At Bethlehem and Zion we've been doing a sermon series on dragons in the Bible. In a nutshell, in the first three sermons, we've learned that the dragon represents evil. Put another way, the dragon represents the devil, Satan. Whether our image is Satan or a dragon or some other force, we're talking about the power that lies behind the world's evil.

The dragon represents the serpent who tempted Adam and Eve to try to grasp that which was only supposed to belong to God. The serpent tempted them to be their own gods.

The gospels don't use dragon imagery, but Satan tempted Jesus in the wilderness with essentially the same thing as Adam and Eve... seizing power on his own terms rather than staying faithful to God and to the mission for which he was sent. Except that Jesus succeeded in resisting that temptation. And that was the beginning of the end for the dragon.

Throughout scripture, that dragon, Satan, was in the business of accusing...tempting...making promises not his to keep. Satan is that voice that tempts people to not trust that God's grace is enough. Even now, that voice tempts us to seize what we think we should have rather than depending on God.

The dragon represents not only our own individual temptation to sin, but also the massive systemic evil that erupts in human history.

The book of Revelation is full of wild imagery of beasts and monsters who represent different rulers and systems that seek the destruction of God's people. Ultimately, Revelation unmasks the dragon...it tells us that the power behind the monsters is that dragon...Satan. It portrays a great cosmic battle between Christ and the forces of evil.

Most importantly, Revelation tells us Christ wins. There's lots of violent imagery in Revelation. It's always tempting for us humans to focus on the violence...to assume that violence is how evil gets defeated.

But in Revelation, every time we are set up to expect violence, instead we get the appearance of the lamb who was slaughtered.

Here in Revelation 12, it's very explicit – the dragon has been conquered by the blood of the lamb...and by the blood of Christ's witnesses who remained faithful, even to death. The dragon is conquered by the exact opposite of what we expect.

Here in Revelation 12, we have this image of the dragon being thrown out of heaven. Between there and the end of the story, the dragon still roams the earth, wreaking havoc. But his final defeat is assured.

At the end of Revelation, the dragon's defeat is final and the new heaven and new earth are ruled in peace by God and the Lamb.

We live in that in between time. The dragon's defeat is assured. But in the meantime, he is still wreaking havoc. And the dragon still tempts us away from faithfulness...still tempts us to grasp that which is only God's to grasp. The dragon lurks underneath the evil of the world that seeks to destroy.

In this in between time the dragon acts like a cornered animal, striking out in viciousness and threat. The dragon shows up in the harshness and meanness we sometime show one another. The dragon shows up in the violence and oppression of political and even religious institutions.

In this in between time, like Christ's first witnesses, we too are called to resist those powers that seek to pull us away from God and from the Kingdom of God. We are called to resist the power of the dragon.

We fight that battle in our own hearts and we fight it in a society that is too often swayed by the power of the dragon. We can see that power most anytime if we look for it. But just yesterday, we saw the dragon's power erupt in political violence as a young man sought to assassinate Donald Trump. Whatever our political leanings might be, the dragon can find a way to use us for its own ends.

I chose the gospel text to go with this reading because it addresses in that unique Jesus way what the battle actually looks like for us.

This passage, commonly called the Beatitudes, is the beginning of Jesus' sermon on the mount. It is probably Jesus' most famous sermon. But it is challenging.

In the sermon on the mount, Jesus lays out what it means to live in God's kingdom. In Matthew's gospel, just before the sermon, Jesus began his ministry by saying, "repent for the kingdom of heaven has come near."

Then in the sermon on the mount, Jesus lays out what that kingdom looks like...and what repentance looks like. The beatitudes set the stage by being very clear that the kingdom of heaven is not governed by the values of the world.

I mean, who do we usually consider blessed?

Well, it's pretty much the exact opposite of who Jesus calls blessed. Instead of the poor in spirit, we think of the confident achiever as the blessed one.

The meek? No, we are a lot more likely to be drawn to those who exhibit power in earthly ways. The merciful? Mercy and forgiveness too often lose out to the desire for revenge.

The peacemakers? Ever heard the saying nice guys finish last?

The pure in heart can be targets for being taken advantage of. And who wants to be persecuted and reviled, even if it is a result of our faithfulness.

The beatitudes do have a future orientation – when the kingdom of God comes fully, all of these will be true. No more mourning, no more sorrow, no more hatred or vindictiveness or war.

But what about now...in this in between time, when we live in the now and not yet kingdom of God? In this time it is our call to resist the dragon by taking the beatitudes...and all of Jesus' teachings to heart. We are called to comfort those who mourn. We are called to show mercy and to be peacekeepers.

We are called to humility and to purity of heart. We are called to prayer, to praise, to gratitude, to worship – to proclaim that it is the lamb and not the dragon who rules.

In short, we are called to be faithful to Christ and his mission. Even if we are reviled...or even just scoffed at. For us, it may never come to actually giving our lives out of faithfulness to God and the lamb, but who knows?

Christ defeated the dragon, not with violence but by self-giving love. And that is what we are called to...to love God and our neighbor, and to even love our enemies. That kind of love takes the dragon's power away, because the dragon's power feeds on hate and vindictiveness. There may never be a more important time in history for Christians to display that kind of love than now.

We have this promise to encourage us – not only does Jesus win over the dragon completely, but the risen Christ fights with us even now. He stands beside us to give us strength and courage when we too walk the path, when we too are called to resist evil...to resist the dragon. He stands with us, encouraging us to resist evil, not with violence, but in the same way he did.

Because in the end, the only thing that will finally defeat the dragon is not a battle with swords and guns and tanks and bombs. The only thing that can finally defeat the dragon is love – the kind of love that Jesus showed by laying down his own life...by becoming the lamb who was slaughtered to free us from sin, death, and evil.