

“Worshipping the Beast”

Introduction: Last Monday afternoon when Rama and I went to see the film “The Good Lie.” It’s a very powerful story about the resettlement in America of some of those known as “the lost boys,” little boys, most of them, who were orphaned as a result of the brutal civil war in the Sudan. The film focuses on how a group of these boys began to make a new life in Kansas City. As they struggled to learn how to use everything from a straw to a telephone, it was heartwarming to see them be able to begin to make a new life in our country. As well, it gave great perspective on what we are able to enjoy here that we probably far too often take for granted.

However, the next day, during what we call “Mid-Term Elections,” I was not so encouraged. Now I wouldn’t for a second want to experience what those boys who came from Sudan went through. And I was a political science major in college, I love my U.S. passport, and I greatly appreciate the right and ability to vote. But what I see in the events leading up to an election day like last Tuesday, and what we’ll be subject to again over the next two years leading up to a new presidential election, is a lot of mudslinging between individuals and parties, a lot of promises made that no one can keep, a lot of false information that gets floated, a lot of money tossed about and wasted, and perhaps above all, a lot of misplaced hope in how one particular candidate or party or is going solve all of our problems.

And so I went from thinking about all of the wonderful opportunities our country offers, to considering how our politics, and political system, border on idolatry. That may strike you as a pretty strong word, but if idolatry is substituting a created thing, even good one, for God, in order to find meaning and purpose and comfort and security in life, then things like our government, the “state” and all of its trappings, even a state that can provide a new start for orphaned boys from across the world, can be in danger of becoming idolatrous. Revelation 13 calls such idolatry worshipping the beast. So let’s try to unpack some of the symbolism that we find in this next segment of John’s vision, and see where it meets us as we think about our relationship with the country in which we live.

I. A Counterfeit Trinity

A. Last week, in chapter 12, we met the dragon, identified by John as “that ancient serpent, called the devil or Satan” (12:9). The dragon represents the personal power of evil that opposes God and seeks to woo his people away from him and his good purposes. The encouragement we were given was that through the cross, the dragon has been defeated and bounced out of heaven. His ultimate doom is sure (which is detailed in Rev. 20). But there is also a warning. The warning is that knowing this, the devil is ticked and is now roaming around the world making life as miserable as he can for the followers of Jesus, identified as the offspring of the woman.

B. What we learn in chapter 13 is that the dragon is not working alone. He has two awful henchmen, a beast that comes out of the sea and one that comes out of the earth. Together, the three comprise a kind of counterfeit trinity. The sea beast comes very close to resembling Jesus, both with his fatal wound, and with power and authority and a throne being given to him by the dragon. And the land beast resembles the work of the Holy Spirit, with its performance of great signs and wonders, and its encouragement for people to worship the beast from the sea.

This is a helpful picture of what evil does. It mimics the true God, even presenting itself in divine language and images, which is why it can become so deceptive. In fact, the beast had become so captivating John says “the whole world was filled with wonder and followed the beast” (v. 3).

II. The Beast of Human Kingdoms

A. So let’s just focus on this beast from the sea. Who or what is he? The beast from the sea is political power, it is the state—human kingdoms—that have moved out from under God and are now playing God. We know this from the description of the beast that John sees. It has ten horns and resembles a leopard, a bear, and a lion (v. 2). This symbolism comes straight out of Daniel 7 which describes a dream that Daniel had. In it, he saw four great beasts coming up from the sea. They are described, as in Revelation, as a lion, a bear, a leopard, and one with ten horns. As the dream unfolds it becomes clear that these four beasts represent four human kingdoms, each of which had rejected the living God and had, therefore, become beastly.

B. As we think about how the state can move into the place of an idol, it’s worth noting that government was God’s good idea, instituted by him to be his servant in the keeping of good order. That role is described in Romans 13. But by the time we get to Revelation 13, it’s apparent that government can also move away from its ordained role. What John is warning his readers is that the state can move from the role of being the servant of the Lord to the role of the servant of Satan. It’s a scary thing. When the state moves out from under God and takes power, and when its citizens idolize this state, it can become hell on earth. Just look at Nazi Germany.

C. In the first century, the beast was clearly Rome, as John’s readers would have recognized all too well. Beginning with Julius Caesar, who ruled at the birth of Jesus, Roman emperors had been deified—given the status and worship of a god—after their death. By the time of the emperors Nero and Domitian, who ruled in the latter part of the century, such deification had moved into a demand that the whole world worship the emperor as Lord and God. In most of the cities to which John was writing, temples had been built to these deified emperors and the name of the Roman Empire had even been changed to the Eternal Empire. Recall that it was John’s refusal to worship the emperor that had landed him on the prison island of Patmos, where he received and recorded this vision. But it’s not only Rome that John pictures. His vision seems to have rolled the four beasts of Daniel into one, the point being that any state, any human kingdom, any form of government at any time that has ejected the living God from the center of its life and has itself become the center of life, is symbolized by the beast.

D. Just a word, then, on the number 666, perhaps the most famous verse in the entire vision! If we were to assign numerical values to the Hebrew spelling of his name, it could possibly designate the Emperor Nero, one of the most beastly of the Roman emperors who, as v. 7 puts it, waged war against God’s holy people. But it’s not that clear. More likely, given that seven is a biblical number of completeness and perfection, three sixes is simply a symbol of massive incompleteness and imperfection. It is one short of the real thing, who is Jesus, symbolized by the number seven, three times over! And the warning is that idols, human constructs, always fall short; they cannot produce what they promise.

