

Romans 8:18-27

I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us. ¹⁹For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God; ²⁰for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope ²¹that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. ²²We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now; ²³and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies. ²⁴For in^[o] hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes^[p] for what is seen? ²⁵But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.

²⁶Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes^[q] with sighs too deep for words. ²⁷And God,^[r] who searches the heart, knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit^[s] intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.^[t]

The Woman and the Dragon

12 A great portent appeared in heaven: a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars.² She was pregnant and was crying out in birth pangs, in the agony of giving birth.³ Then another portent appeared in heaven: a great red dragon, with seven heads and ten horns, and seven diadems on his heads.⁴ His tail swept down a third of the stars of heaven and threw them to the earth. Then the dragon stood before the woman who was about to bear a child, so that he might devour her child as soon as it was born.⁵ And she gave birth to a son, a male child, who is to rule^[a] all the nations with a rod of iron. But her child was snatched away and taken to God and to his throne;⁶ and the woman fled into the wilderness, where she has a place prepared by God, so that there she can be nourished for one thousand two hundred sixty days.

Michael Defeats the Dragon

⁷ And war broke out in heaven; Michael and his angels fought against the dragon. The dragon and his angels fought back,⁸ but they were defeated, and there was no longer any place for them in heaven.⁹ The great dragon was thrown down, that ancient serpent, who is called the Devil and Satan, the deceiver of the whole world—he was thrown down to the earth, and his angels were thrown down with him.

¹⁰ Then I heard a loud voice in heaven, proclaiming,

“Now have come the salvation and the power
and the kingdom of our God
and the authority of his Messiah,^[b]

for the accuser of our comrades^[c] has been thrown down,
who accuses them day and night before our God.

¹¹ But they have conquered him by the blood of the Lamb

and by the word of their testimony,
for they did not cling to life even in the face of death.

¹² Rejoice then, you heavens
and those who dwell in them!

But woe to the earth and the sea,
for the devil has come down to you
with great wrath,
because he knows that his time is short!”

The Dragon Fights Again on Earth

¹³ So when the dragon saw that he had been thrown down to the earth, he pursued^[d] the woman who had given birth to the male child. ¹⁴ But the woman was given the two wings of the great eagle, so that she could fly from the serpent into the wilderness, to her place where she is nourished for a time, and times, and half a time. ¹⁵ Then from his mouth the serpent poured water like a river after the woman, to sweep her away with the flood. ¹⁶ But the earth came to the help of the woman; it opened its mouth and swallowed the river that the dragon had poured from his mouth. ¹⁷ Then the dragon was angry with the woman, and went off to make war on the rest of her children, those who keep the commandments of God and hold the testimony of Jesus.

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The Woman and the Dragon

Romans 8:18-27, Revelation 12: 1-17

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Birth pains. The whole of creation is groaning with what it could be, but isn't yet. The woman clothed with the sun and adorned with stars is crying out in the agony of giving birth to the Beloved Child of God. To bring forth new life is both exhausting and exhilarating. It is an apt metaphor for the suffering that can take over one's life abruptly and stay for a night, an ordeal, or a season. Having given birth – twice - that pain is complex and it was different each time. In both of these stories, the pain represents transformation. The Spirit is the ever-present midwife guiding us, comforting us, encouraging us, but never quite taking the hard work from us, during times of both personal and communal transformation. God protects us, defends us, and nourishes us when we are under attack from those who would threaten the new life being birthed. But the pain we experience in letting go of the old life for the new is very real, and it doesn't lessen just because God's Spirit is with us. That reality has beset humankind for as long as we have had human consciousness. Suffering is both a human problem and a spiritual problem, and it is one that refuses to be dealt with in particularly logical ways.

So instead we tell stories - pretty amazing stories that attempt to describe the presence of spiritual power during our times of trial and transformation. Now, I'll leave the consequences of our own sin for another day because this story in Revelation is about something else entirely. It's about evil. The dragon is evil incarnate, the enemy of transformation, the ruthless power that would gladly kill the woman and steal the child. The dragon is interesting in that it is neither

treated as an “equal” to God, nor is it destroyed in its epic battle with the chief angel of heaven – Michael. Upon its defeat, it is simply banished from its heavenly place to walk the earth. This dragon is the devil, Satan, the deceiver, the accuser – and as such has significant power to wield. Nevertheless, the power is always, always limited power. What those limits are, I can’t exactly say, but suffice it to say that God, meaning: the Lord, the Spirit, the Shepherd, the Messiah, the Lamb, or known by any other name, GOD - the power of goodness, creativity, and love, had then, has now, and always will have the greater power and authority according to John’s impressive vision. The spiritual battle has already been won for us in Christ, of that John is absolutely sure – but he has to still remind people that it doesn’t mean our lives will be perfectly blissful or wonderfully perfect.

