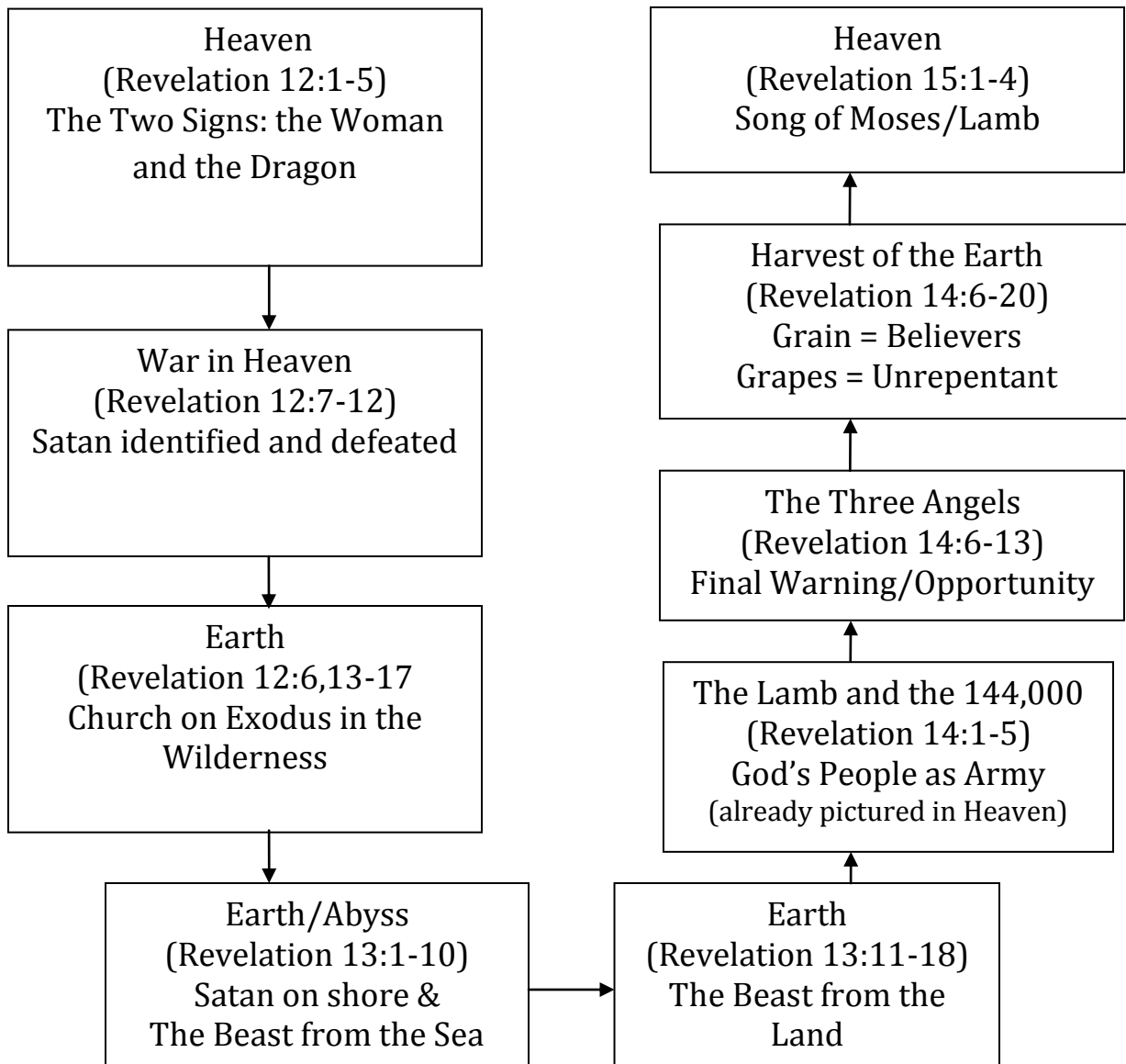
*“Great and marvelous are your deeds,  
 Lord God Almighty.  
 Just and true are your ways,  
 King of the nations.  
<sup>4</sup> Who will not fear you, Lord,  
 and bring glory to your name?  
 For you alone are holy.  
 All nations will come  
 and worship before you,  
 for your righteous acts have been revealed.”*

One day, every knee will bow to the Creator and His King. The world will be repaired. The Boss will have been defeated. Game over. Until then, what matters most is that we live and breathe that final outcome in every thought and deed. That’s what it means to be God’s New Exodus people.

## Revelation Study

## Session 4

### The Fourth Vision Cycle (Revelation 12-15)



The Fourth Vision Cycle begins at the middle of the book. It marks the point where we descend to the very depths of the evil corrupting the world. With the unmasking of Satan and the Two Beasts (the unholy trinity) we now see the depth of the world's ruin and the enemy who must be defeated.

This cycle portrays the New Exodus Journey with great clarity, from the vision of the woman being carried on eagle's wings into the desert to the singing of the Song of Moses and the Lamb.

The evil that corrupts the earth, while symbolized by hideous monsters, is carefully connected to the earthly reality of living under the all-powerful Roman Emperor and his demonic system of worship. This is evil in the real world.

We see the army that defeats the Beast in the 144,000. We see them already celebrating their victory in Heaven, having won the victory through their patient endurance and faithful witness.

We see the world given a "last chance" to repent, as an angel proclaims "Good News," the "eternal gospel." God has come to set the world to rights. What follows are two harvests: one is the harvest of the righteous, the other the harvest of the wicked.

Finally, we are back in Heaven as preparations are made for the Final Judgment. The battle has been won; the victors sing the Song of Moses and the Lamb.

**Discussion Questions (10-15 minutes):**

1. As a group, take a few moments to discuss what you think the Lord is saying to us as His church in the light of this vision cycle. Have someone write down your observations and pass them on to the pastor.

Divide up in groups of no more than 3 or 4 and take some time to share your answers to the following questions:

2. What sorts of things in our culture and society would you see as representative of the two Beasts? What causes the biggest challenge to your faith and endurance as you follow Jesus?

**Prayer Time (5 minutes)**

**Next Week:** Next week we will be studying Revelation 15-19. See you next Wednesday!

Note: Our final session (Nov. 26<sup>th</sup>) will be a family-friendly Thanksgiving Service.