Revelation 12:1-6

God Make You Mighty, Gentlemen

Sermon

We are currently in a Christmas series looking at famous Christmas songs. This morning I want to consider a song that is sorely misunderstood – "God Rest Ye Merry Gentlemen". This song was written during the 15th century at a time when the common people did not enjoy the somber, latin melodies provided by the church. The common English peasants led a quiet rebellion against the church by making and singing their own songs. The words "God Rest Ye Merry Gentlemen" as we understand them today are nothing like what the English peasants meant. The word "merry" was a way of saying "mighty" or "strong" (you've heard of Robin Hood's "Merry" Men?). In the Middle Ages a "merry" army was meant to describe a "mighty" army. So, "God Rest Ye Merry Gentlemen" really meant, "God Rest Ye Mighty Gentlemen." The word "rest" was used to mean "to keep" or "to make", and "ye" means "you". So "God Rest Ye Merry Gentlemen" really means, "God Make/Keep You Mighty, Gentlemen". It's a song meant to encourage, to embolden, to inspire strength in the midst of despair or battle. This helps us understand some of the lyrics:

"***God Rest Ye Merry Gentlemen….let nothing you dismay***" (don't be afraid! Don't be distressed! God Make or keep you Mighty)

"Remember Christ our Savior was born on Christmas day" (Remember…the Savior is born…be mighty! He has saved you from your sin and given you forgiveness! Be Mighty, be encouraged!")

"to save us all from Satan's power when we were gone astray" - We have gone astray – all you like sheep have gone astray…but the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all. For those of you who have put your faith in Jesus…Satan had control…but God saved you through the Savior…though the devil rages and seeks to devour God's people… Be Strong Gentlemen…and May God Make you and Keep you Strong Gentlemen!"

"Tidings of comfort and joy, comfort and joy" - Take courage, take comfort…Christ is born, Christ is risen, Christ is ruling and reigning….BE STRONG CHURCH! He has saved you from Satan's power…Satan has lost the war!

This is the true meaning behind "God Rest Ye Merry Gentlemen". The title of my sermon this morning is "God Make You Mighty Gentlemen"

The theme of advent this Sunday is "peace"…and yet we just looked at a passage that depicts chaos. Why on earth would we look at a passage like this during the Christmas season? Because this passage shows us the scene behind the Christmas scene. It's meant to jar you and I, who during the Christmas season can tend to slide into Christmas carols, and Christmas parties, and shopping, and the busyness of the season, and Christmas trees, and ornaments….enjoy all of it! I really mean that! Enjoy all of it…I love Christmas season. But I personally need to be reminded, that there is a dragon at work…and I need to be strong and be ready. I just want to ask you…does your relationship with Jesus tend to be stronger or weaker during the Christmas season? We can become so busy we can miss the reason we're celebrating. We can tend to let our guards down and forget there is a dragon…he

doesn't stop working during Christmas…in fact, at the very first Christmas he was right there ready to pounce!

We see here a furious, appalling, and hellish dragon who with absolute malice, is seen waiting for the birth of a woman in labor; and he is waiting at her feet, that are up in the stirrups, to devour the baby that is to be born. ***This is one of the most graphic but accurate depictions of the kind of thing that is the insane, but normal disposition of Satan.*** When you see this description of the devil, it gives you an explanation of "why"… why the appalling events in this world that make your stomach turn. Why there are certain people who become so evil and can do the most appalling things – things that make you cringe. There is a blood-thirsty, crazed, dragon in this world. He is that fallen angel, Lucifer. The great accuser of the brethren. Our adversary. The god of this age, the ruler, the prince of this world…for a time. The author of all that is evil. He comes disguised as an angel of light. If you are a child of God, he hates you with a vengeance. **Left to your own devices to withstand him, you do not stand a chance. He is a powerful dragon, and yet when God finally ends his tyranny, he sends an ordinary unnamed angel to fetch him and bring him before the true King for judgment. We have every reason to fear this dragon, and yet God would say – "Fear Not! The child is born and reigning. God Make you Mighty Gentlemen!"**

Revelation 12 is given as a sign to the churches of Asia, who were under the blood thirsty attacks of Rome and the Caesars who were under the control of the dragon. Do things seem a little chaotic in the world today? It was delivered by God's angel to John to make the church mighty.

