

Carol Service

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Preacher: David MacPherson

[0 : 0 0] This evening, I want to talk about dragons. Dragons, of course, as you all know, are at the heart of the Christmas story.

Or maybe you didn't realize that was the case. Well, if you are a little intrigued, then indulge me and listen for a few moments as I share with you about a friendly dragon and a furious dragon.

Oh, the friendly dragons appeared already. I don't know if you've seen the John Lewis Christmas adverts. Well, this is the main character in the John Lewis Christmas adverts.

And his name, if you didn't know his name, I didn't know his name until I explored further. His name is Edgar, Edgar the Excitable Dragon. Now, you've got to hand it to John Lewis.

They may be losing money for the first time in their history, which I believe is the case. But they do deliver a quality Christmas advert. And if you've missed this advert of Edgar, well, shame on you.

[1 : 0 7] But let me give you the gist of the story. I think we can probably remove Edgar from the screen now. We've identified him. And hopefully that reminds you, perhaps, of something you've seen on the TV over these past few days.

Well, let me give you the gist of the story. So, the advert is about that friendly dragon called Edgar who lives in a little village in a fairy tale land a long time ago. And he lives there with his friend, Ava.

Now, Ava is a wee girl who looks disturbingly like Greta Thunberg. Not that that's relevant to my point, but it's something that has struck me. And when you look at the advert again, you can see if you agree or not with that.

Now, Edgar really, really, really likes Christmas. And every time that he sees something Christmassy, he just can't control his flaming nostrils with all manner of mayhem as a result.

First of all, you have a melting snowman. Edgar wanted to put a carrot in the snowman just to give him his customary nose, but he was so excited that he ended up melting the snowman, much to the disappointment and annoyance of the children who had been building the snowman.

[2 : 2 7] After the snowman, there followed the pond and the outside of the village that had frozen over for Christmas very conveniently, producing a very nice ice ring. But you can work out what happened next if you haven't seen it.

Edgar, so excited, his flaming nostrils melted the pond and the children ended up in the freezing water. I don't think there was any tragedies involved, but it certainly was a big disappointment for the village children.

And then, most disastrously of all, the village Christmas tree that had been unveiled in the midst of much fanfare was then burnt to a tinder. As Edgar once again was unable to control his excitable nostrils.

And poor Edgar becomes public enemy number one. But his friend Ava sticks with him through thick and thin and conjures up a plan to save her friend from the ire, the anger of the villagers.

And Ava bakes a Christmas pudding, the kind you pour brandy on and set alight. And marches to the village Christmas banquet with the pudding and Edgar in tow.

[3 : 41] Now, on seeing Edgar arrive, the gathered company fear the worst. But on this occasion, Edgar's flaming nostrils prove just the thing to light the delicious Christmas pudding.

And they all live happily ever after. Well, we're not actually told that in the advert, but it's Christmas, so they have to all live happily ever after.

And the advert ends with a tender call to Christmas kindness. And this is the tagline, really, of the advert. Show them how much you care.

There you have it, John Lewis. Show them how much you care. Now, the cynic in me says, show them how much you care by spending lots of money on expensive gifts for all your friends and family.

But nonetheless, the encouragement is a worthy one. Show them how much you care. Now, when I think of the Christmas story, one truth stands out for me.

[4 : 42] It's a story, a true story, that shouts out to the world, to you and me, how much God cares. And you know, intriguingly, the Christmas story also involves a dragon.

But not a friendly dragon called Edgar, but a furious dragon called Satan. Indeed, in the carols this evening, we've already sung of that reality.

The book of Revelation in the Bible is not one you would immediately associate with a nativity story. But there is such a story in Revelation.

I want to read a few verses in Revelation chapter 9, rather Revelation chapter 12 and verses 1 to 6. The passage won't come up on the screen, but you can just follow the reading as you listen to me read these verses from Revelation.

And we read as follows. Of course, Revelation is a book that's full of picture language and symbols describing realities, but nonetheless in that genre or by that means.

[5 : 50] So, Revelation chapter 12, we read as follows. A great sign appeared in heaven. A woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet, and a crown of twelve stars on her head.

She was pregnant and cried out in pain as she was about to give birth. Then another sign appeared in heaven. An enormous red dragon with seven heads and ten horns and seven crowns on its heads.

Its tail swept a third of the stars out of the sky and flung them to the earth. The dragon stood in front of the woman who was about to give birth so that it might devour her child the moment he was born.

She gave birth to a son, a male child, who will rule all the nations with an iron scepter. And her child was snatched up to God and to His throne. The woman fled into the wilderness to a place prepared for her by God where she might be taken care of for 1,260 days.

And the story goes on in the account there in Revelation. And the language is strange and unusual for us, but really the story there, this nativity scene, we could really call it that, this nativity scene has three characters, two familiar and one a seeming intruder.

