

Revelation II: Apocalypse Now?

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Scripture: Ecclesiastes 3:1-8; Revelation 11:15-12:12

Hymns: VT 209 - We Dream of a Turning; VT 415 - Beyond a Dying Sun

Ecclesiastes 3:1-8 (NRSV):

For everything there is a season and a time for every matter under heaven:

² a time to be born and a time to die;

a time to plant and a time to pluck up what is planted;

³ a time to kill and a time to heal;

a time to break down and a time to build up;

⁴ a time to weep and a time to laugh;

a time to mourn and a time to dance;

⁵ a time to throw away stones and a time to gather stones together;

a time to embrace and a time to refrain from embracing;

⁶ a time to seek and a time to lose;

a time to keep and a time to throw away;

⁷ a time to tear and a time to sew;

a time to keep silent and a time to speak;

⁸ a time to love and a time to hate;

a time for war and a time for peace.

Revelation 11:15-12:12

¹⁵ Then the seventh angel blew his trumpet, and there were loud voices in heaven, saying,

“The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord
and of his Messiah, and he will reign forever and ever.”

¹⁶ Then the twenty-four elders who sit on their thrones before God fell on their faces and worshiped God,

¹⁷ singing,

“We give you thanks, Lord God Almighty,
who are and who were,
for you have taken your great power
and begun to reign.

¹⁸ The nations raged,
but your wrath has come,
and the time for judging the dead,
for rewarding your servants, the prophets
and saints and all who fear your name,
both small and great,
and for destroying those who destroy the earth.”

¹⁹ Then God’s temple in heaven was opened, and the ark of his covenant was seen within his temple, and there were flashes of lightning, rumblings, peals of thunder, an earthquake, and heavy hail.

Chapter 12:1 A great portent appeared in heaven: a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet,

and on her head a crown of twelve stars. ² She was pregnant and was crying out in birth pangs, in the agony of giving birth. ³ Then another portent appeared in heaven: a great red dragon, with seven heads and ten horns and seven diadems on his heads. ⁴ His tail swept down a third of the stars of heaven and threw them to the earth. Then the dragon stood before the woman who was about to deliver a child, so that he might devour her child as soon as it was born. ⁵ And she gave birth to a son, a male child, who is to rule all the nations with a scepter of iron. But her child was snatched away and taken to God and to his throne, ⁶ and the woman fled into the wilderness, where she has a place prepared by God, so that there she can be nourished for one thousand two hundred sixty days.

⁷ And war broke out in heaven; Michael and his angels fought against the dragon. The dragon and his angels fought back, ⁸ but they were defeated, and there was no longer any place for them in heaven. ⁹ The great dragon was thrown down, that ancient serpent, who is called the devil and Satan, the deceiver of the whole world—he was thrown down to the earth, and his angels were thrown down with him.

¹⁰ Then I heard a loud voice in heaven proclaiming,

“Now have come the salvation and the power
and the kingdom of our God
and the authority of his Messiah,
for the accuser of our brothers and sisters has been thrown down,
who accuses them day and night before our God.
¹¹ But they have conquered him by the blood of the Lamb
and by the word of their testimony,
for they did not cling to life even in the face of death.
¹² Rejoice then, you heavens
and those who dwell in them!
But woe to the earth and the sea,
for the devil has come down to you
with great wrath
because he knows that his time is short!”

I know what some of you are thinking: not Revelation again! Didn't Patrick preach on that last week? And you have good reason for staying away from this particular book of the Bible. As one of the most misunderstood books of the Bible, Revelation has been used for centuries as one of the “clobber-passages” – used to create fear of a violent and judgmental God. In some branches of the Christian church, it's used to cement certain rules or the authority of certain church leaders under threat of damnation. “Obey this person or these rules unquestioningly – or else you can expect to face God's

wrath!” Similarly, since the middle ages, people have tried to use the book of Revelation to predict specific dates for the end of the world. “The failure rate is 100 percent.”¹

I want to suggest today – as Patrick did last week – that this usual interpretation of Revelation as foretelling the (violent) end of the world is at best, unhelpful. It’s also just really sloppy biblical interpretation! I might even go so far as to call it spiritual violence, as it uses the Bible in an attempt to control or manipulate people through fear. But if Revelation is not a prediction of how the world is going to end, what is it? What’s going on with all the symbolic numbers and strange imagery of dragons and beasts and such? What does it all mean? Well, many scholars would say that the book of Revelation is in fact a trauma text. I don’t mean this in the sense of it scaring us with predictions of judgment to come. Instead, it’s about the early Christians trying to make sense of the suffering and persecution of their time and place. This is not threatening future suffering, then, but describing and trying to find meaning in what is already happening to and around the early church in the first century. Given that it was still a persecuted, underground movement, these things are described in a kind of code – using symbolic imagery and numbers – almost like first-century emojis.