Before we jump into the text here in Revelation 12, I want to give us all a "primer" to the book of Revelation because Revelation is a unique type of literature that presents unique challenges and is often misunderstood. Thinking caps on…I want to preach and teach this morning. Two things that are important to understand as we approach Revelation 12: The literary style of Revelation; and key characters and events we see in Revelation 12.

First, Revelation is a letter that is apocalyptic and prophetic: Jewish Apocalyptic is a specific style of literature that John would have been very familiar with. There was a vast amount of Jewish apocalyptic writing when John wrote Revelation (4 Ezra, Book of Enoch, Testament of Abraham…etc.). Today we have poetry, or haiku, or journalism, or fiction novels, or non-fiction. With each style of writing there are common characteristics the reader expects to see. I wouldn't expect a sports journalist to tell the events of a Sunday night football game with poetic language. **What are some characteristics of Jewish Apocalyptic literature: first,** there are revelations, images, symbols, signs that are given. Each image is symbolic, but given to reveal a real truth that is factual and historical through the symbol. For example, there is a beast, but the beast is a symbol of a real person, the antichrist. **Second**, these images are mediated by a transcendent, otherworldly being/person – in Revelation, it is an angel that gives the revelation to John of Jesus Christ. **Third**, the image is given to a human recipient who then passes it on. John the apostle is the recipient of the Revelation of Jesus Christ given through the angel God sent and its written as Jewish apocalyptic literature.

In the case of Revelation, it is Jewish Apocalyptic, but it is also an epistle written to 7 churches of Asia Minor. This combination of apocalyptic and epistle makes the interpretation of Revelation unique. It isn't meant to simply be fanciful, apocalyptic imagery that puzzles the reader (like other Jewish apocalyptic) – it is written to reveal, not confuse, but embolden real historical churches in Asia Minor, truths about Jesus, in order to encourage them in the midst of persecution and chaos. God wants

to make these churches filled with Mighty Men and He does it through Revelation. This changes the way you interpret the text.

Finally a unique characteristic of Revelation is its prophetic nature. There are things that "will come to pass", I believe, in the future – he says this in 1:19 where he outlines Revelation. Much of normal Jewish apocalyptic literature is imagery used to symbolize past or present events (this could be why so much interpretation of Revelation sees it as being fulfilled in the past or in John's day). I believe that John is depicting much of what will happen in the future, especially in the last days leading up to Jesus' Kingdom that is coming. Now, because it is prophetic, there is a telescoping of events that happens which is what happens with OT prophecy as well. Isaiah 7:14 tells us a virgin will be born, and in Isaiah's day a child was born, but ultimately this is fulfilled in the birth of Jesus. There is a "near" and "far" fulfillment. This is characteristic of all prophecy. There is a "coming of Jesus" with a "near" fulfillment when Jesus was born, and a "far" fulfillment when He comes again. John the Baptist was the "near" fulfillment of Elijah's coming foretold in Malachi…but Elijah is depicted, I believe, as coming again in the "far" fulfillment in Revelation.

So Revelation is a letter written to encourage real churches about real truths, but it is written with an apocalyptic style, and it is prophetically unfolding the coming of Jesus in all His glory.

Key Characters and events in Revelation – the Antichrist, the Tribulation, the Dragon, the Woman: The Antichrist is depicted in Scripture in many ways. He has a "near" fulfillment in Antiochus IV Epiphanes a Greek ruler over Israel who in 167BC went into the Jewish temple and desecrated it by offering a pig as a sacrifice to Zeus (the abomination of desolation – a horrific event that created the Maccabean revolt…and the celebration of Hanukkah today). He has a "far" fulfillment as the antichrist to come in the future. A future world leader who is seen as a beast that comes out of the sea (Revelation 13). And a little horn among 10 horns in Daniel 7 who are ten kings. In Rev. 12 he is one of the 10 horns on the head of the dragon and in Daniel 7 he is one of the 10 horns on the head of the fourth beast.

