

**Sermon:** Wonder and Delight

**Series:**

**Scripture Reading:** Proverbs 8:1-4; 22-31

**Preacher:** Rev. Susan Shaw-Meadow



We are now in the thick of it...

Chapter 12 marks a major division in the Book of Revelation.

The beginning of this book resembled the content of a letter. We learned about the message to the seven churches in Asia Minor.

Suddenly, the content shifted, and we were introduced to John's terrifying vision of Heaven and God's throne. We also learned about the seven seals on a sacred scroll, the Lamb of God with seven eyes and seven horns, and the tribulation that unfolds because the Lamb of God opened the scroll.

As Pastor Susan preached last Sunday, there was a brief pause between the sixth and seventh seal. This interruption presented the glorious vision of a great multitude clothed in white robes praising God in heaven—a magnificent and hopeful vision of a possible future, especially for those facing extraordinary seasons of suffering, persecution, and despair.

This pause provided us with a respite for what lies ahead.

And spoiler alert! Things get much worse before they get any better.

What ties all these sections together is that, thus far, all these challenges and tribulations are part of God's plan for humanity as laid out by this sacred scroll. God, Jesus Christ, and the celestial beings have been the primary characters of our story up to this point.

But chapter 12 changes all of that.

John receives a new vision that includes a woman clothed with the sun, the moon under her feet, and a crown of twelve stars on her head. It will be correct for us to interpret this woman as God's chosen people. Twelve stars represent the twelve tribes of Israel.

This woman is pregnant and cries out in pain as she is about to give birth. And an enormous red dragon with seven heads, ten horns, and seven crowns is attempting to devour this child.

This sounds like a familiar folktale. We've been in this situation before, as we remember the birth stories of Moses and Jesus and how many innocent lives were lost due to arrogance and fear.

While new in John's Revelation, this Red Dragon is oddly familiar to many of its readers.

John purposefully tries to capture the attention of his audience by presenting an evil force that would be easy to recognize. By recalling these two birth narratives, John warns his readers how bad things will get before a clear, hopeful resolution occurs.

Consequently, the audience knows that John's message must be taken seriously. Unlike the tribulation and suffering seen in previous chapters, which affected the whole world, the Red Dragon only targets God's people. This suffering is for those who do not follow but stand against this Dragon, his beasts, and their followers.

Chapter twelve transports us into a cosmic war between good and evil, involving ordinary people like you and me. We have a role to play in this cosmic war.

So, the question here is, who or what are we facing?

The ancient Greeks classified dragons as a type of serpent. So, another fair interpretation of the accuser is to see this creature as a large, scary, intimidating serpent.

Both the New and Old Testaments constantly present serpents as symbols of evil or whatever stands against God and God's purposes for creation.

Bible scholars argue that this symbolism most likely originated during the time of Exodus or as Exodus was written.

Ancient Egypt regarded the goddess Wadjet as the protector of the land and its people and the guardian of the cosmos, warding off chaos and evil. The goddess Wadjet was often depicted as a snake, usually an Egyptian cobra.

You may know Wadjet by another name, and there are other Egyptian gods and mythological creatures that also resemble snakes, but they are not as prominent in role or depiction as Wadjet.

Ahh... It all makes sense, doesn't it?

The enemy of the Hebrew people was, of course, their oppressor, Egypt. And if a cobra-looking goddess protected Egypt, then that creature also became the enemy of God and God's people!

Other instances in the Bible include the most famous snake in history - the one who tempted Eve to eat from the forbidden tree.

Another significant connection is that Goliath's armor is described as having scales. David ultimately cuts off his head after defeating him—something you do if you want to kill a snake.

Again, it is no coincidence that we hear snake symbolism to describe David's might against God's enemy. This triumph marks David's path towards becoming king. If he can defeat the snake, he can lead and protect God's people.

Some New Testament references include Jesus and John the Baptist employing the term "brood of vipers" to refer to those religious leaders who were doing evil in the eyes of the Lord.

In the Book of Acts, a poisonous viper latches onto Paul's hand as he makes a fire for the survivors of a shipwreck. Everyone expects him to die, but they have a new respect for him when he doesn't. This symbolism states how God protects those who serve him from the "snake."

Therefore, we should not be surprised to encounter the metaphor of the snake representing God's enemy in this great cosmic battle between good and evil.

However, John escalates the description of this creature by calling it a dragon. Serpents bite and harm, but dragons devour and destroy. John exaggerates this snake symbolism to present a power unlike any other—a great evil capable of causing great suffering to God's people.

For centuries, earthly powers and certain people have embodied this snake - Egyptians, Philistines, Assyrians, Pharisees, and in John's Revelation, Romans. But John goes deeper to guide our attention towards the one behind these snakes. The Red Dragon is to be interpreted as the superior snake.

At the end of chapter 12, after Michael and his angels defeat the Red Dragon, this creature is cast down to the earth. It then searches for the woman mentioned at the beginning of our story but cannot capture her.

