

As we heard last week at the end of Revelation chapter 12, Satan is on the earth seeking to destroy the Church. Even though he's not able to do it, he goes after individual saints. He goes after those who belong to God, trying to get them to stumble and fall. And Revelation chapter 13, our reading for this evening, shows us exactly how he does that. It shows us a picture of two great beasts which are at his control, and the first of these beasts is our reading for this evening.

So what is this beast, we might ask? The key to understanding him actually comes in verse 2 of our reading, where it says this: "And the beast that I saw was like a leopard; its feet were like a bear's, and its mouth was like a lion's mouth." And the reason why that helps us to understand the beast is because these are the exact same creatures used to describe four different beasts in the book of Daniel, specifically Daniel chapter 7. In that chapter, Daniel saw a vision of four great beasts which also came up out of the sea. The first of those beasts was like a lion, the second like a bear, the third like a leopard, and the fourth unlike any creature on earth. It was totally different from everything else. And in the book of Daniel, we are told very clearly that those beasts represented kingdoms. In Daniel chapter 7, verse 17, it says: "These four great beasts are four kings who shall arise out of the earth." Kings are often used as symbols for entire kingdoms. In fact, it's made even more clear a little bit later in the same chapter when it says concerning the fourth beast that "there shall be a fourth kingdom on earth, which shall be different from all the kingdoms." So it's very clear in the book of Daniel: the beasts represent individual kingdoms, individual empires in history, the first being a picture of Babylon, the second being a picture of Persia, and so forth.

But now, here in Revelation, we see all of those beasts rolled together into one to make one great creature. So the beast here in Revelation is not a picture of a particular kingdom. It's not a picture of a particular part of the earth or anything like that, but rather it is a picture of all kingdoms, every kingdom which sets itself up against God, any government that tries to take the place of God. The beast is a picture of power that seeks to dominate and to rule. It is a picture of power that tries to take the place of God.

And so with that understanding, then, we can see a lot more clearly what this beast is here in Revelation chapter 13. Verse 1 says: "And I saw a beast rising out of the sea, with ten horns and seven heads, with ten diadems on its horns and blasphemous names on its heads." This beast is coming up out of the sea, because the sea is a picture of nations and of peoples. We'll hear that a lot more clearly later in the book of Revelation, especially Revelation chapter 17. But this beast comes up out of the nations because it happens all over the world. It doesn't matter what government we're talking about, it doesn't matter what period of time we're talking about, no matter where in history we are, it is every government setting itself up against God. And this beast has ten horns and seven heads, because it looks like the dragon. If you remember back in Revelation chapter 12, Satan is described exactly that way, to have the same number of horns and heads. The beast, in a sense, is his child, and it seeks to war against the Church, just like its father. The diadems are said to be on its horns, because a diadem is a symbol of authority and horns are a symbol of strength, of power. So it is a beast which rules by force, one which will force people to listen to it, one which will force people to bend the knee. It's going to have its way or else. And it has blasphemous names written on its heads, because it goes against God. It claims things for itself that really only belong to God. In a word, the beast claims to be God.

Now, this happened literally in John's day, because the Roman emperors in his time claimed to be gods or at least to be sons of gods. Because when they issued coins, for example, they would put their face on that coin, and they'd have writing on it which would say things like "God" and "Lord" and "Savior." And they would also set up statues of the emperor in their temples and in their marketplaces, statues which were worshipped. People prayed to the emperor. People gave thanks to the emperor when something good happened. People worshipped the emperor as a god. It was certainly a very blasphemous thing. But Christians, this still happens today, although it's a lot more subtle. Even if our rulers don't claim to be gods, we still see people who act in very much the same way. When you have a law, for example, that demands that we do something contrary to what God wants us to do, that is the spirit of the beast. When you have governments which claim to be the very center of our lives, that is the spirit of the beast. When you have governments which claim to be able to even change things that only God can decide, to redefine what marriage is or to tell us what it means to be male or female, that is the beast at work. This beast claims for itself what properly belongs to God, because it claims to be God.

Now, John tells us very clearly here that this all happens because of Satan. Satan gives to the beast his power, his authority, and his throne. Satan uses the beast to carry out his will. He uses the beast in his war against the Church. Now, yes, it's true: true authority comes from God. And yes, it's true: the government can only be the government because of God. Paul makes that very clear. Peter makes that very clear. Jesus even makes that very clear when he's talking to Pilate. There can be no authority apart from God. Government is supposed to be a good thing. But Satan corrupts it. He can turn what is good into evil and to use it to dominate and to destroy. He can use it and twist it in order to lead people away from God.

But even though they turn away from God, people still want to turn towards something. And so, since they don't want to go to God, they turn towards the beast instead. They look to human authority the way that they should be looking towards God. This is why the beast in our reading for today imitates Christ in several different ways. We're told in verse 3: "One of its heads seemed to have a mortal wound, but its mortal wound was healed, and the whole earth marveled as they followed the beast." It's wounded like Christ, because you'll remember in Revelation chapter 5, Jesus is described as a lamb who had been slain. He was a lamb as if he had been wounded to death. The beast claims to be the same way. And just as Jesus lived and now lives forever, so the beast also claims to live, to have survived its wound. Now, Jesus was the one that wounded it in the first place. Jesus wounded it when he died on the cross, just like he silenced the dragon when he shed his blood on the cross. But the beast continues, just like Satan continues to war against the Church, even though he's been defeated. One nation will rise up, set itself up against God, only to fall and have another one take its place, one that was just as bad if not worse as the one before. The Roman emperors who claimed to be gods are long gone, but there are governments that still oppose the Lord, that still set themselves up against Him. It is as if the beast refuses to die.

