

## **Pentecost 9, Year C,**

Sermon by Rev. Glenn A. Brumbaugh

11<sup>th</sup> August, 2019

### **Daniel 8:23-25 NIV / Revelation 13:11-18 NRSV**

The terms “con” and “con man,” have been a part of our modern language  
in one form or another since we’ve developed written communication.

Throughout the history of civilization,

a big part of our social contract with each other

is the understanding that we will interact with each other

with integrity and honor,

that to cheat and steal is negative behavior

which has social, cultural, and often legal consequences.

In ancient cultures, the perception of your integrity and honor

determined to some extent your status in society,

and the way in which that ethic would be rewarded.

Those who were perceived as cheats or dishonorable,

were often the lowest rung of the social ladder, or outright outcast.

We have a couple examples here of more modern concepts of con men,

those who promise you something too good to be true,

which eventually turns out to be just that, too good to be true.

On the left we have Bernie Madoff,

whose retirement fund scheme bilked individuals and charities

out of billions of dollars,  
and on the right, the classic snake oil salesman,  
whose miracle product will cure whatever ails you.



What is it that makes these people so successful? How do they pull off their scams?

Well, they offer an easier way.

With them, you can make easy money without much investment or effort.

Whatever illness or pain you are suffering from can be cured

just by taking a few spoonfuls of their cure.

Or the God they present is much more palatable, much easier to follow

because the Divine they reveal is so much more

like the values of the world and culture

in which we live and work;

their God doesn't require much effort or change.

Last week as we started our study of the book of Revelation,

we focused on the first beast from Revelation 13.

That multi headed monster that mirrored in so many ways  
the beast imagery from Daniel 8.

As we discussed last week, John's first beast  
was very illustrative of the dominance of Rome,  
and the author was critical of those who fell under its spell,  
and went along with the rest of the crowd  
in leading a dual life,  
part Christian, but not letting go  
of the worldly values and worship of Rome and of Caesar.

Despite the fact that Rome ruled by dominating others,  
and the Pax Romana, or peace of Rome  
was built on the threat of brutal retribution for any resistance,  
many were still swayed to worship and participate with the Beast,  
the Empire, and its ruler.

Despite the fact that they were heavily taxed,  
and those proceeds all made their way back to Rome and the Emperor,  
they still believed that the Beast had their best interests at heart.

How were they so easily manipulated?

Why did they support the very system  
that kept them down, suppressed, and marginalized?

Well, that brings us to the second Beast from Revelation 13, the Beast of the Earth,  
in contrast to last week's beast who rose from the sea.

This Beast is like a lamb with ram's horns, but speaks like a dragon.



Like last week, Daniel 8 also begins with a vision of a beast with 2 ram's horns.

In Daniel's dream, that beast represents the kingdoms of Greece,

that ultimately lead to a wily king

who leads many astray and comes to dominate the world.

Which can give us some insight into what is meant by "speaking like a dragon."

In the Old Testament, dragon imagery is used in describing the Leviathan,

the great serpent of the deep subdued by God during Creation.

Over the centuries, this dragon imagery was used in Judeo mythology

to represent any power in opposition to God's will.

Yet in many legends, dragons speak with intelligence and persuasion,

often leading their victims astray with cunning deception.

With that in mind, I'm not so sure I agree

with this threatening image of this second Beast.

After all, both the imagery in Daniel and today's reading from Revelation

indicate that this Beast was able to deceive many

into worshipping and following the first Beast.

I don't know about you, but I'm not about to willingly sign up

with something that looks like that...ew!



I think this is probably a lot more like what John of Patmos had in mind.

Just another innocent looking, non-threatening lamb, you know,  
the easy-going docile grazing animal that makes the perfect sacrifice.

Which is a parallel comparison that would not be lost of John's audience.

After all, one of the most prevalent images of Jesus at this time  
is that of the paschal lamb,  
the one sacrificed for the salvation of others.

So how would John's audience have perceived and interpreted

this second Beast from an apocalyptic literature perspective?

To understand their perception,

it helps to have a little background

on the origin of civil worship practices

in the cities of Asia Minor that John was writing to.

It's important to understand that leader worship

was not historically a part of Roman culture and practice.

Certainly they had their pantheon of gods

that they sacrificed and performed acts of worship to,

but that was largely an individual determination and initiative.

However, then came the Roman Civil war,

which pitted a number for factions vying for control against each other

following the assassination of Julius Caesar.

His chosen heir Octavian, later known as Augustus,

was popular in the Western empire

and was fighting against Marc Antony

whose support base was the Eastern provinces,  
including Cleopatra in Egypt.

