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Rev 1:4-12

SAVING REVELATION I: CAN I GET A WITNESS?

Last week after service I sat in the office after everyone had cleared out and was talking with Karin Jonsson, the operations manager for the Mayflower Medical Outreach, the woman headed to live in Jinotega for a year. Karin is from Sweden and I was asking her what Swedish people did on Easter. “Well”, she said in a very animated way – if you know Karin, you know that she talks a lot with her hands and with a good deal of energy – “On the Thursday before Easter, we dress up like witches and put red circles on our cheeks and wear long wigs and big dresses and carry around copper pots that we have decorated the night before. Then we go door-to-door and hand out Easter cards and get candy from the neighbors.” She admitted that it sounds like Halloween here.

I wondered how one arrived at that sort of ritual for Easter. I mean – Easter witches? As it turns out, the ritual evokes an old Swedish folk tale, one as secular as Easter is for the Swedish culture. As an article in Time magazine reports, “The tradition is said to come from the old belief that witches would fly to a German mountain the Thursday before Easter to cavort with Satan. On their way back, Swedes would light fires to scare them away, a practice honored today by the bonfires and fireworks across the land in the days leading up to Sunday.” So, in Sweden just as here our religious lives intersect with our historical and cultural lives just as Christianity mixed itself with so-called pagan stories and rituals.

If I had never known that story, however, the Swedish Easter tradition would look pretty silly to me. Even knowing what I do, it is still odd and peculiar to me. The Book of Revelation, or what is more properly called the Apocalypse of

John, is the same way for lots and lots of people. It is a strange book full of lurid imagery, bizarre animals and bloody scenes of conquest. So we look at it in the same way that we might look at witches on Easter or that someone from Sweden might look at folks running around pinching people on St. Patrick's Day...especially if they were pinching people dressed as ten headed dragons.

If you don't want anything to do with Revelation, you are not alone. It had a hard time making it into the canon in the first place. Written, most scholars think, near the turn of the first century, it wasn't widely accepted as scripture until the late second century. The Eastern Church took even longer to accept it. In the fourth century, the Christian historian Eusebius labeled it as "disputed" and the early church father Cyril of Jerusalem omitted it completely and forbade its public or private use.

It wasn't until the 10th and 11th centuries that this text began to be consistently included in New Testament manuscripts. By the time of the Protestant Reformation, it had become an issue again. Martin Luther said that he could not "discern Christ in it" and John Calvin, even though he allowed that it was canonical, wrote a commentary on every other book of the bible except for Revelation. It is the only book of the Bible that is not read as part of the *Divine Liturgy* in the Eastern Orthodox Church and it makes only this brief five week intrusion into our lectionary, and that only every three years.

Still, this book makes a profound impact on Christianity in the 19th and 20th centuries and has inspired two of the most popular "religious" books of all-time – Hal Lindsey's Late, Great Planet Earth, and the fantastical fiction of the Left Behind series of books by Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins. In fact, I think that it is because of the improper union between the theology from these books and the Book of Revelation that many people simply reject it. If you get past that issue there is the abundance of troubling, sexist and even barbaric images to chase us away.

And even beyond that it is just plain hard to read. It is thick with metaphors and images that are foreign to us. And since we don't have the key to deciphering the images or come from the same cultural, social or political context, we have a hard time making sense of this work. And into that vacuum of information, one may insert all kinds of speculation and conjecture. If we are to understand this book like we try to understand the whole "witches of Easter" thing, we need to do some deconstruction and reassembly of our notions and absorbed misconceptions, and we need some background.

The Book of Revelation comes from a genre of literature – one that was very common at the time. This genre is called apocalyptic literature from the Greek word *apokalypsis*, which means “unveiling” or “revealing”. In fact, the term revelation and apocalypse are synonymous, though not in our post-left behind minds. We think of apocalypse as destruction or the end of the world – they thought of it as a revealing of something that is hidden. There were any number of apocalyptic texts floating around the ancient world – the Apocalypse of Abraham, the Apocalypses of Adam, Elijah, Zepheniah and Ezekiel, the Revelation of Ezra, the Testament of Moses, the Apocalypse of Peter, the Apocalypse of Paul, and the Apocalypses of Stephen, Thomas and James...all of which are non-canonical, meaning that they never made it into the canon we call the Bible. But they were known and read and part of a larger literary tradition at the time, but no longer. And that lack of familiarity with the genre means that we get a lot of interpretive styles.

