

July 5, 2020
Rev. Jane Florence
Title: A Whirlwind of Hope
Scripture: Rev 22: 16-21



I'd like you to consider for a moment the metaphor of a tornado. It's one that does not land and stay on the ground for miles upon miles, but one that touches down briefly and skips along its track dropping down intermittently. But I'd like to modify the metaphor. This is important. When this imaginary whirlwind touches the earth, instead of tearing down homes and bringing destruction, imagine instead that it lifts up all that is good and full of promise and sets that beauty in the middle of a prism where pure light refracts all that glory onto every surface and into every being. This is a whirlwind of hope not destruction. It is a flurry of Divine goodness breaking in and transforming hearts and lives and all the earth.

The last five weeks we have been riding this whirlwind of hope through John's book of Revelation in our morning worship. Our readings in Revelation started in the first chapter and dropped us down in the 5th chapter and the 7th chapter and the 21st chapter. We skipped along this journey lifting up that which was good and full of promise and glory and truth. We touched down in Revelation at the points in which John's theme of hope rose to a crescendo and spun God's glory onto every surface and into the heart every being. We saw images that John flashes upon the screen of breathtakingly beautiful images of worship, a peaceful lamb reigning on a throne, and the tree of life and flowing with water and food for all in the already, not-yet realm of God on earth.

But. What about in between our euphoric skips dropping down into the happy places of this book? Sandwiched in between these beautiful scenes we have witnessed, there are also some violently horrifying images. The Book of Revelation is an expose on the Roman Empire and the struggle of good and evil very real to the community in 90 AD. Daily life wasn't at all beautiful prisms of a love feast and holy worship. John's listeners were those who had been trampled upon. John's listeners were those persecuted and oppressed. John's listeners were those whose loved ones had been imprisoned for resisting Rome and slaughtered for being faithful to the Way of Jesus. They lived in a world where it appeared that evil was winning; their good efforts were met with death. Their good news witness was fed to lions. They are in a battle against the Empire, and by all looks everyday life, the empire is winning.

John's imagery reminds them of Jesus who was executed by empire. When it looked like evil had prevailed in his crucifixion, Easter proclaimed victory. They are told to put their faith in his way. They are told to resist the empire system as he did. They are told that faithful resistance wins, but that's not what they see when they walk down the streets. That's not what they see when another loved one is tortured by the state. That's not what they see as the hungry and vulnerable grow weaker. That's not what they see when people are caged. Sometimes it is hard to see who is winning this battle of good and evil when we look at the mess of the world, and lives of people in pain around us.

In his visionary narrative he does not deny the political and economic realities of suffering. John embodies Rome's evil in the figure of a dragon, a beast in all manner of grotesque mutation. There are other places we could have dropped into this text. Chapter 13 reads:

¹And I saw a beast rising out of the sea,
having ten horns and seven heads;
and on its heads were blasphemous names.

¹¹ Then I saw another beast that rose out of the earth;
it had two horns like a lamb and it spoke like a dragon.
it deceives the inhabitants of earth,

and in chapter 17 John, shows us :

I saw a woman sitting on a scarlet beast
that was full of blasphemous names,
and it had seven heads and ten horns.

⁴The woman was clothed in purple and scarlet,
and adorned with gold and jewels and pearls,
holding in her hand a golden cup
full of abominations and the impurities of her fornication;

⁵and on her forehead was written a name, a mystery:
'Babylon the great, mother of whores
and of earth's abominations.'

⁶And I saw that the woman was drunk
with the blood of the saints
and the blood of the witnesses to Jesus.

There is no missing the sexist culture as John's dragon beast morphs into female image who personifies the evil of the world. She is Babylon the great. She is called a whore.

These beasts are John's symbols of military power, and she is a symbol of luxurious consumption and material greed that devours good.

John shows his listeners that this mighty empire of wealth and power that feeds on the poor, ignores the needs of the vulnerable and consumes in gluttony, this tremendous beast which seems too big to fail -will die at last!

