

December 24, 1999  
Chapel Hill Presbyterian Church  
Mark James Toone

**A CHRISTMAS MESSAGE FOR A NEW MILLENNIUM**  
**GOD'S TREASURE BOX**  
*Revelation 11:19-12:1-6*

Seven days and three and one-half hours from now, we will find out who was right. Y2K. Will we go into global economic meltdown? Will we really get to use all those supplies we have been stockpiling? Frankly, it has been a little tough for me to get too excited about the impact of Y2K on us. Let's see, possible power outages, transportation shut downs, long lines, limited phone access. Shoot, we go through that five or six times a year over here. Nothing new about that for us.

But for many it is a serious matter. A lot of attention has been given this issue. A lot of speculation. So---what will the world look like in eight days? I don't know. But if you are as uncertain as I am, then there is no better place to be on this last Christmas of this Millennium than here. Because we are here to celebrate the one who knows the future. The one who has created the future. The one who is sitting in the future waiting for us. It is this great, powerful, all-knowing one whose remarkable birth we celebrate tonight.

We have been studying the Book of the Revelation these past few months. Since a main theme of Revelation is the end times, it seemed an appropriate book to study and an appropriate time to study it. But of course, tonight is Christmas. What would Revelation have to say to us on Christmas Eve?

Well, Christmas is for surprises. Let me surprise you with what I am sure is a Christmas Eve story you have never heard preached before. (Read text)

Well, was I right? How many of you have ever heard this story told on Christmas Eve? How many of you have ever heard this story told? Well, unusual as it might seem, we are listening here to John's Christmas story. You realize, don't you, that it is only Matthew and Luke who tell us about Christmas. Matthew tells us

about Joseph's dream and about the magi and about Herod. Luke tells us the story from Mary's perspective. From him we also hear about the angels. But that's it. If we were depending on the other two gospels, Mark and John, to tell us about the birth of Jesus, we would be disappointed. They don't say a word.

But later on, near the end of his life, John who had written the gospel wrote another book. It was the Revelation. It was the story that he had written down after God gave him a vision of incredible things. Mostly his vision has to do with the end of the world. But smack dab in the middle of the Revelation is this story, the story about the woman and the dragon.

Is the woman Mary? Some have thought so. Others think the woman represents the nation of Israel from which the Messiah descended. Certainly the child that is born is Jesus. And clearly what we have taking place is a great battle. The dragon, who represents Satan, waits eagerly for the woman to give birth. You can almost see this in your mind's eye, lying at wait, ready to pounce upon this helpless child at its mother's weakest moment. This story is a picture of the great battle between good and evil. The battle between God and Satan. The battle for the world

When we think about the birth of Jesus, we usually examine it through a microscope. All we see are the things that we enjoy looking at. A young virgin surprised by an angel's announcement. A young man trying to do an honorable thing. A hard journey in her ninth month; an inn that is full; a manure filled barn that is turned into an obstetrics ward. Shepherd's awakened from their sleep by angels, told to go and see this new baby that had been born. Wise men schlepping themselves across hundreds and hundreds of miles of desert to pay homage to this little king.

This is what we see. It is warm. It is beautiful. It is precious. Even for the non-religious, the story is inspiring. Even for those who have no interest in following the adult Jesus, the story of the baby Jesus is ...well...cute.

Revelation 12 makes us take a much broader look at the story of Christmas. It lays the context. It tells us why. It tells us what was at stake. A great force of evil was at work in the world. Evil that encouraged human beings to hate one another, steal from one

another, slaughter one another, dominate one another. This evil force the Bible calls Satan. Something had to be done about it. God could not allow evil to continue unabated ...unopposed.

So he prepared a preposterous plan. He would come to earth as a baby. He would live as we were all created to live. He would love as we were all created to love. He would show us what God intended from the first. And then, in a supreme act of love, he would sacrifice his perfect life to save those who wanted to be saved.

That was the plan. It had been the plan from the beginning of time. But it was unveiled to us on Christmas Eve in Bethlehem, nearly 2000 years ago. Satan saw it coming and wanted to destroy the plan before it had a chance to work. So he lay in wait. We don't understand exactly what is meant when Revelation talks about this horrible dragon. But when you put a name on the dragon ...a name like Herod ...it makes more sense. Herod was the king. The wise men said this new baby would be the king. Herod would have nothing of that. So he was poised, ready to destroy the one who would take his throne. And we have the horrible story of the slaughter of the Innocents.

