

“Revolution and Revelation”

Revelation 13:1-18

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At the end of the worship service last weekend, worship leader Karen Swenson selected a piece of paper from the grab bag. It said: “I would like to hear a sermon about: More about Revelation.” I had given a bit of a teaser on Revelation last week and I guess it was just enough to wet the whistle and not enough to be satisfying. I’m not sure today will be any more satisfying. But I’m always glad to speak about Revelation.

It’s especially appropriate to think about it as the fourth of July is upon us. For like Revelation, the declaration of Independence is also a treatise against the evil empire. In this case England. The colonies fancied themselves as the righteous remnant who were free to exercise their form of liberation on the other side of the pond. Of course, this little experiment included the owning of slaves and the extermination of the original inhabitants. Sorry, is that critical race theory or just history?

There’s a reason Revelation and revolution sound so much alike. Today’s scripture even has fireworks in it. But the fireworks are tools of empire to distract from the true purpose of a believer. Revelation is the fledgling Christian Church’s declaration of independence. It was them saying they were no longer subject to the evil empire. They were answering to a higher call. Follow God, not the dragon. Follow the Lamb, not the beasts the minions of which there are legion.

As I said last week, Revelation reads like a graphic dystopian novel. The world it depicts is encoded. It was not a declaration to be conveyed to an emperor an ocean away. It was a treatise meant to give courage and support for the despairing Christian Church who was just struggling to survive. It was a word that gave them hope, fortitude and a sense of solidarity. It was probably read aloud in the shadows, to the thrill of the captive people. Because its language was so fanciful, it could be read under the watchful eyes and ears of Roman overlords without them having a clue about what they were saying—which I’m sure thrilled the early readers. Rome was never quite in on the joke.

It’s like the slaves singing songs of liberation in the fields. Their masters thought they were singing about heaven after a life of toil. What they were singing about instead was a heaven on earth on the other side of the river separating South and North. Shall we gather at the river? You bet. We’re going to follow the drinking gourd for the old man is coming for to carry you to freedom. For that freedom train is a comin’. And we’re gonna wade in the water as we cross over into campground.

Remember that Revelation was written to people in deep despair. They had lost many, too many of their family members and loved ones in a wicked war with the state. They needed words of assurance.

The Christian community to whom Revelation was written in about 96 CE were hiding out in catacombs, trying to maintain their faith against huge odds. They met in people’s homes, not in huge churches. They did not have a whole lot of established traditions, save Baptism and a communion celebration.

Like all challengers of the status quo, wild stories got made up about them. People confused what it meant to be consuming the body and blood of Christ. They were accused of cannibalism. Since they followed one who was crucified by the state, they were clearly unpatriotic. The Roman Emperor Nero accused the Christians of starting a fire which destroyed much of Rome in 64CE. The Christians therefore were socially and economically discriminated against. They had to publicly worship Roman gods including the Emperor who was called lord and god.

Rome was like Goliath and they were little insignificant Davids. But the Revelator reminded them that it was the Davids of the world who were destined to be the receivers of redemption. They did not have to fight any physical wars, God would take care of that. The system which we see is not the real system. The real system is controlled by God who sits on the throne. The real system is controlled by the Lamb (Jesus) who was and is and is to come. The other system is based upon evil and as such it will implode. Evil cannot and will not last. The work of a Christian therefore is to remember whose side you are on.

“Revelation’s central theological query is: To whom does the earth belong? Who is the ruler of this world? The book’s central theological symbol is therefore the throne, signifying either divine and liberating or demonic and death-dealing power.” (Fiorenza, 1991:120)

So, with that background, let’s unpack a bit today’s chapter of Revelation.

The writer speaks of two beasts in today’s chapter. The first beast is a political beast who comes from the water and the second beast is a religious beast who comes from the land. The beasts have been given authority not by God, but by the Dragon or Satan. It’s helpful to read the 17th chapter to find out what the ten heads and seven horns mean. The seven horns are seven mountains, like Rome. They also represent the recent Roman Emperors, one of whom was had received a head wound but somehow recovered. The ten heads are ten kings who yield their power to the beast (and who will receive their reward). Think senators who think that cleaving to the beast will save them.

The beasts have big rallies, huge crowds. The beast lies. The beast leads by fear. The beast convinces people that he is their savior. The people fall over themselves and say, “Who is like the beast, and who can fight against him?” It’s easier to tell a lie or even believe a lie than it is to believe you have been lied to. This is what being drunk by the wine of the beast is like.

The beast says nasty things—utters haughty and blasphemous words and was allowed to rule for, get this 42 months, or three and a half years (Half of seven). This beast blasphemed against God and made war on the believers. And by fear, all the world worshipped the beast. All except for the righteous remnant that were persistently resisting and enduring this time of trial.