The Red Dragon, as anyone would expect, becomes enraged and wages war against God and God's people.

John is warning us: Be careful with the snake but fear the dragon.

And when I say, "fear the dragon," I don't mean it as a suggestion to be scared and withdraw, but as a "Pay attention. Don't let the dragon fool you. There is great evil in our world today. Stand firm and do what is right. Face your fears with courage."

Chapter 12 presents a good-news, bad-news kind of situation: on one hand God's power can overcome evil in any form. On the other, God's people, must now join this fight. The Red Dragon is here among us. It has been and will continue to be here until Christ comes again.

God's people must endure whatever evil lies ahead because this Red Dragon has a weak point, sort of an Achilles' Heel. It is vulnerable to two things: the blood of the Lamb (which means the power of Jesus Christ) and the word of our testimony.

Friends, how we respond to the evil we see today matters. How we hold on to our faith despite our doubts matters. How we proclaim and testify to God's good news in Jesus Christ matters.

This is the cornerstone of John's Revelation: we must endure our trials and tribulations with hope, resisting the temptation to give up or join the evil forces in our midst, because our testimony can make a tremendous difference.

As Pastor Matt Gaventa recently shared about this text, "Revelation doesn't just call its readers to testimony. It believes in their power. It's not just calling people of faith to tell the truth. It believes that people of faith who tell and live by the truth can slay dragons."

But take note, friend, this is not warfare as we know it. We cannot defeat this Red Dragon through violence, guns, armies, bombs, or any other traditional means of retaliation. This cosmic war is a spiritual one. It is a battle that seeks not to destroy by force but through testimony, witness, and faithfulness.

We join in this battle when our lives point to Jesus Christ.

We stand against today's evil forces, the Red Dragon in our midst, when we actively participate in building, bringing, and professing God's plan for creation, which is, as we will see next week, a new heaven and a new earth.

Many of you know Andrew Dodson, a gifted musician and aspiring theologian. He shared a post on social media that truly spoke to me, especially as I wrote this sermon. He presented the power of testimony in a way that inspired me, and I hope it will inspire you, too.

He said, "What's more, I've come to believe that having faith is itself a heroic act. It's no secret that the world is full of suffering, tragedy, and evil. I believe that for someone to look the abyss in the face, to see all the evil that the world can conjure, and to defiantly declare the world to be good and God to be love, is an act of heroism. Faith isn't naive, and it's not ignorant, it's courageous."

So, beloved, as we leave today's vision behind and return to the world outside these church walls, let us not go empty-handed. Let us carry with us the courage of faith—the kind of courage that does not deny the existence of evil, but faces it head-on with the testimony of God's goodness and Christ's love.

Revelation 12 reminds us that evil is real, active, and deeply personal. But it also reminds us that evil is not ultimate. The Red Dragon may seek to devour and destroy, but it is already defeated by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of those who testify.

This means you. This means me. This means us—the church.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

Doesn't Wisdom cry out and Understanding shout? From the hillsides and every street corner, wisdom raises her voice inviting us to listen to her counsel, to heed her teaching.

Did you catch that? The person Wisdom in the Book of Proverbs is a woman.

The voice of wisdom is female. She speaks to all who will listen.

The Book of Proverbs is addressed, formally, to a young man whose father wants to see him grow to responsible adulthood. Like every good father.

To the extent that he follows Wisdom's instruction, the young man will make wise choices and avoid the traps of youthful temptation. He will prize Wisdom above all other possessions, more precious are they than gold or silver. He will join Wisdom's practitioners who turn from folly, recognize evil, and live. This Wisdom, of course, is for all of us.

Proverbs is among the oldest books in the Hebrew Bible, dating to the mid-tenth century BCE. Proverbs is ascribed to King Solomon who reigned at that time and who was greatly esteemed for his wisdom. We will note, however, that the beginning chapters of Proverbs, including Chapter 8, are thought to be later compositions, dating to the Hebrews' 6th century return from exile in Babylon.

We are familiar with Proverbs' short pithy expressions:

The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom (9:10);

Pride goeth before destruction, and an haughty spirit before a fall (16:18).

Train up a child in the way he should go and when he is old he will not depart from it (22:6).

Proverbs 8 is different. In an extended poem, we get Wisdom's backstory.

Wisdom is ancient, the first born of all creation. When God laid the foundations for the earth and heavens she was there. Before the primordial waters of chaos, she was.

When God set boundaries and gave order to the new creation, she was.

What is not at all clear is Wisdom's function at creation. What was her job?

It is a question that has occupied scholars for centuries.

Is Wisdom *a master of crafts*, as I read in the Common English Bible? If so, what was her craft? How did she practice it?

Was she a child, as some contemporary scholars prefer? Might that fit better with her playful persona? Clearly, Wisdom functions as a playful element in Creation.

She has fun, frolicking with the created order. She delights in the human race.

From the very beginning, Proverbs tells us, God has a playful companion.