Mennonite scholar J. Denny Weaver uses the example of the seven seals in Revelation 6 to show the first-century references that are being made. Seal two, for instance, speaks about a red horse bringing war – a major threat under Roman emperor Caligula (37-41 C.E.), whose army marched through Palestine and threatened to occupy Jerusalem. Seal three is about famine, which occurred under emperor Claudius (41-54 C.E.), and is also described in Acts 11:28-29, where the early church organizes

¹ J. Denny Weaver, *The Nonviolent God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2013), 35.

to provide aid to those affected by the famine.² Other seals are similarly coded references to real events that befell the early Christians – not predictions of trouble to come. The suffering therefore wasn't something theoretical, but something happening to them and all around them. Their questions revolved around how to keep their faith in God in these times of turmoil, and what God was up to while they underwent these terrible experiences.

According to Weaver, a major clue about the purpose of the book of Revelation comes in seals six and seven. He writes, seal six's "imagery of astronomical collapse and earthly chaos and devastation has been frequently interpreted as a description of the end of the world. It is not. This imagery depicts an actual, historical, mundane event, but one that seemed like the end of the world to those who experienced it." This was, namely, the utter destruction of Jerusalem, including the Jewish Temple, by the Roman army in 70 C.E. (under emperor Vespasian). In order to depict the horror of that event, Revelation uses imagery of "celestial chaos – the sun going black, the moon becoming like blood, stars falling, the sky rolling up." All of these represent "the breakdown of order and the feelings of total loss and utter devastation when the army of the occupiers utterly destroyed Jerusalem and its sacred temple." But remarkably, that's not where the story ends. The believers don't give up even though their beloved capital city and central place of worship have been destroyed. Instead, the seventh seal depicts the angels of God "holding back the winds so that nothing is damaged," and marking the servants of God on their foreheads. "Here," Weaver claims, "is the beginning of a statement that regardless of what has happened in the earthly realm, such as the

² Weaver, 40-41.

dastardly deeds of emperors chronicled in ch. 6, ultimately, God is in control, and the fate of the people of God resides with God.”³

Imagine how radical it is to claim in the midst of destruction that God will ultimately make things come out right, that this experience may feel like the end of the world, but it isn't. God is already working in unseen ways to bring about justice. What a powerful message of encouragement and hope to those suffering under the Roman empire! In order to strengthen them to persevere, this passage says to them: Rome will not have the last word; God will. It's like standing in the midst of the destruction and war in the Ukraine today and saying, the Russian army will not have the last word; God will set this right. This is what apocalyptic literature is about in the Bible: to strengthen the persecuted community and give them hope in the midst of their great suffering. As Diana Butler Bass puts it, Revelation or “John’s apocalypse functioned as a comforting text for a persecuted church. The book revealed the evils of this age and assured Christians that a triumphant God would overcome all their pain and suffering. Revelation was, essentially, an extended metaphor of Christ’s victory over a sinful world,”⁴ the ultimate triumph of good over evil even while it seems that evil is still prevailing. It's the same kind of logic seen in some of the Psalms, where the Psalmist gives thanks in advance, even though they're still in the midst of trouble. That's how confident they are that God will come through for them.

Our Scripture passage from Revelation for today comes a few chapters after the seven seals, but echoes this message about persevering and keeping the faith in the midst of trouble. It also speaks to what kind of triumph God is working to achieve. In the

³ Weaver, 41.

⁴ Diana Butler Bass, “Sunday Musings: Revelation: Holy War or Sacred Wooing?” https://dianabutlerbass.substack.com/p/sunday-musings-d0b?utm_source=email&s=r, paragraph 16.

face of the overwhelming brutality of the Roman empire, John's vision depicts God's kingdom – or God's empire – instead. The heavenly voices and elders praise God and declare God's reign:

“We give you thanks, Lord God Almighty,
who are and who were,
for you have taken your great power
and begun to reign.” (Rev. 11:17).

Sounding a lot like Jesus in the gospels, these heavenly voices proclaim that God's reign has already begun – despite appearances otherwise. God's kingdom/kin-dom is already here.⁵ In the next few verses, God's heavenly temple is revealed – again, a defiant symbol against the Romans who have destroyed and looted the (earthly) Temple in Jerusalem.

Then the symbolism changes, and we have this strange episode of the woman clothed with the sun who is preparing to give birth, with a dragon waiting to snatch her newborn baby. It's an image of vulnerability and danger – but God snatches the child up to heaven, and the woman is provided with safety and sustenance in the wilderness. This little story is full of the symbolism of Jesus' birth, death, and resurrection (referenced in the child), as well as the history of the Israelites wandering in the desert, finding safety and God's presence with them there, perhaps unexpectedly for such an unwelcoming, hostile place. The woman, representing the church, is depicted as wandering in another wilderness – the violence of Rome – under God's loving protection.

