

15th Sunday after Pentecost, Year C

28 August 2016

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Revelation 12:1 – 15:8 (selected verses)

John's Revelation requires a few pieces moving in harmony to make much sense to our modern ears. One is to know a bit of the historical context into which John was writing—what life was like in the Roman Empire for minority religious groups like the early Christians. Another is to know the sacred texts of the community, the Bible, in a way that folks who could not pick it up and read it when convenient might know it—written on

their hearts as the prophet Jeremiah put it. Not being a persecuted religious minority and frankly not knowing our Bibles well enough to pick up on all the references John makes—both of these put us at a disadvantage for trying to make sense of the fantastic imagery and metaphor we encounter.

And I think that is all true as much with today's text as just about any we encounter in Revelation. We skipped over quite a bit of

chapters 12-15 in our reading, but we have beasts and dragons with multiple heads waging war in heaven and earth. A mother who wears the sun as a dress, props her feet on the moon, and wears a dozen stars for a crown. Now given that our sun, a relatively small star on the cosmic scale, could itself fit roughly **1.3 million** earths inside it, I'm pretty convinced we are meant to read all of this as metaphor, as a poetic sermon proclaimed to seven churches in Asia Minor as to us.

With that in mind, even if we find it difficult to wade through the images of dragons

and beasts and a sun clothed mother, I think John nevertheless hides a pretty interesting message to his congregations in this section of his sermon.

The first thing I notice is that John sets some pretty ordinary, mundane activities inside the scope of a cosmic re-creation. Of course when we read about an honorific mother giving birth to a son who is taken into heaven, we immediately think of Mary and Jesus. But this isn't just mother and son in a humble Bethlehem manger. This is a retelling of the first chapters of Genesis. The sun and moon and stars make an appearance.

The woman cries out in birth pangs, which Genesis 3 associated with Adam and Eve's eviction from Eden. The dragon that appears to go after the child is described in verse nine as the "ancient serpent," Adam and Eve's antagonist in the Garden.

And within this cosmic metaphor of creation, the beast is given voice to make war on the people of God. And the weapon the beast chooses is the very mundane act of commerce. Of buying and selling. This beast has the power to slaughter those who do not worship it, yet it chooses to exercise its power into the everyday structures of our existence. In that

way, the mark of the beast becomes a visible sign for how we live in the world. The beast wants to be worshiped, and it does that by drawing people into an economy of buying and selling.

Now for me, as I'm sure for most of us, this gets to be a pretty touchy topic. I like getting a paycheck. I like using that paycheck to buy things—things like food and clothes, and less necessary things like a TV and a computer and a cell phone, dinner at a restaurant, tickets to a movie or a play, a day at Dollywood with Wallace. I like to buy and sell stuff and frankly I'm pretty uncomfortable associ-

ating those activities with the embodiment of evil.

But I don't think we have to go quite that far to at least recognize that God's economy sounds a little different. Listen to these words from Isaiah 55:

"Ho, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and you that have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price. Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labor for that which does not satisfy?"

I don't think we have to say that commerce, or buying and selling things, is evil or the purview of the beast to

recognize that it is possible to participate in an economy that draws us away from God, from community, from one another. Any time we forget that a person's worth is not measured by his or her bank account, any time we exploit other people, or exploit creation, for our own gain, we participate in an economy that is not God's. Jesus even tells a story about a wealthy young ruler who would rather hang on to his fortune than be a part of the community to which Jesus invites him.

I think for me it often comes down to this. We all use our money for different things. To meet differ-

ent needs and desires. But what money represents for me is freedom. Freedom to buy what I want to eat at the grocery store, freedom to do the things I want to do and to have the spare time to do them, and when I'm truly honest, freedom to not have to depend on someone else for my own wellbeing.

It's a silly example, but I've shared before that if I'm cooking dinner and need an egg or a cup of sugar, I'm far more likely to get my keys and wallet, drive 10 minutes into town, buy a dozen eggs and a bag of sugar at Food City, and drive 10 minutes back home than I am to call up one

of you and ask to borrow some. It's not that I don't think most anyone in here would happily share, but that means depending on someone else.

On the other hand, God's economy offers us freedom as well, but not a freedom that can be bought or sold. And not a freedom that liberates us from dependence on one another. Instead it's a freedom that comes from trusting fully in God and one another. It's freedom that comes with an economy of grace, not an economy of buying and selling.

John frames all this as a cosmic battle between good and evil. Between the beast the

heavenly forces. But for me it's more of an every day battle. Am I going to pursue freedom in my own independence or through community? Am I going to put my trust, and use my money and resources, to further an economy in which anything can be bought or sold, or to work toward God's economy of grace in which all are fed and loved?

It is interesting to me that the response of the faithful to this beastly economy is to sing. To sing a hymn – the song of Moses: God overcomes the economy of the beast through a song, a new song. In particular, a song that points us

back to Israel's bondage, their forced participation within the economy of a nation that saw Israel as simply a tool for Egypt's legacy.

This new song declares a different possibility – that we are invited, and welcomed to dwell in God's economy of grace. It is a song, a hymn, that we sing not merely with words, but with lives that reflect a different way of living in the world. It is a hymn we sing together, we sing in community, we sing in our prayers, our concerns, our hopes, the shape of our daily lives in this world. A new song.

Amen