The Tribulation period - aka Daniel's 70th week, or Jacob's Trouble. The Bible teaches that just before Jesus comes again, there will be a ruler who is a false-Messiah – the antichrist (αντι – "in place of"; Χριστος – "Messiah"). He will gain control for a 7-year period of time on the earth, also known as the Tribulation period. In the middle of that time (3 ½ years) he will perform a blasphemous act in the temple of God (which will be rebuilt – much like Antiochus Epiphanes and the pig) and the Jewish people will realize he is a false-Messiah and will run for their lives. Some of them will flee to the wilderness to escape his violent attacks. For the latter 3 ½ years the antichrist, possessed by the devil, will wreak havoc upon the earth and seek to exterminate the Jews. At the end, Jesus will return and completely wipe the antichrist and his armies away in the battle of Armageddon, and He will establish His Kingdom on the earth for a millenium (Rev. 20 – 1,000yrs) where He will rule with a rod of iron.

The antichrist has not yet come…he may be alive right now, we don't know, but he is controlled by the devil, seen with the dragon wearing the 10 horns on his head. A false type of reign. 7 diadems, which are victor crowns – a false ruler, with a false victory, controlling a false-Messiah. The dragon: He is the devil, we see him all throughout Revelation as the one who controls the beast, the little horn. So the dragon and the beast (antichrist) wreak havoc on the earth during this Tribulation period. Finally, the woman: She is Israel. We'll see that in our text in a moment.

But before we go there, I want to draw your attention to Daniel 9:24-27 briefly. You can study this later, but if you look closely at Daniel 9:24-27 there is a prophecy of 70 sevens, or 70 seven year periods of time that are given by God for the purification of Israel and to bring a remnant to faith in Messiah…69 of these seven year periods have been fulfilled. There is one period left, the Tribulation period. This is for the purification of a remnant of Israel:

Seventy weeks [or lit. in Hebrew, seventy "sevens" – seven-year periods] **are decreed** [decreed by God] **about your people** [Daniel's people, the Jewish people] **and your holy city,** [Jerusalem] **to finish the transgression, to put an end to sin, and to atone for iniquity,** [to do away with sin! Christ has redeemed us from our sin! He came, at the 69th week in this prophecy. He has saved through His sacrifice to put an end to sin, to atone for sin, but it must be received by faith. Romans 11 tells us that Israel has rejected, by and large, their Messiah…but a time is coming, a final seven-year period, where God will draw out a remnant from the Jewish people who will believe. This will finalize or "finish transgression". And as it says in Romans 11:26 – "all Israel will be saved". That is, the remnant of Israel, all who are truly Israel, will be saved] **to bring in everlasting righteousness,** [this speaks in part of the righteousness of Christ given to us, but I think also the righteousness of His Kingdom on earth that will come AFTER the 70 sevens are complete] **to seal both vision and prophet,** [no more prophecy to be fulfilled after the 70 sevens…the 70th seven of Revelation, the Tribulation period, remains.] **and to anoint a most holy place.** [this speaks of the temple that will be rebuilt…a most holy place which will be defiled by the antichrist, but cleansed by Jesus when He returns] **(Dan. 9:24)**

This prophecy is not about the church, the church is not seen in this seven-year period of time because this time period is for the Jewish people. The people of Israel have rejected their Messiah, but only for a time. There is a seven-year period coming where God will turn the hearts of Israel to their Messiah, Jesus. Satan means to devour them, but God will save them.

There is our primer…now lets look at the text…

And a great sign appeared in heaven: a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars. [who is the woman? Roman Catholic interpretation for centuries has seen the woman as Mary, which makes sense as she gives birth to the child, Jesus. Some say the woman is Israel and the church that is grafted into Israel, but notice the woman gives birth to the child – the church is born from Jesus, Jesus is not born from the church. When John wrote Revelation there was already so much Jewish interpretation and Jewish apocalyptic literature that depicted Israel as the sun, the moon, and stars. In Genesis 37 Joseph dreams a dream of his father Jacob (Israel) as the sun, his mother Rachel as the moon, and 11 stars that bow down to him (his eleven brothers who along with Joseph make up the 12 tribes of Israel.) "Then he dreamed another dream and told it to his brothers and said, **"Behold, I have dreamed another dream. Behold, the sun, the moon, and eleven stars were bowing down to me." (Gen. 37:9).** So the woman is best explained as Israel. This is how John would have received this sign from the angel.] 2 **She was pregnant and was crying out in birth pains and the agony of giving birth.** 3 **And another sign appeared in heaven: behold, a great red dragon, with seven heads and ten horns, and on his heads seven diadems.** 4 **His tail swept down a third of the stars of heaven and cast them to the earth. And the dragon stood before the woman who was about to give birth, so that when she bore her child he might devour it.** [the second sign is the dragon, which 12:9 tells us is the devil: **And the great dragon was thrown down, that ancient serpent, who is called the devil and Satan, the deceiver of the whole world—he was thrown down to the earth, and**