The story of the Woman and the Dragon reminds us of the context of that first Christmas. A world that was desperately broken. A world that was at war with itself. A world very much like our world today. But notice this: The story begins, not in chapter 12, but one verse earlier in 11:19. Listen carefully to this again. "Then God's temple in heaven was opened, and within his temple was seen the ark of his covenant. And there came flashes of lightning, rumblings, peals of thunder, an earthquake and a great hailstorm."

In talking about this text tonight, I was going to bring it into a modern light by referring back to the movie, "Raiders of the Lost Ark." Then I remembered that that movie debuted 15 years ago. I really am dating myself. But in that movie, Indiana Jones is searching for the lost Ark of the Covenant. The Ark of the Covenant was a box covered with gold. It had gold angels on the top of it. Inside was stored the most precious reminders of God's deliverance of the people of Israel out of Egypt, including the tablets upon which were written the Ten Commandments.

Wherever the ark was was a holy place. Even when they wandered in the wilderness and kept the ark in a tent, that was the place where God came down to talk with Moses. When the people finally reached the Promised Land, they ended up building a place in which to keep the ark. It was called the temple. The inner most room where the ark was kept was called the Holy of Holies. It was so holy that only the high priest was allowed to go inside that part of the temple and then, only once a year, on the Day of Atonement. When he went in, he had a chain tied to his ankle so that if he was struck down by the awesome presence of God, at least his fellow priests could haul his body out.

The ark and the temple represented the dilemma facing the people of God. That little box, filled with all kinds of precious treasures, represented the absolute holiness of God; his unapproachability. In the same way that to touch a fire is to get burned, so to come too close to the radiant, holy God was to risk death. In a sense, the temple was the way of protecting the people of Israel from their own God.

But all along, God had a better idea. He wanted to be able to be with us. To walk among us. To hold us and laugh with us. In Revelation 11.19, we begin to see that plan unfolding. Do you realize how remarkable these words are: "Then God's temple in heaven was opened, and within his temple was seen the ark of his covenant." Always, the ark had been hidden and forbidden. Always, God's treasure box was too holy to be touched, too holy to be seen by all but a few. There was nothing humans could do about it. They just were not made to be in the presence of a holy God.

Then God did an incredible thing. He ripped the roof off of his temple. He pulled down the doors. He opened up his treasure box and presented to the earth the greatest treasure ever offered. His own Son.

We read this evening about the Wise men who came bearing gifts to offer at the feet of the baby Jesus. We carry on that tradition when we offer gifts to each other. When we take the time to think about it, some of us might even ask God what gifts we can offer to him in gratitude for his love for us. But the truth is, the gift has

already been given. It is God who opened his treasure box, God who presented us his great gift...the gift of his Son.

Recently I traveled to Israel. When I returned, I got my two kids together and said, "I've got surprises for you." I pulled out olive wood toys, a beautiful cross, a stuffed camel and other pretty cool stuff. When I was done, Cooper, who will be four tomorrow, said, "Daddy, Look it I have a surprise for you." His hands were behind his back. "What is it Cooper." With a flourish, he pulled his "surprise" out from behind his back. It was a dirty dishrag.

There is a sense in which anything we could possibly offer to God would be nothing more than a dirty dishrag. Compared to the gift he has given us in his Son Jesus, what could we possibly give? On the other hand, I wonder if God isn't as delighted when we offer something of ourselves in the same way that I was at Cooper's wonderful gift. I really don't have much use for a dirty dishrag. But I have a great deal of use for a little son who has watched his Daddy give him gifts and wants to try and learn to give back to him.

My friends, on this Christmas Eve, we remind ourselves that God tore open his treasure box and offered the very best that he had to offer...his own son. He offered this gift to you and to me so that the evil at work in this world ...and, sadly, within our own hearts...might not have the final word. The greatest Christmas gift you could offer in return would be to say, "Lord, thank you for loving me this much. I offer you my life, as dirty as it might be. Please make it clean."