### **Play is built into the fabric of Creation.**

Wait, what? You're saying that God, the Creator of Heaven and Earth has a companion? In our Adult Faith Formation class, Eldon just led us through two creation accounts in the Book of Genesis. Now we're saying there is a third Creation story? In a sense, yes. I always remember Professor of New Testament Margaret Aymer's very first lesson: The Bible is a library. A library containing a great diversity of source material and literary forms.

The creation accounts in Genesis chapters 1 and 2 are different from each other, and they are different from Wisdom's story in Proverbs 8. All three are part of the canon. We read all three as God's holy Word, offering guidance for our living.

Let's engage Wisdom's story with curiosity:

### **Play is built into the fabric of Creation.**

I suppose one of the things I like so much about working with children is you're never far from a playful moment. I'm pretty well recovered from a week of active learning and service at Mission Kerrville. The exuberance of young bodies and spritely spirits put an exclamation mark on our experience.

The way that traveling across campus, or along the riverfront, naturally involved running and jumping. Why walk when you can run?

The giggles at frisky pups and sweet smiles for their owners.

The easy connection with senior helpers.

The deep concentration of children at work. The fun of children at play.

**Play is built into the fabric of Creation.**

It turns out that modern neuroscience agrees. Play is an innate human capacity. We are most ourselves, more resilient and creative when we develop and sustain our capacity for play. We may lose the capacity to totally immerse ourselves in play as young children do, **but we grown up humans can be *playful*.**

According to Dr. Stuart Brown, founder of the National Institute for Play - right! -

“Play is a state of mind that one has when absorbed in an activity that provides enjoyment and a suspension of sense of time. Play is self-motivated so you want to do it again and again.”

Consider the following attributes of play:

- Play is self-chosen and self-directed.
- The means (or process) of play is valued more than the outcome.
- Play has structure or rules that emanate from the minds of the players.
- Play is imaginative, non-literal, or mentally removed in some way from “real” or “serious” life.
- Play involves an active, alert, but non-stressed frame of mind.

This is similar to the way we describe being “in the zone.” We are calm, focused and absorbed. We enjoy what we are doing. Like a child at play.

Dr. Jack Panksepp describes the way our brains are literally wired for play.

As he likes to say “play lights up the brain.”

Panksepp’s work shows that play is part of our biology and that *play is essential for healthy brain development in children, as well as emotional well-being for adults.*

(I’m going to say that again: ...)

### **Play is built into the fabric of Creation.**

Some of you may be familiar with the children’s faith formation method called Godly Play. Developed by Episcopal priest Jerome Berryman, Godly Play uses the child’s innate capacity for wonder to teach core stories and concepts of the Christian faith. Based on the Montessori method of child-directed learning, the Godly Play teacher presents a story with simple materials and leads the children in exploring the story using questions that begin “I wonder...”

*I wonder what this place could be?... I wonder who this shepherd could be?...I wonder if you’ve ever been to a place like this?*

In Godly Play, children are given time for their own creative response using art and manipulatives. The Godly Play classroom builds community through a simple shared meal and quiet conversation. It takes a lot of planning and preparation to fully implement a Godly Play program. Even so, I have found the Godly Play method to be adaptive to different settings and age groups. It really does work. It can be quite magical.

Jerome Berryman is now of blessed memory. For years he led Godly Play trainings for new teachers. I was privileged to attend one of his workshops in San Antonio. Sitting cross legged in a circle with this masterfully playful storyteller was a true gift.

### **Play is built into the fabric of Creation.**

So where does this leave us? Are you feeling play challenged?

Not to worry. As we grow up we do, as the Apostle Paul put in his letter to the Corinthians, “put away childish things”. We have responsibilities; we carry burdens that hopefully were not ours when we were young. Our experience changes us, Our experience sobers us. We could all use a good joke.



## **A Father's Day story from my own household.**

I don't remember how it began but every so often our family comes out with humor rankings. The funniest at the top, the most serious and humorless at the bottom. Yours truly perennially occupies one of those bottom slots while my husband and son always come out on top. No fair, the girls and I complain. They came up with this gambit in the first place. They assign the rankings. What can we expect?

I'm sure you have your own family stories that make you laugh until you cry, give you perspective, and brighten the darkest day. This is so important.

We noted that these early chapters of proverbs are a later addition, dating to the time when the Israelites were reestablishing community in Judea following the exile.

It was a time of great social change. A time when the Israelites sought out the ethical and moral teachings of their tradition. In vulnerability, our forebears in the faith turned to wisdom that would help them navigate their new circumstance.

We too live in a time of great social change, a time of tremendous political tension.

We too look for wisdom. May we engage our own time with a twinkle in the eye and a playful spirit as one of the very best ways to confront our challenges with creativity, insight, and hope.

*Doesn't Wisdom cry out and understanding shout?..*

*I was beside him growing up.*

*I was daily his delight, playing before him every moment,*

*Playing with his inhabited world,*

*Delighting in the offspring of adam.*

(William P. Brown translation)