his angels were thrown down with him. (Rev. 12:9). This dragon, δρακων, takes the form of a sea monster in the OT, or the serpent in the garden of Eden. Nebuchadnezzar and Pharoah are both depicted as the dragon (Jer. 51:34; Psa. 73). He has ten horns on his head – one of which is the little horn of Daniel 7 – the antichrist. This dragon is red with fury, and the woman is in "agony" which is a word used in Revelation to speak of persecution and trial for God's people. There are LOADS of OT passages (Isaiah 26; Micah 4) where Israel is depicted as a woman in labor. "He sweeps a third of the stars with his tail". We see some of the telescoping of prophecy here. Stars in Revelation are often a picture of angels. This possibly refers to the fall of Satan when he took a third of the angels with him who became his demonic army. But notice the dragon hates the woman and he waits to devour the child, the Messiah.

When we think of Christmas morning, we think of the calm night, O little town of Bethlehem, silent night, holy night, the star shining, the rejoicing of the Shepherds, the quiet manger scene. God, in this vision, is allowing us to see things from a different vantage point. The sick and grotesque vantage point of a dragon waiting by the manger to gobble up the child right after He is born.

The dragon knows that Israel is destined to bring forth a kingly offspring that will crush the dragon. **I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel." (Gen. 3:15).** This is foretelling the birth of the offspring of Israel, the Messiah, who will crush the head of the dragon, the devil.

I encourage you to do a study on the history of antisemitism and to see how throughout history up to this VERY DAY the children of Israel have been persecuted by Egypt, by Babylon, by Persia, by the Hellenists, by Rome, by the Catholic church, yes, sadly even by protestants, by virtually every nation in which they have been scattered in the diaspora. From countless historical examples in countries and communities, to the horrors of the holocaust. They have gone through "agony" as they have brought forth the seed, Jesus. When Jesus, the perfect Israelite, was born, the dragon was there waiting to pounce on Him. Through Herod in the slaughter of the innocents. Through the temptations of Satan in the wilderness, "throw yourself off the building Jesus!". Through the temptations to abandon His destiny by Peter, "Not so Lord…you shall not die! Messiah's don't die! They conquer!", to which Jesus said, "get behind me Satan…you are an offense to me." The Jewish leaders sought to kill Him…but they couldn't touch Him until His time came. When Jesus was betrayed by Judas, it was the dragon who possessed him and turned Him over to crucifixion, at which point the devil thought, "I've done it! I've devoured the child, the Son of God, finally!" But He rose from the grave, conquering Satan and death and ascended to His heavenly throne] **[5] She gave birth to a male child, one who is to rule all the nations with a rod of iron, but her child was caught up to God and to his throne, [6] and the woman fled into the wilderness, where she has a place prepared by God, in which she is to be nourished for 1,260 days.** [the child was born, and the child was "caught up". This word, "caught up" is the same word that is used to speak of the sudden, and immediate resurrection of the saints who are alive at the time of the rapture - they are caught up (ἁρπαζω). The child was crucified, but He was "caught up" to heaven. The scene moves from His birth, all the way to His resurrection and ascension. And He rules all the nations in fulfillment of Psalm 2 where David says the Messiah will rule with a Shepherds rod of iron defeating all of the wicked enemies on earth: **I will tell of the decree: The Lord said to me, "You are my Son; today I have begotten you. [8] Ask of me, and I will make the nations your heritage, and the ends of the earth your possession. [9] You shall break them with a rod of iron and dash them in pieces like a potter's vessel. (Psa. 2:7-9).** It is a strong rule. One that dashes the wicked, Christ rejecting nations of the world, but

rescues the people of God**.** This rule of the Messiah begins at His ascension to Heaven, where He is now seated at the right hand of God waiting for the time when He will return. God is not done with the woman, Israel. She is seen as fleeing to the wilderness, where she is nourished for 1,260 days, or 3 ½ years. This is the remnant of Israel who during the second half of the Tribulation period will flee to the wilderness after the antichrist turns on them. They will call upon the Lord there, the Spirit of God will be poured out upon them and they will look upon Him whom they have pierced and mourn and repent, and will trust in Jesus as their true Messiah]

