

You're Fighting Systems, Not Just People

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[0 : 00] So I recently decided to read this cult classic book called House of Leaves by Mark Z. Danielewski. Has anybody heard of it?

! Wow, I'm surprised. I guess not a lot of horror fans in here. So the main horror of the book is the idea of this unknowable evil that's lurking in the depths of a house that's bigger on the inside than on the outside.

Think Black Mirror version of the TARDIS, kind of. The characters get trapped in a labyrinth of endless black corridors and they struggle to find their way out.

And the book mirrors this reading experience with pages that you have to read like upside down or in a mirror or footnotes that lead you into unexpected parts of the narrative. It took me like two weeks to read. It was chaotic. And all the while an unknowable terror lurks in the halls.

And navigating our lives right now may feel like struggling to find a way out of our own labyrinth. We are not facing an unknowable monster in the depths. We are surrounded by a kind of chaos that's pervasive, deceptive, seemingly everywhere.

[1 : 23] Last week, Pastor Ternetta talked about the work of the dragon in Revelation 12. And the dragon represents Satan. And this is not Satan in the sense of some porn creature lurking in the depths of hell, but the very real forces of deception and evil that stand against the work of God.

And we are living in a time when it seems like the dragon is winning. The dragon thrives on chaos. And there is so much chaos lurking around every corner. Our city and our nation are still under occupation by police forces who are abducting people from their homes and street corners.

So many of us in this room, in our city, in this country are facing the reality of job loss, unemployment, financial insecurity.

People don't know where their next paycheck will come from or where their next meal will come from. I was watching a reel this morning where Capital Area Food Bank had twice as many people as they expected, and they still couldn't feed everybody that came asking for assistance.

And as a church, we are now grieving the loss of this evening location that has meant the world to so many of us, myself included.

[2 : 47] And it is really hard right now not to feel lost in the labyrinth of chaos and pain and anger and fear and hurt.

This is what the dragon wants. It wants God's people to be so demoralized and defeated that we refuse to fight any longer.

This was true when Revelation was first written, and it is still true now. Through dramatic imagery and coded language, Revelation teaches us how to respond when our backs are against the wall and we are face to face with the work of the dragon.

So tonight I will explore the nature of the two beasts of Revelation 13. What they represent, how they showed up in the early church, and how they show up now.

Our fight today is not against a single person, but against two beasts that demand our conformity.

We can recognize and reject the work of the beasts by standing firm on our faith and enduring even when chaos reigns.

[3 : 55] So if you have a Bible with you, I recommend turning to Revelation 13. And I am going to take each section of this chapter one at a time, kind of classical expository preaching, if you will.

So I recommend having it in front of you to reference as we go along, but it will also be on the screen behind me. I saw a beast rising out of the sea with ten horns and seven heads, and on its horns were ten diadems, and on its heads were blasphemous names.

And the beast I saw was like a leopard, its feet were like a bear's, and its mouth was like a lion's mouth. And the dragon gave it his power and his throne in great authority.

One of its heads seemed to have received a death blow, but its fatal wound had been healed. In amazement, the whole earth followed the beast. They worshipped the dragon, for he had given his authority to the beast.

And they worshipped the beast, saying, Who is like the beast? And who can fight against it? Then the beast was given a mouth speaking arrogant and blasphemous words, and it was allowed to exercise authority for forty-two months.

[5 : 16] It opened its mouth to speak blasphemies against God, blaspheming his name and his dwelling. That is, those who dwell in heaven. Also, it was allowed to wage war on the saints and to conquer them.

It was given authority over every tribe and people and language and nation. And all the inheritance of the earth will worship it. Everyone whose name has not been written from the foundation of the world, in the book of life of the lamb that was slaughtered.

Let anyone who has an ear listen. If you are to be taken captive, into captivity you go. If you kill with the sword, with the sword you must be killed.

Here is a call for the endurance and the faith of the saints. A couple details about this beast stick out to me.

