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Whatever Would Undo Us Is Undone

Revelation 12:1-6, 13-17

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. She was pregnant and was crying out in birth pangs, in the agony of giving birth. Then another portent appeared in heaven: a great red dragon, with seven heads and ten horns and seven diadems on his heads. 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 deliver a child, so that he might devour her child as soon as it was born. And she gave birth to a son, a male child, who is to rule all the nations with a scepter of iron. But her child was snatched away and taken to God and to his throne, 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.

So when the dragon saw that he had been thrown down to the earth, he pursued the woman who had delivered the male child. 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. Then from his mouth the serpent poured water like a river after the woman, to sweep her away with the flood. 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. Then the dragon was angry with the woman and went off to wage war on the rest of her children, those who keep the commandments of God and hold the testimony of Jesus.

When we were in grad school, Matt worked for a theatre company in Munster. They put on about six shows a year, including a Christmas-themed show in December. One year they did *The Christmas Schooner*, which is not well-known outside of Chicago. The musical is about the boats that brought Christmas trees from German settlements and logging towns in Michigan to German immigrants in Chicago. The year Matt ran the sound board for the show, they brought in about 60 cut pine trees, which flooded the theater with the smell of pine and, by the end, left a terrible mess of needles that were surely a fire hazard. It was chaos, with the trees being thrown all over the stage, banged on the ground in rhythm. Near the end of the story, the schooner capsizes in a late storm, highlighting the hazards these ships risked for the sake of Christmas spirit. But there is something about the show as a whole, about the families who lived at the mercy and chaos of the great “inland sea”—the lives lost, the livelihoods earned and forfeited to misfortune. In one scene, a child recites Psalm 107—near the center of the psalm, where God who made the sea and Leviathan, just for fun, will bring those tossed about on the

sea to the haven where their hearts long to be. It is a response, as faithful as possible, to the deep-held questions about where God is in the midst of tragedy and catastrophe. In the face of chaos—God promises again and again that God has already undone whatever would undo us.

The early church lived in a precious position. In addition to the tragedy and fragility of life in the ancient world, the early Christians lived under constant threat of persecution. When John of Patmos writes Revelation, he writes a not-so-thinly-veiled rebuke of the Roman Empire. And while many of the references are lost on us, Revelation is retained in the scriptural canon not just to remind us of its historical moment, but for its critique of Empire and Power in any age. Revelation is not a roadmap of the end times, where contemporary tragedy and natural disasters can be overlaid on the bizarre images of John of Patmos's vision in order to tell us what will come next. Revelation condemns the sources of violence and persecution in the world and lifts up the non-violent ways of the lamb, of God in Christ.

In today's story, of the woman clothed with the sun, the dragon is a figure for the Roman Emperors, for the Empire itself. The dragon was a military standard of the Roman cavalry, a symbol of those who did the Emperor's bidding, those who threatened the Church who, through word and deed, bears Christ into the world. In the omitted verses from today's story, Revelation tells of a battle in heaven which all but assures the dragon's defeat. This passage is a condemnation of the empire, of the powers, of the things that threaten to devour us. This brings to mind Luther's words in "A Mighty Fortress":

Let this world's tyrant rage;
in battle we'll engage!
His might is doomed to fail;
God's judgement must prevail!
One little word subdues him.

To people living in fear for their lives, John of Patmos tells them to take heart, because God has already conquered their foe. God assures us that the last word in our lives belongs to God alone. There is nothing—not cancer, suicide, violence, or earthquake—that will get the last say in our lives. God has already defeated them. Our redemption, our salvation, has already been worked, not by a dragon, but by a lamb, not by an emperor, but by a child, not by violence, but by love.

Deep in grief, I remember once saying that there is nothing that could redeem my loss. Nothing could replace the child I lost; just as nothing can replace lost health, lost time. There is so much of our experience that cannot be repaired or redone. But no sooner had that thought entered my head than something else, something deeper within me said, but God. But God has already redeemed it. The things that threaten to undo us, God has already undone.

You might note how great a sentiment this is, but beg for the proof. And I agree. I am glad to believe that God has undone the very things that threaten to undo me, and yet we still lose, we still grieve, we still get sick, still witness untenable violence, and we still know of unspeakable tragedy. John of Patmos reminds us in his epic vision that God's salvation is cosmic. God is redeeming the universe, undoing the powers that threaten not just you or me but all existence. God has redeemed the cosmos, and we will all be swept up in the redemption, delivered along with our neighbors, with strangers, with people of every time and place, and with the air and the land and the sea, animals and plants—every good creation made by the hand of God.

Amen.