Lesson 6: Revelation 13

Opening Question: Who is one of the most patient people you know?

Opening Prayer: We long for the day of your return, Jesus. We long for every wrong thing to be undone. May we, your saints, have patient endurance and faithfulness as we await your return. Amen.

Read aloud Revelation 13:1-10

Here John is building on the images written about in Daniel 7. In that chapter, Daniel writes about beasts that arise out of the sea. The last beast is the worst. Knowing this, pick up Wright:

In Daniel 7, there are four monsters that come up out of the sea. They are, like so much in this kind of writing, the stuff of nightmares. The first is a winged lion. The second is a bear with three tusks in its mouth. The third is a leopard with four wings and four heads. Then comes the fourth beast, greater and more terrible, with iron teeth and bronze claws. It has ten horns, with a further little horn growing up beside them.

The interpretation is quite clear. These monsters represent four kingdoms, the fourth of which in particular will become a great and brutal world empire. The horns represent different kings, the last one of whom will make war against God’s people and blaspheme God himself. Then comes the great reversal: ‘the Ancient of Days’ takes his seat for a court hearing, sitting in condemnation over the last great monster and destroying his power, giving it instead to the ‘one like a son of man’ who comes to be presented before the Ancient of Days and to receive an everlasting, universal sovereignty.

There is no question but that John has this passage of Daniel firmly in mind. No question, either, how he and many in his day were reading it. They are not interested in actual monsters, great Day-of-the-Triffids creatures crawling up out of the Mediterranean Sea to attack the holy land. They are interested in the earthly reality which these monsters represent. And in the first century the identification was not difficult. John’s single monster has telescoped Daniel’s four into one, part leopard, part bear, part lion, with ten horns and seven heads. The monster is Rome (115-116).

Here is where we remember that this book meant something to the people who originally read it. They would have understood the reference to Daniel 7, and they would have known that the first beast John was writing about was Rome.

Wright says:
But the central and important feature, which all his readers would have recognized at once, is that the monster claimed worship, and shared that worship with the dark pagan gods that stood behind it. A glance at Roman coins of the period tells its own story, as one emperor after another not only claimed to be ‘son of god’ but to dress up in the garb traditionally associated with this or that ancient pagan divinity. And of course, once the emperor becomes a god, there is no room for other gods. It’s all right if local and tribal deities are still worshipped, so long as one worships the new god, Rome and the emperor. But if one refuses – as the Christians knew they were bound to refuse – then a collision course is set. Like Daniel and his friends in the early chapters of the book from which John drew so richly, all the world seemed to be worshipping the monster. Only the faithful few, here described in terms of their names being in the lamb’s book of life, refuse to do so.

The last verse of this section may reflect John’s sober realism when contemplating the scene he has now drawn. Some people are going to be taken captive. Others are going to be killed with the sword. That’s just the way it is. The proper response is not to kick and scream, but to hold firm to patience and faith. Chapter 11 meant what it said. It is through the faithful witness unto death that the lamb wins the victory, that God’s kingdom replaces the kingdom of the monster, that the dragon himself is to lose the last remains of his power. How this is to be worked out we have yet to see. But what John is doing at this point is sketching the larger, darker picture within which the little local struggles of the churches must be seen if they are to make sense, and if the challenge to uncompromising witness is to make sense. Only when we remember the dragon and the monster do we realize what a deadly serious thing Christian faith, patience and holiness really is (117-118).

Read aloud Revelation 13:11-18

Just as with the seven letters to the churches, there are contemporary references in Revelation 13 that address the lives of the people in these churches.

Read Wright aloud:

There were several tricks commonly employed to enable the statues of various gods to move about, to breathe, weep and even speak. Sophisticated pagan writers of the time mention many such devices, pouring scorn on their trickery. But people were taken in, and more and more people, through the work of the local 'monsters', came to worship the first monster itself. And, through that means, the dragon itself.

What’s more, worshipping or nor worshipping was quickly becoming the dividing line between people who were acceptable in the community and people who weren’t. Not long after this time, some local officials introduced a formal requirement that unless
but we also do well to search our consciences and our own societies and enquire to what extent we, too, have been deceived by fakes posing as the real thing (120-122).

Optional Discussion Questions

1. Where are we faced today with choices that reflect our allegiances? That is, when are we asked to make someone or something else Lord in place of Jesus?

2. When are we asked to compromise the demands of discipleship in regards to our money, sex, time, or power to get along more readily with others in our world on our floor/ in class/ at work/ in relationships/ in politics?

3. Remember the main theme of Revelation: Jesus is ____ and he .....!

Closing Prayer: Reveal to us, Holy Spirit, the idols that we have set up in your place. Cast every idol from its throne, so that we will worship you and you alone. To God alone be all our worship, praise, honor and glory. Now and forevermore! Amen.