There are people who read Revelation as a purely figurative book about the cosmic battle between good and evil. There are those who read it as a historically bound commentary on events taking place at the time it was written. There are those who read it as being played out in history to this date. And, of course, there is the interpretive group we are most familiar with - the ones called futurists who believe that Revelation has a future fulfillment that is either to come or in the process of happening pretty immediately.

All of these groups have subtleties to them and the depth of interpretive structure goes way beyond what I would attempt to talk about in a sermon or would really want to talk about at all. Suffice it to say that there is far more complexity to Revelation's interpretation than you could ever imagine - largely due to the complete vacuum of discernable data about its intended meaning. As any author will tell you once you publish something you have written, the intent you had is no longer meaningful...your work is now a free radical, picking up whatever it will attract. So the real question when dealing with Revelation that I ask people is - what do you think this text is about? Most often I get some derivative of the end of the world or the second coming of Jesus and the destruction of the planet. Both of these answers assume a certain interpretive structure that marches pretty well lock-step with the Left Behind theology, and this is not the only one available. Just as attending this church might help you understand that the fundamentalist interpretation of the Bible is not the only interpretation, I hope over the next few weeks to give you a new way to look at the Book of Revelation.

As a genre, an apocalypse served a function. It was designed and written to address a specific problem, namely to relieve stress, to inspire hope or fortitude and to set in the mind of the reader God's promise for victory or rescue from oppression. It was written not necessarily to demonstrate what we would call "real" outcomes, but rather to imagine something that appeals more to the heart than the head, more to our moral imagination than our rational mind. It is easier for me to think of apocalyptic literature as akin to the genre of science fiction – Revelation as Star Wars – because just like the drive of science fiction it uses things that aren't real to comment on things that are real.

Marcus Borg points out that John echoes the ancient story of the cosmic battle between good and evil in which the "forces of light, order and life battle the forces of darkness, disorder and death." This, as Borg also notes, is the same myth that gets played out in Star Wars and, I would add, the Lord of the Rings and Chronicles of Narnia, even the Matrix stories. These tales tap into something almost primal for human beings - the recognition of evil and the yearning for good and justice to prevail.

As you might expect, apocalyptic literature often makes a comeback during times of crisis as it tends to reflect on suffering as part of the plan for renewal that God has in store. So we can look at the times in which these texts were written as well as times in Western European history like the Crusades, the Plague, the Reformation and then the Civil War in this country and the Great Depression as times that this text and the situations it addresses get pulled out again. In particular the so-called "futurist" interpretation comes out at these times and, in this country, this interpretation dominates the reading of Revelation. It goes something like this:

The primary basis of this interpretation is a theory called - are you ready for this - premillennial dispensationalism and is widely thought to have started with John Darby, a minister in the Church of Ireland in the 1800s. Picking up on a theological movement in the European community, he developed this theory which centered on what was once an ancient heresy, the idea of the "rapture" in which the "true followers" of Christ would escape the tribulation to come in the thousand years war from Revelation. His theory would gain a lot of traction in *this* country upon the publication of the Scofield Reference Bible, written by Cyrus Scofield, a born-again Christian who had led a hard early life, been imprisoned for forgery and abandoned a wife and two children before finding God. Scofield's Bible was built entirely on this premillennial dispensational model

and his notes (printed in the Bible) were often so close to the text that people mistook them for the Biblical text itself.

Scotfield was ordained as a Congregational minister and started the First Congregational Church of Dallas and his ideas continue to dominate the curriculum at Dallas Theological Seminary - one of the main schools for this interpretive style. It is largely through the influence of Scotfield and his reference Bible that these notions have become so popular amongst fundamentalist Christians today.

But this is not the only way to read Revelation. I am going to offer you an option, and a reason that we should still read Revelation and not just throw it out with the bathwater. Revelation, like all apocalyptic writings, addresses the nature of evil in the world, suffering all around us and God's plan of action to contend with that evil. Revelation tells us of two kingdoms - the one of Caesar and the one of God. And it asks us - are we to work for a kingdom of empire, what theologian John Dominic Crossan says operates from the idea of "peace through violence and victory", or are we to work for a kingdom that says peace comes through justice and love? Which kingdom do we look for, which one do we struggle for?