Illustration: Reflecting on the way in which the state can become an idol, a good thing which becomes an ultimate thing to which we look for our comfort and security, meaning and purpose, it’s helpful to recognize that because we’ve been created in the image of God, we are wired to worship some absolute power. As scholar Bruce Metzger puts it, if we don’t worship the true and real power behind the universe, we will construct a false power to which we will give allegiance (*Breaking the Code*, 77).

III. The Beast of Civil Religion

A. So what is the beast today? In what way might John be warning us about to whom or what we pledge allegiance in the place of God? Here I tread very carefully but also, I think, very necessarily, into the realm of what is known as “civil religion.” This term, as it relates to America, describes a form of devotion and commitment that binds the citizens of this nation together around the seemingly sacred nature of our country. Although there is a separation of church and state, it has not prevented, somewhat ironically, the political realm from taking on a religious dimension. This religious dimension borrows so heavily from the language of Christianity that many cannot see the difference.

B. Civil religion had its beginnings in the events surrounding the Revolution, beginning with the Puritan John Winthrop, who identified New England with Christ’s “city upon a hill.” Drawing on terms and images from Christianity, Europe was equated with Egypt, Americans to God’s persecuted chosen people, General Washington became the divinely appointed Moses who led his people out of the hands of tyranny, America became the Promised Land, the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution became the sacred scriptures, and because God had accomplished all of this to establish a new social order, it was to serve as a light to all nations. Since then, our various wars, from the Civil War to the war on terror, has only upped the ante. The flag, not the cross, is our sacred symbol. It is what we’re to pledge allegiance to and what we are said to sacrifice our life for. Our presidents and legislators are our prophets and priests. Memorial Day, the Fourth of July, Veterans Day, and the various presidential birthdays are our sacred holidays. We understand ourselves to be a redeemer nation, the world’s last great hope, though what we seem to be hoping for is that other nations become a democracy, not followers of Jesus. In fact, you’ll rarely, if ever, hear Jesus mentioned in the realm of civil religion. If he is, it’s as a great teacher or helpful example, but never as Lord of heaven and earth! While the inaugural addresses from Washington, Adams, Jefferson, and on down all make mention of God, nothing much is said about who he is except that he seems to be rather Unitarian, more interested in law and order than sacrifice and love, and is involved in our world to the extent that we believe he somehow has a special concern for America.

C. Now, all this may sound rather unpatriotic to you! In fact, it is very patriotic, and that is the issue. As I said, I love my passport, the right to vote, and the many benefits I can enjoy along with those who are trying to get a new start from places like Sudan. Our nation has offered us, and many others, incredible opportunities. But, because of our history, and because we have loaded so much of who we are with theological language and images, the line becomes very thin between patriotism and idolatry, between relying on human, political systems to bring salvation and meaning and purpose to our lives rather than the grace of God through Jesus Christ. If we’re not careful, we can skate awfully close to worshipping the beast. So how can we guard against such idolatry? Darrell Johnson, in his work on this chapter, offers several, what he calls “discipleship implications” for us in the 21st c. [*Discipleship on the Edge*, pp, 237-8, 251). Let me close with four.

1. The text calls us to hold our allegiance to political institutions lightly. They can accomplish good things, and we should get involved in them. But we need to keep our eyes open and even retain a healthy suspicion of them, because they can tend toward thinking that they’re the savior, and that they have all the answers, regardless of whether what they pursue is consistent with the kingdom of God or not.

2. We need to be aware that not only can political institutions begin to think too much of themselves, but that religion can lose its way as well, especially when it puts its trust in the power of a particular nation, especially the power that seeks to meet force with force, and not with

sacrifice. Johnson tells the story of a conversation he had with a missionary while serving in the Philippines. The U.S. was being pressured to withdraw its military forces from Clark Air Force Base and Subic Naval Base. The missionary wondered, “If the U.S. military leaves, what is going to happen to God’s work in this country?” Johnson just let his words hang until the reality of them set in. And that is that it’s easy to succumb to the deceit of the beast who wants us to believe that power is in him, and not in Jesus Christ. To quote Bruce Metzger again, “In the last analysis, it is always a choice between the power that operates through inflicting suffering—the power of the beast—and the power that operates through accepting suffering—the power of the Lamb.”

3. The text calls us to pledge allegiance to the trans-national kingdom of God, the only kingdom that will last. As followers of Jesus, we need to lift our eyes above the idol of nationalism and put them on to the multi-national, transnational body of Christ. As Christians, we have more in common with a North Korean disciple of Jesus than the person who lives next door to us but does not know him.

4. We need to fight our temptation and tendency to worship the beast with worship of the living God who has revealed himself in Jesus Christ, gifted us with his Spirit, and rules over all nations on the throne of the universe. The questions, Who will I worship and adore? To whom will I pledge allegiance? In whom will I trust? are critical questions.

As Moses declares of the God who rescued the Israelites from slavery in Egypt, and through Jesus rescues us now from the slavery of sin and is in the process of making all things new through his Spirit:

Lord, you have been our dwelling place in all generations. Before the mountains were brought forth, or ever you had formed the earth and the world, from everlasting to everlasting you are God. [Psalm 90:1-2]

This God, revealed as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and not the counterfeit trinity of the dragon and the two beasts, is the real power behind the universe. Only he can save. He is our hope and our sure defense. Let us worship him.