Enter the woman, the most amazing symbol of this story. Who is she? What does she represent? For this question, it was helpful to read and learn from what others have said. My Roman Catholic spiritual director reminded me that her tradition sees in this story a vision of Mary as the mother of our Lord fleeing for her own safety and the protection of Jesus from Satan’s desire to kill them both. Our Protestant tradition, since it likes to describe the Church in the feminine, as Christ’s holy bride, thinks that the woman could be the Church, especially the early Church that faced great persecution. And if you read the biblical scholars, they puzzle over the similarities shared between the pagan goddess mythology present in Asia at that time and John’s willingness to duplicate some of those same elements of storytelling in his vision being that he was so adamantly against most pagan practices. Therefore, this symbolic woman could be the whole world, all of humanity, if not all of creation. But when I initially read this story, as the Spirit called me to it, the woman in this story was me.

I don't say that to be presumptuous, but rather, I hope to identify that this great vision is applicable on our most intimate human terms. I've met my dragon. Maybe you have met yours too. There are elements of this story that are WAY too close for comfort. I came under attack by a few, let's say, "challenging" church folks when I was pregnant with my daughter. Those folks operated exactly how this passage describes it, by deceiving and accusing. That's how the devil works through wounded individuals. He convinces them that their own pain will be lessened if they blame their woes on the OTHER - a practice quite familiar to both of these biblical writers. Paul talks about this A LOT in his letter to the Romans and John points it out boldly as he critiques the Asian churches. The dragon knows how to knock the stars out of the sky to be sure.

That I too was pregnant when I met my dragon is both coincidental and weirdly prophetic. What I think connects my story directly to this story is the recognition that I was most prone to attack by evil forces at the time when I was the most vulnerable. Evil seems to wait for just the right moment to pounce. A woman in the throes of labor is almost unable to do anything else but succumb to that process. Without direct intervention by God and God's appointed angels, she could have been, most likely *would have been* destroyed by the dragon. The Spirit comes to her assistance – seemingly just in the nick of time.

I want you to know – that's what it can feel like to do battle with evil. My hunch is that a good number of you already know. It exposes your softest side to the pointiest teeth and the blistering fire-breath of the dragon. I can feel it, even now. Our bodies respond to this fear – sometimes by fighting, sometimes by fleeing, sometimes by freezing in place. Instinctually we go into self-protection mode. The Spirit knows this about us. Jesus must have experienced it in his all too human realm of emotions as he faced off with evil many times over. But in this passage, in the moment of the woman's greatest terror, God intervenes.

Now, I wish that God intervened with far greater frequency. Too often, I would like to explain to God that this person or that person has certainly had enough. Evil can look like its winning. The forces of evil affect so much of what we do and what we cannot do. Paul asks the question just a few lines later in chapter 8, “What will separate us from the love of God? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or the sword?” He says, we are counted as sheep being led to slaughter. AND YET – he says, No, not on God’s watch. In these things, these terrible horrible things, we are more than conquerors through God who loves us. NOT ONE THING can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. But as Paul and John both know. Hardships come. Distress is inevitable. There is only one way out, death – but there are hundreds of thousands of ways through. Life is tenacious.

So back to God’s intervention... I am absolutely amazed by how John describes God’s actions in this chapter. It is these kindnesses that remind me that the Spirit does intercede, blessedly so, with sighs too deep for words. The woman flees to the wilderness after her child is born, escaping the dragon who is prevented from pursuing her because of God’s angels. In that wilderness, the Spirit prepares a place for her, a place where she will be nourished for 1,260 days. She is given three and a half years – of solitude, of rest, of mourning - the time and space it takes to re-connect with her soul. I think this is what the transformation is all about. It can take years to recover from our most disturbing life events. Healing takes time. Our culture gives people three days, and three days is not nearly enough. With even greater poetic flair, John describes the wings of the great eagle she is given for her flight. He also describes how the earth itself comes to the woman’s aid, swallowing the river the dragon sends to drown her. And even then the dragon’s anger seethes and it seeks then to make war on her children.

I do hope this visionary tale will speak a Word of comfort and hope to your life experiences as it did to mine. When confronted with evil, calling on the power of God's Spirit is a wise thing to do. She will give you wings. She will nourish you with the bounty of the earth. She will give you time, and space, and solitude, and at the same time bring friends to your assistance. The saints have always known this. It has given them courage and strength disproportionate to what one might expect from some of these unlikely pillars of our faith. And yet, the story can be read just as easily with the woman representing Mary and the trials of Jesus' childhood, or the struggles of bringing birth to God's true church, or with the groaning travails of the whole of creation in mind. Evil has a way of getting to us in community just as well as it stalks us individually. The deception, accusation, and cruelty which are the dragon's weapons can infect our humanity in oh so many ways. And we are more than conquerors, and the spiritual battle has already been won, and the hope that we possess as the followers of Christ Jesus is not, I repeat, is not a hope in vain, but a hope in what is yet to be born in us, and in our world. Amen.