It was once thought that Revelation was written at a time of great persecution for the Christian church and that this book was meant as comfort to those suffering under persecution, the very claim that the "Left Behind" theology claims - with secularism as the great Satan. Some scholars placed its writing as early as the 6th decade of the first century - the time when Nero was the Caesar and the persecution of Christians was open and cruel. But scholars have more recently begun to think that the writing comes much later and at a time of relative peace between Rome and the Christian church. This scholarship makes Revelation an even more controversial text and, I think, a more poignant work than ever for us in our time and place.

John writes to seven churches - Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia and Laodicea. He has specific descriptions of each church, some flattering, some not. He calls out some of them and praises others. And if we look at the churches in an archetypal fashion, there are some pretty uncomfortable accusations here.

See, if Revelation is supposed to bring hope to the huddled masses under the thumb of some evil regime, it is one thing. That is the kind of witness that you might be able to understand this disturbing text being written for. But if it is

instead an indictment of that imperial domination system and that indictment forces us to look at the ways that we aren't subject to it, but actually cooperate with it, that's a whole new ballgame. John calls to Smyrna and Philadelphia as communities that are persevering in "the way" and keeping themselves at arm's length from the temptation of empire. To others, like Sardis, John says that they are asleep and to churches like Ephesus that they follow the path but for all the wrong reasons. John's worst condemnation comes for Pergamum and Laodicea. Pergamum, the center of "Caesar worship" in the Roman Empire he accuses of simply being in bed with the enemy, but Laodicea, the wealthiest city in the empire he labels as lukewarm. They are neither hot nor cold, but comfortable and unwilling to either confront evil, lest it adversely affect their comfort, or be good, lest it do the same. He accuses Laodicea of being blind.

One does not have to look far to see a bit of the Laodicean attitude right here and now. Too enmeshed in our own comfort to make hard decisions, we have let the lure of easy money seduce us into foolish choices - as individuals, as corporations and as a nation. If we have enough money (money and power now being synonymous), the American mythos now says, everything else is fine. The only problem is, as corporate leaders, celebrities, families and even professional golfers have discovered, there never is enough money in that scenario and it does matter how you get it, what you do with it and what kind of person it makes you think you are. This is where the "Left Behind" theology lets us off the hook, because it negates the effect of Revelation as a rhetorical, imaginative argument and makes it entirely factual and concrete - just like fundamentalism does with the Bible. In the words of theologian Elisabeth Schussler-Fiorenza, "such fundamentalist media-apocalypticism misuses Revelation because it does not either proclaim the apocalyptic promise of justice and salvation to the poor and to the oppressed or challenge the complacency and security of the relatively well-to-do".

And the worst, most damaging attitude of all is found not in our opinions but in our apathy. As a survivor of the Nazi death camps, Elie Wiesel knows a lot about the power of radical views and unchecked power. But it was he who said, "The opposite of love is not hate, it's indifference. The opposite of art is not ugliness, it's indifference. The opposite of faith is not heresy, it's indifference. And the opposite of life is not death, it's indifference." This is the lukewarm attitude that John calls out in the Laodicean community, and it may be closer than we want to admit.

And yet we also do not have to look far at all to see the very tangible weight of crushing economic exploitation, human degradation and political abuse. We can see it in everything from the tragic recent history of countries like Haiti or Somalia to the clergy abuse scandal that is now rocking the Catholic Church to the sharp rise in black market human trafficking. The world has plenty of examples of an imperial mindset, a mindset that claims that power is something to be consumed and wielded, not something to be tamed.

Even if we make this a completely personal metaphor, there is probably at least one time in everyone's life where they feel like what so many blues singers have said, "If it weren't for bad luck, I'd have no luck at all". Maybe it is in the hospital waiting room or in the middle of the custody battle, at the scene of the accident or after the breakup, when we witness the foreclosure or see the impending pain of our children's struggle with maturity - as we think about waiting outside a West Virginia coal mine with hope fading like the sunset sky or laying your child down for yet another night in a tent outside Port-au Prince...all of these things can make us doubt our faith, feel undermined in our belief and to long for that cosmic battle to be won, and for once to be won by the side we think that we're on.