The beast emerges from the chaos of the sea to follow the will of the dragon. And it also has this fatal wound that has miraculously been healed.

[6 : 30] And this was seen as a sign of God's divine favor. And it compelled people to fall in line to worship him. For the original audience who would hear this being spoken, or actually they would have seen it being performed, they would have immediately thought of Emperor Nero who persecuted the Christians and who died by a self-inflicted stab wound.

And they were afraid that he would rise from the dead. And this death blow was meant to parody the slaughtered lamb and make the power of the empire seem invincible and inevitable.

Who is like the beast and who can stand against it? The people asked. This question mocked the ancient song of worship after the Israelites escaped from slavery in Egypt.

Who among the gods is like you, Lord? Who is like you, majestic in holiness, awesome in splendor, doing wonders?

The Israelites worshipped because of how God was acting to set people free. But the beast sought worship through the powers of subjugation and destruction.

[7 : 48] The beast represents this drive toward power, imperial violence, and oppression that claim earthly power as ultimate authority. And this beast rages today.

Any time power is exercised by the hand of the state to oppress, to dehumanize, to commit violence. That is the act of the first beast.

We could think about the violence as far away as Palestine and as close by as the ice raids occurring on street corners, or the presence of the National Guard at metro stops.

When we are confronted with this evil all around us, we have to wrestle with this fact that resistance does require steadfast endurance, even when the stakes are higher than ever.

The early church regularly faced persecution and violence at the hands of the state. They were called to endure, and so are we.

[8 : 52] And I love the way that New Testament scholar Brian Blunt talks about this idea, this central concept of endurance. The Greek word used here is *hypoamone*.

I think that's right. If it's not, pretend that you didn't hear me say it wrong. And this word is so fascinating because it is about an ability to stand firm under pressure, to actively practice non-violent resistance, and stop ourselves from using the same weapons as the enemy.

Our challenge as a church is to not allow our voice to remain silent and our feet to remain still. And we have to resist the urge to repay evil with evil or use coercive power to fight coercive power.

As Audre Lorde once said, the master's tools cannot dismantle the master's house. And as if that wasn't enough, we also have to contend with the work of the second beast.

Then I saw another beast that rose out of the earth. It had two horns like a lamb, and it spoke like a dragon.

[10 : 19] It exercises all the authority of the first beast on its behalf, and it makes the earth and his inhabitants worship the first beast whose fatal wound had been healed.

It performs great signs, even making fire come down from heaven to earth in the sight of all, and by the signs that it is allowed to perform on behalf of the beast, it deceives the inhabitants of earth,

telling them to make an image for the beast that had been wounded by the sword and yet lived. And it was allowed to give breath to the image of the beast, so that the image of the beast could even speak, and cause those who would not worship the beast to be killed. The second beast looks like the lamb, but it speaks like the dragon. In other words, it pretends to be the lamb that was slain, but in reality, it only seeks to deceive and to conquer. The second beast performs great signs meant to intimidate, like making fire come down from heaven, like the prophet Elijah on Mount Carmel, and it acts only to confuse and distort people for its own ends.

[11 : 33] So the second beast represents deception, false ideology, and propaganda. For the original audience, this beast stands in for the political and religious leaders who supported the work of the empire and forced compliance.

Consider the religious leaders who delivered Jesus over to be crucified. And as we learned from Paul's example, there were so many who used the name of religion to confuse, oppress, and destroy.

By using the tools of deception and propaganda, they encouraged people to fall into the temptation to bless the work of empire and play into its logic.

Following Christ during this time was a matter of life and death. And it would have been all too tempting to stop resisting and simply allow the empire to work its will.

And this beast, too, wrecks havoc today. I think that one of the single greatest examples of this that I've seen recently was a wheel that the Department of War put out a couple of weeks ago.

[12 : 46] In this short video, the Secretary of War, Pete Hegseth, recites the Lord's Prayer over the sound of tanks and bombs in warfare.