And that is why the world follows after the beast. That's why the world worships it. Verse 4 of our reading says: "And they worshiped the dragon, for he had given his authority to the beast, and they worshiped the beast, saying, 'Who is like the beast, and who can fight against it?'" Now, the things that the world is saying about the beast here really only are true of God. In our Psalm for this evening, for example, in Psalm 86, we hear: "There is none like you among the gods, O Lord, nor are there any works like yours." God is the one who has no equal. God is the one who

is above all things. But instead of asking, "Who is like the Lord?", as they should've done, they say, "Who is like the beast, and who can fight against it?"

It's like in John's day with the Roman Empire. They had conquered the entire known world. It seemed like there was no one who could stand before them. Who would ever be able to oppose them? But you still hear it today too. Whenever someone says that it's pointless to go against what the government says because the government has things like bombs and tanks, it's the same idea. Or whenever somebody tries to say that if we just have this man in office, all of our problems will go away, it's the same idea. Or even the idea that a majority can never be wrong, that as long as 51% of people say something is true, then it must be true, instead of looking to what God says is true, it's the same idea. All of these things show us, Christians, how the world follows after the beast, saying, "Who is like the beast, and who can fight against it?"

But this isn't the only thing that the beast does. Verse 7 of our reading says: "Also it was allowed to make war on the saints and to conquer them." Because it's not enough for the beast to be called a god. It's not enough for it to just be worshiped like one. It wants to be the only god. It wants to have everyone bend the knee. It wants to have no rival. If God is God, then the beast cannot be God, and the beast hates that. It refuses to go along with that. So it wages war against God and wages war against the Church. This is why tyrants always hate Christians, because Christians remind them of their limitations. Christians remind them that there is a power greater than themselves, and that's why they make war against them.

And in John's time, that was a call for the people to compromise. "Just say Caesar is Lord," they said. "That's all you have to do! Just say Caesar is Lord, and we'll leave you alone. You can be a Christian. You can do whatever you want. You can go to church as often as you want, as long as you just say that one little thing. Just give in on that one little point." But Christians couldn't do that, because Jesus is Lord, not Caesar. And so the Romans persecuted them. They hunted them and killed them. It was true of their businesses too. If you wanted to work, you had to be a part of the guild, and if you wanted to be a part of the guild, you needed to participate in their worship services too. You had to worship their gods or else you weren't going to have a job. And so there were plenty of Christians who lost everything, who became poor because they refused to go along. And so it is also today, Christians. We have governments and societies which try to tell us to just go along with what they're doing. "Believe what we say you should believe, say what we say you should say, and we'll leave you alone. You can be a Christian. You can do whatever you want. All you have to do is give in on that one little thing. And if you don't do it, then you are a threat to society. If you don't do it, then you are the problem. If you don't do it, you are the one holding us back. You are the one causing everything to go wrong. You must change your ways or die!"

And I know that's never easy to deal with, Christians. It is never easy to deal with the pressures of the world. The easy thing to do is to compromise. The easy thing is to go along with what the world is doing, to give in on that one little thing in the hopes that they'll leave you alone. That's the easy thing to do. But that's not who we are as Christians. That's not who we have been called to be. Being a Christian means refusing to go along with the world. Being a Christian means standing firm against the world, even if we have to do it alone. Being a Christian means holding on to God, even if we're the only ones doing it. Yeah, that's not going to be easy. The world will hate us because of it. The world will attack us because of it. We may lose something for being a

Christian, but it is the price that we must pay to follow after Christ. As verse 10 of our reading says: "If anyone is to be taken captive, to captivity he goes; if anyone is to be slain with the sword, with the sword must he be slain. Here is a call for the endurance and faith of the saints."

So how do we deal with it? How do we put up with these things? How do we get through them? We get through them, Christians, by seeing that God is the one in control. Because the beast is allowed to speak blasphemous things, but notice that he is allowed to do it. God allows him to do it. God allows him to carry on the way that he's doing. The beast claims to be mighty. He claims to have no rival, but he's on a leash. He is, in fact, nothing much at all. And the beast is permitted to do these things for forty-two months. God determines exactly how long he can do it, and he can't go for any longer. And the beast is permitted to make war against the saints of God. God allows his Church to suffer, but he does it because in this way, Christians, we become like Christ also in his suffering. If we must go into captivity for being Christians, then that is God's will. If we must be slain because we are Christians, then that is God's will. If we suffer because of Christ, then that is God's will. And this is for our good, because it makes us like Jesus. And nothing happens apart from God. And nothing will go on any longer than God allows it to go on. Though the world fights against God, though the beast rages against God and against his Church, they will fall. They will come to nothing. Because the real question is: "Who is like God, and who can fight against Him?" No one. No one at all.

Therefore, Christians, stand firm. Endure to the end. If the world tells you to sin, don't listen. If the government says that evil is good, don't go along with it. If society tries to pressure you into doing something, don't give in. Yes, that is hard. Yes, it will probably mean losing something because of Jesus, but it's worth it. Because remember: your names are written in the book of life. Governments will fall. Societies will come to an end. But our God goes on forever. So stand firm through it all, knowing that victory will be ours through Jesus Christ.

Let us pray. O Lord God of Hosts, who is the First and the Last and besides whom there is no god, keep us steadfast in true faith against all the pressures of this world, and be with us through every trial, because you are the one in control of all things; through Jesus Christ, your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.