⁵ Ched Myers writes, “Apocalyptic dualism is not static but dynamic, asserting that the corrupt age is already ‘passing away,’ the new one dawning. It is precisely the conviction that the new order is ‘here but not yet’ that motivates the believer to join in the unfinished, genuine struggle for history.” See: Myers, *Binding the Strong Man* (Orbis Books, 1997), 339.

Then the angels defeat the dragon in a kind of heavenly battle, and another hymn of praise ends our passage. This one again proclaims that God's reign is now here, and that "the accuser of our brothers and sisters has been thrown down" or overthrown. Good has triumphed over evil. And what's more, this hymn talks about how this triumph came about. Those who are being "accused" and persecuted "have conquered ... by the blood of the Lamb, and by the word of their testimony." As Patrick talked about last week, it is the Lamb that is the key to God's victory in Revelation, the same Lamb who is worthy to open the seven seals (ch. 6-7). It is the nonviolent faith of those who have suffered or even lost their lives in that context that triumphs, even over great empires and all their violence. The church's "weapons" in this symbolic, spiritual battle are therefore "the death and resurrection of Jesus and the testimony of the martyrs," says Weaver. In several places in Revelation, God's "victory comes through resurrection – the overcoming of violence by restoring life – rather than through greater violence by God to eliminate the world's violence."⁶

This careful reading of Revelation therefore begins to unravel ideas about God and Christ as the great warriors who come to punish with violence at the end of the world. This isn't some action-movie ending! Rather, it's a statement about power that talks back to the crushing domination of the Roman empire. Though Rome thinks it's winning, though it appears that the people of God are defeated, that's not true, says Revelation. What appears to be hopeless suffering is in fact the life-giving suffering of childbirth. Those who appear to have been defeated and martyred are in fact safe in the arms of God. The world will not end with Rome violently occupying the whole world, but with God's eternal reign, symbolized by a wedding feast and a beautiful garden of

⁶ Weaver, 39, 45.

healing and peace – the antithesis of imperial domination. Butler Bass says that the book ends with “a bridal procession and a powerful image of love: No more waiting. We are welcomed into a relationship that is intimate and imminent. Joy. New life. A home. Separation and sadness are banished. *God will be with them; God will wipe every tear from their eyes.* The longed-for radiance of God. The pain of empire overcome by light and love.”⁷

Butler Bass insists – and rightly so – that Revelation has caused all kinds of trouble throughout Christian history, especially when it’s been taken literally as a call for Christians to build their own empires that borrow all of Rome’s tactics – seen in the crusades and colonialism, to name a few. “Sadly,” she says, “taking Revelation literally has proved one thing: all empires – including Christian ones – are empires of grief, awash in blood and tears.”⁸ Failing to recognize that it’s not “the conquering ‘Lion of the tribe of Judah’” that is Revelation’s central image of Christ, but rather the resurrected Lamb, has led the church astray over the centuries. We have failed to notice that the image of Christ holding a sword (Rev. 19) depicts it as coming from his mouth – a common image of the Word of God. This has led us to mistake this Christ for a warrior, even though there is no battle.⁹ He is simply “armed” with the truth of his words, and remains the Rabbi of the gospels.

Revelation, then, for all its strangeness, offers us a portrait of a community in crisis, finding its way through a time of great trauma and pain. Yet they do not curse God or see this suffering as coming from God; they turn to God for comfort and hope,

⁷ Butler Bass, paragraph 28. Emphasis hers.

⁸ Butler Bass, paragraph 25.

⁹ Weaver, 51.

living according to their faith that love is stronger than death and destruction. Rather than causing us fear and trembling, this book was written to assert that a hopeful new age is already on its way; that the empires are already falling, crumbling under their own treachery. The world will end as it began: in a garden, with trees and love and laughter. We can look forward to that day, even as it already appears in glimpses among us.

AMEN

Blessing When the World Is Ending by Jan Richardson¹⁰

Look, the world
is always ending
somewhere.

Somewhere
the sun has come
crashing down.

Somewhere
it has gone
completely dark.

Somewhere
it has ended
with the gun,
the knife,
the fist.

Somewhere
it has ended
with the slammed door,
the shattered hope.

Somewhere
it has ended
with the utter quiet
that follows the news
from the phone,

¹⁰ Jan Richardson, *Circle of Grace: A Book of Blessings for the Seasons*,
<https://paintedprayerbook.com/2016/07/18/blessing-when-the-world-is-ending/>

the television,
the hospital room.

Somewhere
it has ended
with a tenderness
that will break
your heart.

But, listen,
this blessing means
to be anything
but morose.
It has not come
to cause despair.

It is simply here
because there is nothing
a blessing
is better suited for
than an ending,
nothing that cries out more
for a blessing
than when a world
is falling apart.

This blessing
will not fix you,
will not mend you,
will not give you
false comfort;
it will not talk to you
about one door opening
when another one closes.

It will simply
sit itself beside you
among the shards
and gently turn your face
toward the direction
from which the light
will come,
gathering itself
about you
as the world begins
again.