[7 : 07] We have a woman, Mary. We have a newborn babe or a babe about to be born, Jesus. But we also have a dragon with murderous intent.

And the identity of the dragon is made very explicit for us in what follows in that account. We read just two or three verses on, the great dragon was hurled down, that ancient snake called the devil or Satan who leads the whole world astray.

It's a frightening scene that is painted there, not one that we associate with Christmas. We've seen so many Christmas cards. And Christmas cards, especially if it's a nativity scene, we see all manner of creatures, don't we?

Sometimes we see camels and donkeys and cows and sheep, and I don't know what other creatures we would find on a Christmas card. But have you ever seen a Christmas card with a dragon looming large over the place where Jesus was born?

I think not. Of course, there wasn't an actual physical dragon loitering by the inn in Bethlehem. But the very real character that the dragon represents was very much present.

[8 : 18] We've read about Herod and the massacre of the innocents in Bethlehem, how Herod's intention was indeed to kill the child before he could grow and be a threat to his rule as he understood it.

Satan did not want baby Jesus to survive. He used human instruments to seek to fulfill or achieve his murderous intentions. And so the picture painted in Revelation is not so far, indeed not far at all, from the reality, the historical reality of what happened at that first Christmas.

But how does this nativity scene in Revelation, this rather unusual nativity scene, darkened by the presence of a dragon, how does it reveal to us how much God cares?

Well, let me suggest three things. It reveals, first of all, that God cared so much that he sent his one and only son, Jesus, to face that furious dragon.

God so loved the world. He so loved you and me that he sent his son and exposed him to such hatred and to such a danger. But we can also say this, that God cared so much that he protected Jesus from the murderous intentions of the furious dragon of Satan.

[9 : 45] In Revelation, in the passage that we've read, we're told that the child was snatched up to God. It's almost as if the account fast forwards to the ascension of Jesus.

Jesus did indeed return to his father, but not before he fulfilled his mission, where at every stage he was protected from the dragon until the time came for him to die.

And that leads us to a third thing we can say, that how this rather somber nativity scene describes to us or reveals to us how much God cares. God cared so much that when the time came, he did send Jesus to the cross to die in the place of sinners.

The one who was born there in Bethlehem, he grew. He grew into a boy. He grew into a lad. He grew into a man. And he lived a life of perfect obedience in our place, that life that we can't live.

And when the time came, at the appointed time, he embraced the death that he had been sent to die by his father. And when Jesus was condemned to death, we can be sure that the dragon and his minions celebrated that outcome, little knowing that by the death of Jesus, the dragon's own defeat was sealed.

[11 : 09] You see, the dragon's greatest weapon to hold sinners in his grip, even to this day, is our own sin that condemns us and alienates us from a holy God.

But at the cross, Jesus broke the power of sin and death by taking upon himself the punishment that we are due. By his death, we are saved from death.

You see, gentle Jesus, meek and mild, is God's dragon slayer. Jesus came to do battle with Satan and sin and death, and he won.

He died, but then he rose victorious from the grave and is alive today. At Christmas, by the sending of his own son, Jesus, God has shown how much he cares.

Ava and Edgar, the friendly dragon, showed how much they cared by preparing a delicious Christmas pudding for all the villagers.

[12 : 13] I want you to imagine the scene there. If you've seen the advert, it will be easy for you to do. If you haven't, then use your imagination. Imagine the scene as the Christmas pudding is presented to the gathered company.

Such a thoughtful gift. Can you imagine the villagers turning it down? Can you imagine the villagers saying, no, we don't want the Christmas pudding. Take it away. We have no interest in your Christmas pudding.

The advert doesn't actually show them tucking into the pudding, but I think we can safely say that they would have welcomed the gift that was brought to them. But what about God's gift of his own son?

Have you received that generous, wonderful gift that God gives, and as he does, by that shows how much he cares?

Have you received that gift, the gift of life, the gift of forgiveness, the gift of acceptance and love? You can receive that gift. If you have not done so, even today, trust in Jesus, the dragon slayer, as your Savior, and follow him as your Lord.

[13 : 21] And if you are a Christian, this Christmas is a new opportunity to show how much you care, sharing with others the good news about Jesus, the dragon slayer, who announces and demonstrates by his coming, living and dying, how much God cares.

Let's pray. Heavenly Father, we do thank you that you are indeed the God who cares for us. You so love the world that you sent your one and only Son, Jesus, to be our Savior, to conquer death, to defeat the evil one, to rescue us from the grip of sin and guilt.

We thank you for his coming. We thank you for the incarnation of God, for the Word become flesh. We thank you for the life that he lived, and we thank you for the death that he died in our place.

We thank you for that indescribable gift that is offered to us, and help us to receive that gift gratefully and joyfully, and to trust in Jesus as our Savior, and to follow him as our Lord, and we pray in his name.

Amen.