Your kingdom come. Rows of military officers stand ready for warfare. Your will be done. Bombs fall on earth as it is in heaven.

Tanks roll by. Warplanes swoop through the sky. We see how Christian nationalism has infused this idea of faithfulness to God with faithfulness to imperial power.

God is no longer a slaughtered lamb, but a raging lion seeking people to devour. But the second beast can also show up in our own spaces, in our own church.

For example, we can also tend to identify our political beliefs with our faith, insisting that Jesus was a liberal or a Democrat or a progressive or what have you, instead of realizing that Jesus came to change and challenge all of those systems.

[14 : 03] And for me, when nonviolent resistance seems futile, when the work of the beast demolishes and devours, it can be hard to remember that our faith doesn't require us to exercise power over in order to win.

This is a hard lesson to learn. And that's precisely why we have to be wary of the ways this beast urges conformity and how none of us are immune to that temptation.

Let us turn our attention now to the mark of the beast. Also, it causes all, both small and great, both rich and poor, both free and slave, to be given a brand on the right hand or the forehead, so that no one can buy or sell who does not have the brand, that is, the name of the beast or the number for its name.

This calls for wisdom. Let anyone with understanding calculate the number of the beast, for it is a number for a person.

Its number is 666. Now, if you're anything like me and you grew up in a conservative evangelical household, the number 666 is probably somewhat familiar to you as the number of the Antichrist.

[15 : 37] Interestingly though, the word Antichrist never appears in Revelation at all. And I still can't think of the word Antichrist without thinking about Nicolai Karpathia from the Left Behind series.

Yes. To this day, it baffles me that in middle school, I read every single one of them. I was that kid. Unfortunately for that kid who was waiting anxiously for the rapture, the number 666 does not really mean the Antichrist. But this is where my swifty brain kind of lights up because I love the numerology here.

The number 666 would have been considered a code for Nero Caesar. So by taking on this number, this mark, you would have been conforming to the injustice of the Empire.

And incidentally, the number 666 was also considered to be a pale imitation of the number for perfection, which would have been 777.

[16:51] 7 was considered a representation of perfection or wholeness. That's why earlier on you see all of the 7, like the 7 churches, the 7 spirits, the 7 seals, all of that.

But the two beasts, they are the methods used by the dragon to ensure allegiance through the mark.

If they had the mark on the hand, it controlled their ability to buy and sell. In other words, it called into question their economic viability in the system and exploited their labor for the gain of empire. And those who don't comply don't have the resources to survive. And then the mark on the forehead is meant to transform our mind and our identity so all we can do is follow the will of the state.

And the temptation to take the mark of the beast in this time of chaos can be overwhelming. Right now, sitting in this room, we face the closure of this evening service location.

[18:13] This is where the table has made its home for over 9 years. It has seen us through countless times, from our founding pastor leaving, to the search for another pastor, through COVID, through the aftermath, through multiple political administrations, and now the chaos reigning in our city.

And this place is sacred ground to me. And it is sacred for so many of us. For all of us who were involved, closing this location was a heartbreaking decision.

And it shows all too well the cost of refusing to take the mark of the beast. And I confess because this week was a very hard week.

And I am really struggling to preach in this moment. And I'll be honest, when I see other churches who are thriving, who are maybe a little bit quieter about their beliefs, who say all are welcome, but then underneath the surface, people like me wouldn't be welcome there.

When I see other churches thriving on hate, fear, and capitulation to empire, I get jealous. It's hard to see.

[19:48] Especially when our church is struggling to navigate the chaos around us. And the weight of it can seem really, really heavy. And sometimes, if I'm really personal, I think it might be easier to take the mark of the beast.

They purposefully make it appealing because the cost of not doing so is so great. I am sometimes tempted to go back in the closet, to hide, to pretend to be a straight woman who only aspires to be a pastor's wife, or pretend that I would be happy in another church where I wouldn't be able to be my full self.

Life might be a lot more stable that way. But by doing so, I would be losing something that's far more precious.