Now you may say, "Pastor Brian….common…it's Christmas season! Why are you diving into all of this?" I'll tell you why. The dragon is real…and he wants to devour you because he hates God's people. In John's day, when the church was going through chaotic times, God gave this vision to John, to encourage the church – "Be MIGHTY CHURCH…the Savior is born! He has defeated the dragon!"

Two ways this passage is meant to encourage you this Christmas season…

1. What the Dragon uses to devour your faith, God will use to develop your faith

When we face chaos in life, our natural inclination is to think that things are out of control, or that something strange is happening to us. Once we've been walking with the Lord long enough we know better. We can look back on what the devil meant to devour our faith and see how God used it to develop our faith. I take great comfort in Peter's words:

> **Beloved, do not be surprised at the *fiery trial* when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. (1 Pet. 4:12)**

It's funny, but when we are faced with fiery trials we do exactly what Peter tells us NOT to do…we act surprised! We think God has abandoned us. This is what the dragon wants…he wants to devour your faith with fiery trials. Know who your enemy really is this Christmas season. It's NOT that relative of yours, its not even that sickness or awful situation, and its certainly not your spouse. With every temptation to sin, with every spiritual battle the dragon is behind the scenes. But take "comfort and joy" this morning - what the devil uses to devour your faith, God will use to develop your faith. "God Make you Mighty Church"! Take comfort and joy in the fact that there is a dragon who hates you, but there is a God who loves you and He is in control of the dragon. You DO NOT HAVE to give in to him. The dragon can do nothing to you that God doesn't allow, and if He allows it, He is going to use it for good.

The woman, Israel, is in agony, but the child is born, and the dragon did everything to devour the child, but the child overcame. Even at the very moment when all hell broke loose on the cross – the very efforts of the dragon to devour the child produced the greatest peace the world has ever known – the salvation of the Son of God for sinners.

If God can use the most evil and chaotic event, the crucifixion of Jesus, to bring about the greatest peace on earth…can't He use the chaos in your life right now to bring about something beautiful.

2. Resist the dragon and worship the child

You do not have to lose the battle! When faced with the temptation to sin, it helps me to think of this picture - an insanely fiendish dragon, who comes disguised as an angel of light that wants to tear my life

and my family's life into shreds. He's coming for your life and the life of your family…are you going to let him?! You know what the devil has no power over? Your obedience and surrender to Son of God. When you resist him through surrendering to Jesus and His Word…he will flee.

resist the devil and he will flee from you (James 4:7)

He is a roaring lion seeking to devour (1 Peter 5:9) but he is a defeated foe and the power of God through His Spirit and His Word is far greater! God Make You Mighty Gentlemen.

Finally, as we close, I can't help but think there might be one person here who is thinking, "Do these people really believe this?! A dragon with 10 horns, a woman clothed with the sun…do they really believe all of this stuff?!" Do I believe there are dragons floating around that we can't see…no. This is apocalyptic imagery of course. But it is depicting a very real enemy, the devil, who I believe is very real. 2 Cor. 4:4 says the devil has blinded the minds of nonbelievers to keep them from seeing the glory of God in the face of Jesus. If you don't believe he exists he has deceived you. I pray that even now in this moment the Spirit of God might open your eyes to see the truth. Would you be willing to simply make a step towards God this morning, "God there is something within me that thinks, maybe this stuff is real. Would you show me."

Maybe you're here and you do believe but you also realize that you haven't yet surrendered your life to Jesus. The Bible says that all have sinned and all of us fall short of God's standard. Because of our sin we are facing the wrath of God that we deserve for our sin. One day we will face the judgment of God that we deserve for our sin, but God sent His Son Jesus to die in your place and take your punishment upon Himself on the cross. You have NO POWER over the devil apart from Jesus. So you must be saved…the Bible says, "confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead and you will be saved." (Rom. 10:9-10) You can do that now.

Pray