Revelation is a book that in the most fantastic of ways says that the beasts of domination will come to overcome those who follow peace and justice and remain faithful. Its vision calls us to see in incredible images a world in which we are asked to worship such forces of domination, forces that are manipulative and deceitful and lure us into their grasp. It calls us to keep our faithful walk and that such perseverance will be vindicated. It asks us if it is possible to worship God and Empire at the same time. It uses the imagery that we might associate with science-fiction to say that our call as followers of Jesus is to resist the forces of domination, whether internal or external, to focus our worship on God alone and to hold to the vision of building a new world...God's Kingdom here on earth.

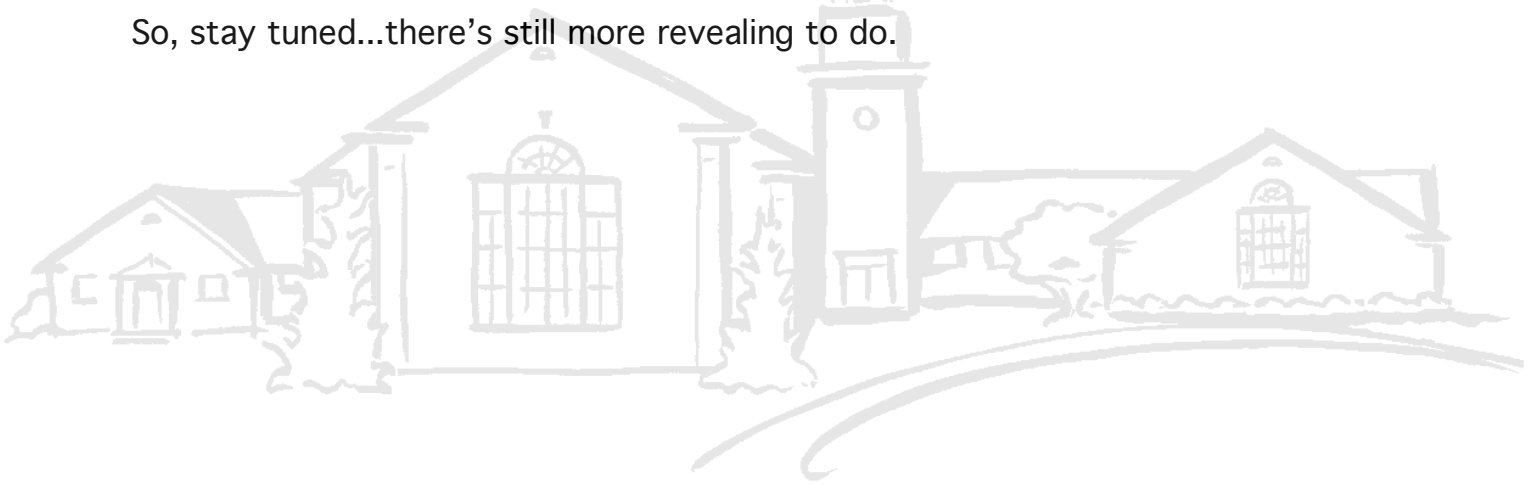
Over the next three weeks I will give you some new tools for interpretation, some new lenses through which you can see the world that John imagines in his graphic, sometimes disturbing and intentionally unsettling ways. I hope to leave you with a deeper understanding of this mysterious and problematic text - warts and all...and I hope that you will come away feeling that you no longer wish to just leave this book behind, but instead will see it for what it is - a mystical vision of what might be, and a call for us to not only have personal

redemption, but also to participate in God's re-creation, God's holy renovation of our world.

So – next week...we will meet the first of three women that John evokes in this book, the woman referred to in Chapter 12: “A woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars...she was pregnant and crying out in birth pangs...”

We'll look unflinchingly at the more brutal, repressive and even misogynistic aspects of Revelation, something that has to be done with many myths...products of the culture from which they come. And we will discover more about the world that John is calling us to help build...

So, stay tuned...there's still more revealing to do.



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