I would be sacrificing the way of Jesus, and I would be sacrificing who God has called me to be. In these difficult times, I am able to resist the mark of the beast because I know what I am fighting for, and I know that Jesus walked this road before me.

In our church, I know that times are difficult and they are dark. It seems like our fledgling church is fighting for its life at this moment.

[21:15] But I have never wavered from the belief that our calling to proclaim a more beautiful gospel and seek communities of authentic belonging is something that is worth fighting for.

I have chosen this church, I have chosen this community, and I would not take that decision back for anything.

We are living in a time when we cannot and we should not minimize the real cost of our path. But no matter what, we are called to endure.

I think about the early church and saints through the ages who lost their physical spaces. For example, the church in Corinth, they were pushed out of their city for a long time, and they couldn't return until the people who were persecuting them turned their attention.

And there are churches and saints through the ages who were forced underground time and time again, and yet they found their way through.

[22:33] Then I looked, and there was the Lamb standing on Mount Zion, and with him were 144,000 who had his name and his father's name written on their foreheads.

Today, I want to invite us to consider what it means to have the mark of the Lamb. Rather than the dragon beast with his miraculously healed wound, the Lamb was actually slain, but still he lives.

When we take on the mark of the Lamb, that requires us to consider the weight of the cross and all that we are sacrificing for the way of Jesus.

But as Paul once memorably wrote, our power is made perfect in weakness. There are challenging times ahead.

That is to be clear. Once we've seen the beasts and we felt their power, we can't go back. But we can hold fast to the words of Revelation 13 verse 10, where we are called to endure and hold onto our faith.

[23 : 59] This is not passive, but an active remembering that hope is not a fool's errand, that there are brighter times ahead, and those times are worth fighting for, whether those times are days away or generations away.

Endurance doesn't mean that we don't feel pain. Sometimes, enduring feels like putting one heavy footstep in front of another, gritting our teeth against the full weight of the beasts trying to drag us into the labyrinth.

And I know this is a hard word to hear when life seems determined to break us down at every turn. Life seems fragile these days.

I'll be really honest that there were times this week where it was really difficult for me to get out of bed and get my day going. It is hard to keep fighting when giving in seems to provide some momentary peace.

And for so many of us, this location has been a place of security and stability, an eye of the storm where everything seems chaotic.

[25 : 16] It's a place that we can retreat to and know that we are home, that we are safe. But the work of the dragon has reached us.

And we are all faced with a heartbreaking loss where we don't know what the future holds. And it's really hard to know what to say that doesn't sound like endless platitudes when we know the dragon beasts are still out there seeking whom they will devour.

So, dear church, as much as we can right now, do not give in to cynicism or despair on one hand. And do not align with the powers of injustice on the other hand. The beast may offer a quick path to power. The beast have taken away many things, including our comfort, our job, our stability, and even now, this location.

It is right and proper to mourn these things, to wish that we had not lived to see such times. So, if all you can do right now is mourn, if everything else seems like sinking sand, then mourn, grieve.

[26 : 43] But I urge you, don't do it alone. Don't let the grief pull you away from the people who are in this together with you. Hold tight to one another in this moment.

And if you're feeling stretched too thin, overwhelmed, anxious, stressed, remember that you are carrying the mark of the Lamb. Though Jesus cried out on the cross, why have you forsaken me? He still rose again on the third day. And if, like Jesus, you are feeling forsaken, remember that death is always followed by resurrection.

And from the ashes, I hope we can see new shoots of life spring forth. And if you are feeling weak right now, lost, angry, frustrated, grieving, unsure where to go, remember that grit, tenderness, and endurance can be held in fragile vessels.

Even you, even me. So, may the words of the Apostle Paul in 2 Corinthians 4, verses 7-9 be your comfort this week.

[28 : 03] But we have this treasure in clay jars so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us.

We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed, perplexed, but not driven to despair, persecuted, but not forsaken, struck down, but not destroyed.