

June 14, 2020
Rev. Jane Florence
“The Already Not-Yet”
Rev 7: 9-17



Listen with me to these words from the last book of the Bible: The Book of Revelation

John looks, “There was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages” An angel asks, “do you know who these are?” John says, “You tell me!” The angel says, “These are they who have come out of the great ordeal.”

Who are the multitudes too great to count who have come out of the great ordeal? The biblical story is full of ‘great ordeals’ of the Hebrew people. There was the flood ordeal and the slavery in Egypt ordeal, and the wandering in the desert ordeal, and the exile to Babylon ordeal, and the oppression by the Roman Empire ordeal. The persecution of the followers of the Way ordeal as Christians were imprisoned, beheaded, used as human torches to light the night or fed to the lions to entertain an insane tyrant.

When we broaden the scope of time and geography to cosmic and global scales, human history is full of ‘great ordeals.’ Natural ordeals: of volcanoes, earthquakes, monster storms, famines, pestilence and pandemics. Human ordeals: of slavery, genocide, war, and poverty. I think we can relate to the idea of ‘great ordeals’ these days. Ordeals that have lasted for generations. It’s easy to see John’s vision of great multitudes that no one can count, “from every nation, all tribes and people and language” who have perished in tragedy or cruelty.

Then he says, “They have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.” Now, just in case anyone had any question of the genre of this writing, this one line should give us ample evidence. If you’ve ever washed your clothes, and you want your whites to be really white, you’ve probably added some Clorox bleach, or maybe some good ol’ fashioned 20 Mule Team Borax, or a newer version like Oxy-Clean. Those are products to whiten your wash. You know that you don’t add blood to make your clothes whiter. The Book of Revelation isn’t literal guide on how to clean your clothes. It isn’t a literal anything.

This whole Book of Revelation is imagery created by rich figurative language.

The book is a vision or dream experience that John wrote at the end of the first century. John was not writing about the year 2000 or 2020. John was writing about his experience in what we mark as year 1. "John was a refugee from the Jewish war that had just destroyed his homeland, Judea. And the center of that whole territory, which was Jerusalem, the Temple of Jerusalem, had been utterly leveled by the Romans in response to a Jewish rebellion against the Roman Empire. This is wartime literature. It comes out of that war, and it comes out of people who have been destroyed by war. the Romans sent 60,000 soldiers into Jerusalem. the Jewish historian Josephus, who wrote about the war, he said it was the greatest

of all wars of all time.” In addition to the great war, the eruption of Mount Vesuvius happened in the year 79 which consumed two whole cities in moments. It appears the earth can spew forth fire and clouds to swallow entire cities instantly.

So much of what we find in the Book of Revelation, couched in the most fantastic imagery, are descriptions of events that for John were very close: the war in Jerusalem, the Roman emperors who were ruling at the time- waging that war, the eruption of Mount Vesuvius. The book of Revelation speaks about the great scarlet beast with seven heads and seven crowns, but it's a very thinly disguised metaphor or image for the ruling power of Rome, and probably the seven heads of the beast, most people think, represent the emperors from the dynasty of Julius Caesar, Augustus and Tiberius, Claudius and so forth.”¹ John could not call out an emperor by name- there was no freedom of speech against a Roman Emperor. John spoke in metaphor that his readers knew and understood.

When John is speaking of the multitudes who have come out of the ordeal, he is speaking to those who have died for their faith in God of grace who holds them throughout their suffering. He speaks of those who were persecuted and killed, those who lived and died in need of shelter and food and water. Those who knew scorching heat and pain in this world. Those who so believed in the promise of God's grace that they held onto their convictions and did not compromise the truth of God's love as a way of life. They did not conform to the Empire's ways; they held fast to the Way of God's grace.

God's love saved these multitudes from meaningless death, not saved *from* a wrathful God, but saved *by and for* a Loving God. These folks are Living in difficult times, through great ordeals, and still managing to see the victory of God's goodness and the promise that goodness will prevail. John proclaims that God's goodness has already won the battle against evil forces in this world. It is already accomplished, but it is not-yet fully visible.

John is caught in an already, not-yet world where the Empire still oppresses, the hungry and thirsty remain, the political and economic injustice remains, but... God's future is bursting forth and breaking in full of God's pervasive grace and liberty. John remembers the 'dark past' even while he sings doxologies full of hope.

James Weldon Johnson was born in 1871. That was just six years after the Thirteenth amendment prohibited slavery, but 93 years before the Civil Rights Act of 1964. He lived in the already not-yet emancipation. When he was four, a group of newly-freed African Americans purchased property for a school. There they built a wooden structure; it was the first school for black children in Jacksonville, FL, the surrounding counties, and the State of Florida. James' mother was the first female black public school teacher in Florida; she was James' teacher. When James graduated from Atlanta University at 21 years of age, he returned to that school, Stanton School, to be its principal. On Feb 12, 1900, 500 Stanton school students gathered in celebration of President Lincoln's birthday. A man who had lived the already and died in the not-yet freedom for all. The school principal wrote a poem

¹<https://www.npr.org/transcripts/148125942>

which the students recited that day. His brother and he later set the poem to music and published it. It slipped from their mind thereafter. However after the assembly, the student's remembered it. They taught it to others: ²

Lift every voice and sing, till earth and Heaven ring,
Ring with the harmonies of liberty;
Let our rejoicing rise, high as the listening skies,
Let it resound loud as the rolling sea.
Sing a song full of the faith that the dark past has taught us,
Sing a song full of the hope that the present has brought us;
Facing the rising sun of our new day begun,
Let us march on till victory is won.

Stony the road we trod, bitter the chastening rod,
Felt in the days when hope unborn had died;
Yet with a steady beat, have not our weary feet,
Come to the place for which our fathers sighed?
We have come over a way that with tears has been watered,
We have come, treading our path through the blood of the slaughtered;
Out from the gloomy past, till now we stand at last
Where the white gleam of our bright star is cast.

James Weldon Johnson painted a scene in his poetry not unlike John's Revelation of those who have come out of the great ordeal. And they worship God night and day in hope and promise, "and the one who is seated on the throne will shelter them. They will hunger no more, and thirst no more; the sun will not strike them, for the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of the water of life, and God will wipe every tear from their eyes."

We are guided to the baptismal springs of the water of life. We live in the already of God's grace, unconditionally loving us and all, without limit. Victory accomplished. God love wins! We see God's justice prevailing - breaking into our world in the courageous voices and actions today. And at the baptismal font, we commit to the path of the not-yet, "where the white gleam of our bright star is cast," where we vow to live in the Way of God's true justice and mercy for all tribes, and peoples and languages. At the baptismal font we take historic vows, "to resist evil, injustice and oppression in whatever form they present themselves" We join the multitudes who have come out of the great ordeal. We live in the already not-yet faith. True to God's hope for today and working for God's promise for tomorrow. Thanks be to God.

² <http://www.sc.edu/library/spcoll/amlit/johnson/johnson1.html>