The followers of the beast represent all of the masses of people who are too scared to follow the lamb. The followers of the lamb are the people of the persecuted church, the faithful witnesses who see the larger picture.

The first beast is a politician. The second beast is another politician disguised as a religious person. The faith, however is not in God or the lamb, but in the Dragon, who makes war on anyone who does not fall into line.

The catacombic readers of Revelation knew exactly who they were talking about. Especially when they used the number 666, that number that is so much less than the perfect 7. In Roman numerology, 666 spells out Nero Caesar.

The Beastly Roman emperors were hell-bent on wiping out the Christians who sought to subvert their power. Christians were hauled out in front of Caesar and asked, “who is Lord.” If

they said, “Caesar is Lord,” they were spared. If they said “Jesus is Lord” they were either drawn and quartered or they were beheaded. It was risky business being a Christian back then. When Revelation talks about the faithful witness having traded their white robes for red, it is referring to people having their own blood spilled. This is a scary book. I Cor. 12 says that no one can say Jesus is Lord, except by the Holy Spirit. We now know why.

In order to bear the faithful witness, it is important to be not afraid and to have incredibly patient endurance. Resist, resist, resist.

However, the writer of Revelation makes it very clear that it is difficult for all but the most astute to tell the difference between the lamb and the beast. The beast appropriates the language of the lamb in order to win support and confuse the faithful. That is why it is so important to listen to the Spirit. When the beast looks like the lamb it gets confusing. Think of white evangelicals supporting a president who does decidedly unchristian things.

It’s no accident that the mall in Washington is shaped like a cross presided over by a huge statue of Lincoln in his own stone temple. This is designed to blur the lines between Christianity and empire. But Revelation says, beware. Your allegiance is to God and the Lamb.

Revelation tells us that we need to watch who we follow. It’s about leadership. Is your leader Jesus or the emperor? The lamb or the beast? A lamb is passive and a beast is destructive. But do we then follow the lamb who destroys the followers of the beast, sending them to the lake of fire? How is this violence redemptive?

I think it’s more important who *we* are. Are we the faithful witnesses resisting the powers and principalities on behalf of those on the underside of empire? Or are we seduced by the beast into passive acceptance of the status quo?

In Greek the word Apocalypse means peeling away. It peels away layers of deception and it reveals the core truth.

Here’s the truth that it reveals:

Empires fall, tyrants fade but God is still here.

That’s the reality revealed by the apocalypse and it’s very good news for those in the midst of persecution.

Revelation speaks to the underside of Empire. At the underside of empire are those who are victims of empire—the voices of those who exist below the surface: the people who are persecuted for who they are, for the language they speak, for the complexion of their skin, for their nationality, their religion, their sexual orientation or affectional proclivities, people who are crunched by debt, folks who ask the critical questions, folks who fight in wars not because of their overt choices, but because of their circumstances.

The work of the Christian Church, the authentic Revelation-inspired Christian Church is to be wise as serpents and gentle as doves. It does not call for a military battle, but for a battle for our very souls. It’s so easy to be seduced by the Beast, but we are to persistently resist all of that so-called glory for the real glory that comes from following the lamb. And we only hear about it in glimpses. Like the angel chorus reminding us that Holy is the God of Hosts. Worthy is the Lamb that was slain. The angel chorus that rejoices when we speak truth to power, when we garner our best strength to join in God’s project to create a new earth here and now.

So what does this mean to us today? I think it means that as faithful followers of the Lamb, we must be ever attentive to the powers of seduction possessed and utilized by empire. We need to be careful not to create God in our own image. We must be awake and attentive to the forces of evil and as a church we need to be in constant community and self-reflection-mode so that we are not lulled into a false sense of security. For that is where

Babylon/Rome/Empire/Satan rules. That is the cosmic battle that is talked about in Revelation. That is also why Revelation is so vitally important for us to understand and embrace as progressive people of faith.

Revelation doesn't spiritualize human oppression, it unmasks it. We can't resist what we cannot see. Elizabeth Schussler Fiorenza wrote, "Revelation proclaims and visualizes judgment against the dehumanizing powers of evil in order to warn readers not to succumb to the very concrete pressures of these powers." (Fiorenza, 1991: 130)

So as the bombs burst in the air this evening, let's seek to remember those who are too often ignored by powers and principalities. How would they interpret such a celebration? Imagine them singing their songs of praise and resistance under the cover of another's blind celebration. There is another narrative that demands the attention of the faithful. And paying attention to those left out of empire's benefits is where the God of Revelation lives.

So let's find a way to remember that on this day celebrating Revolution and Revelation.