Images from his contemporary world and pagan mythology flood this book. John's people know what/who it is whom he depicts as dragon, beast and whore. His images are not timeless symbols. They reference events and people of the 1st century.

As a child in the 1960s, I remember the preacher talking about Revelation. He said it depicted the struggle between the forces of good and evil loose in our country at that time. I remember him looking at the scripture for images of the eagle to represent the US and the bear to represent Russia. He said the bear was strong, but the eagle disappears in the story. I knew enough to be scared.

Now, I know that John's Book of Revelation was written in the first century of the Common Era talking about events of the first century to people of the first century. John was not using 20th century national mascots to predict the outcome of the Cold War. John uses very militaristic language. He paints scenes of battles against monster- sized forces of evil that rival any Hollywood images on the big screen. It is tempting to see this as good guys vs bad guys, and blow em all up action heroes where blood splatters, heads roll, dragons breathe fire and devour. But that is not the message of the Book of Revelation.

In the midst of all the violence exploding in these stories, John also paints images of the church community of Jesus followers. Revelation's readers are encouraged to take part in the struggle not by joining the violence, but by keeping focus on worship of God and God alone in order to establish God's way on earth. The battles and dragons and beasts are not the church ways. The conquering of the beast by the church in this dream narrative comes through passive resistance. It comes through martyrdom; it comes through a daily living resistance against the idolatry culture that worships everything but God. It comes through their faithful witness to the truth of God.

The destruction that the church is called to enact is the destruction of the systems represented in John's images - political, economic and religious systems - any systems- which oppose God's goodness. Revelation testifies to us today - not about a date for the end of the world, or the demise of a national enemy, or the call to arms - quite the opposite.

John calls the church to participate in Jesus' victory over the evil by following the same path Jesus took: the path of faithful, unwavering witness to the truth from death to life. What was the truth that Jesus died for? What is the truth that the church today is called to proclaim? I can only speak for my understanding of it; you decide yours as well.

When I review the whole of the biblical narrative and scriptures, when I search the life and teaching of Jesus of Nazareth, when I peel back the layers and open the poets and prophets, the truth I find is

Love.

It's not cheesy love. It is spiritual, deep, abiding divinity. God is Love. At our core essence, **we are** all love. We are all connected in that love. I think that must be the truth that we are willing to suffer to announce. Love of God, Love by God, Love as the soul of all where all means all, all friends, all family and yes, all foes. If all we do is not grounded in genuine love that goes beneath all the clashing surface egos, then we are but a noise gong or a clanging symbol (1 Corinthians 13).

I am reminded of the teaching "you can only protest effectively, if you love the person whose ideas you are protesting, as much as you love yourself." You can only protest effectively [and bring about change], if you love the person whose ideas [and behaviors] you are protesting, as much as you love yourself." (Ram Dass, *Be Here Now*) I suspect this is what Jesus meant when he said we must love our enemies. Unless we can see beneath the broken exterior ego of our enemies, and remember the Divine is also the soul of the one we struggle against, our protest is at best in vain and at worse it will make us into that which we protest against. Our struggle against must be rooted in love.

We must see beyond the violence in the streets; we must see beyond the pollution of our seas; we must see beyond the hatred and fears that exclude and the consumption that devours. We must face the beast of our own time with the confidence and assurance that Holy Love is rooted at the heart of all.

John gives hope with visionary whirlwinds of grace that splash over the streets filled with suffering and turns them into streets golden, gleaming God's joy.

Listen with me to these last words of the Christian Bible:

16 'It is I, Jesus, who sent my angel to you
with this testimony for the churches.
I am the root and the descendant of David,
the bright morning star.'

¹⁷ The Spirit and the bride say, 'Come.'
And let everyone who hears say, 'Come.'
And let everyone who is thirsty come.
Let anyone who wishes take the water of life as a gift. Come. ²¹ The grace of the
Lord Jesus be with all the saints. Amen.

May it be so.