Augustus emerged victorious,

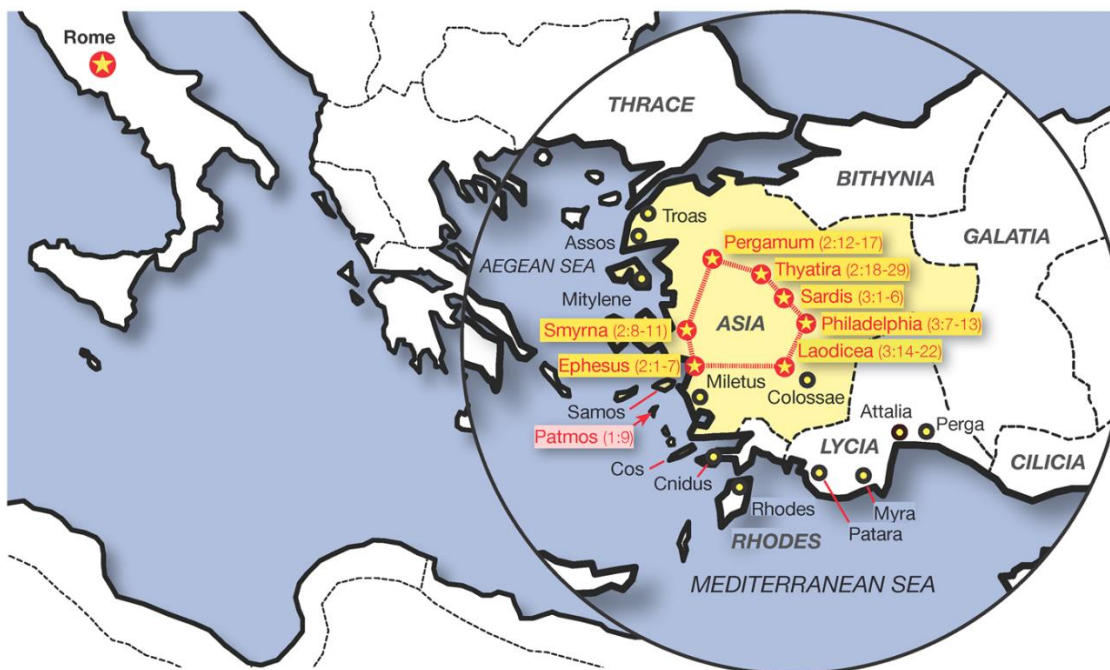
and set to work subduing any resistance across the empire,  
particularly in the east.

Since this conflict caused such upheaval,

and his subjugation was so effective at eliminating conflict and resistance,  
many in Rome praised him as a “Savior.”

## REVELATION: ROME & THE SEVEN CHURCHES

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Meanwhile those in Asia Minor, who had backed the wrong horse in Marc Antony,  
were very concerned that reprisals from Augustus would be severe.

So some of these same cities who received John of Patmos' letter,

were actually the places where emperor worship began.

They made Augustus into a god, and began to erect temples to him,

praising him as a divine savior

sent to bring peace and prosperity to the empire.

Sounds familiar doesn't it?

So much of the language and imagery we have for Jesus

directly mirrors the same language and traits attributed to the emperor.

The poet Virgil wrote of Augustus,

“This, this is he, whom you so often heard promised to you,

Augustus Caesar, son of a god,

who shall again set up the Golden Age in Latium (or Rome)?”

The poet Horace said,

“Upon you, however, while still among us, we bestow honor in good times,

set up altars to swear by in your name,

and confess that none like you will hereafter arise

or has arisen before now.”

The messianic allusions are unmistakable

and mimicked by this statement from the provincial council of Asia Minor,

“...bringing Augustus, whom she filled with virtue

as a benefactor to all humanity,

sending to us and to those after us a savior

who put an end to war and brought order to all things,

...the birth of the god was the beginning



of good tidings to the world through him.”

In response, the early church also developed icons and symbols

to match those being erected in these new emperor temples

springing up in places like Smyrna and Pergamum.

Symbols and signs do not have meaning in a vacuum;

they must somehow relate to what the users already know.

The critical issue for Christian discipleship

is whether the symbols and signs orient believers toward the Beast

or toward the Lamb.

Both the Roman Empire and the church recognized that rituals of worship, in particular,

could be powerful indexes that reflect and forge allegiance.

If Christians adapted signs and symbols from the empire

and used them in exclusive worship of God and the Lamb,

the borrowing was certainly politically subversive.

While Rome allowed religious plurality as long

as it didn't interfere with the status quo,

Christianity required loyalty as stated in Ephesians 4:

“one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all,

who is above all and through all and in all.”

For the followers in the first century, this set the state for a showdown with the empire.

They could not coexist and fit into the system.

They couldn't worship and honor the Beast.

They couldn't give their allegiance to the world and to God.

Some scholars have suggested that the number of the Beast mentioned here, 666,  
is actually a numerical representation of the Caesar Nero,  
who likely was the current emperor when Revelation was written.  
While that symbolism would point John's audience to the current emperor,  
what is important is that number represents allegiance  
to whomever currently fills the beastly role,  
and we should not let the parts of our body  
that are used in taking oaths of allegiance,  
such as the right hand,  
be sullied with symbols representing the beasts in our midst.

So, like last week, our circumstances may differ in some respects,

but is it really so different?

True we aren't lured to actual temples to worship the emperor,

but the sentiments sound amazingly similar today, don't they?

Someone ordained by God, who deserves our support.

Someone who will solve all our problems,

who alone knows how to make everything right in the world.

Yet stands for the opposite of everything Jesus taught:

not welcoming the stranger, the foreigner in our midst;

not caring for the least of these among us;

not being good stewards of creation;

not loving your neighbor as yourself. The list goes on and on.

Yet we have many versions of this second beast in our world.

Faith leaders who have recognition and access  
to broadcast their accolades of false prophets,  
becoming false prophets themselves.

You may think the pastor's getting awfully political,  
but this scripture undoubtedly is firmly rooted in the politics of John's day.

It is first and foremost a warning not to fall prey  
to the false prophets who will lead you astray,  
who will sell you on the big con.

The con that all the beast stands for is God's will.

That might makes right is the divine way of things.

That one worldly culture and its people are superior to another.

That some lives are not worth as much as others.

Not much has changed.

The peace of Rome was built on the method of brutalizing one group of people  
to ensure others would be too scared and intimidated  
to resist and fight for what is truly right in God's eyes.

The question is, are you falling for the con and the con men and women

who promote it?

If not, do you call it out?

Do you speak up and buck the system?

Or do you just go along with the flow?

Is there a number on your hand as being complicit?

In times such as these, there is a cost to be counted.

The question is, are we willing to take the risk of standing against the con,  
or letting it go on unchallenged?

For all our sakes, I hope we make the right choice. Amen.