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Revelation 12:1-12

Saving Revelation II: War Broke Out in Heaven

Last week I shared with you some of the issues with reading Revelation, not the least of which is that it is most commonly interpreted via a theology that many of us don't agree with. But I also talked about how interpretation fuels theology and that Revelation can be interpreted many ways – in fact, with the lack of code breaking tools we have for this heavily coded work, interpretations abound. As if he were writing a science fiction story this author, John of Patmos, uses fantastic imagery (along with scriptural references) perhaps, some scholars think, to throw off his Roman detractors and remain opaque, but certainly to comment on current events.

I hope that I left you with the idea that Revelation can also be interpreted as a hopeful and challenging myth that shows us two kingdoms – the kingdom of domination systems (represented by the Roman Empire in this case) and the kingdom of God. Revelation, in my opinion, offers us a choice between the way of Empire and the way of Jesus Christ.

I also told you that we would look unflinchingly at this myth which, like all myths, is a product of its culture...in this case a patriarchal and violent culture. This story involves violence and plays on the well established and widely accepted myth of redemptive violence. This phrase was coined by Walter Wink, a theologian who writes extensively on the nature of power and the way that power uses violence to dominate, reward and punish. He reflects on the fact

that domination systems seem to “enshrine the belief that violence saves, that war brings peace, that might makes right”.

While we can clearly see this myth alive in our own culture, I have to confess a certain belief in this same myth myself, perhaps only from sheer osmosis. I used to consider myself a pacifist and I still think that I am in theory. I don't believe that violence solves anything but if someone were trying to hurt either my wife or children, violence would be a quick and easy response for me. If I were to somehow sit in a room with Timothy McVeigh and listen to a few of the glib comments that are only now being revealed to us from audio interviews made in the weeks before his execution, I might be tempted to reach across that table and remind him in no uncertain terms of the children he killed for his cause. I have to recognize that capacity in me. Maybe that is a tension that we all live with, but it is there for me in an increasingly strong way, and Revelation plays off of that very human capacity.

That is where I make our entry into the Revelation story this morning. I will be using three central figures – all women - over the next three Sundays to illustrate this complex tale as best I can in a short format like a sermon series.

The first woman that John uses in his visionary myth is the woman I will call Mary, mostly since she is a thinly veiled caricature of Jesus' mother. But she also reflects the goddess culture of a more matriarchal age – the “celestial woman” who figured heavily in ancient myths and often wore the articles of the heavens, like stars and the moon. Even today icons of the most venerated saint of Mexico – the Virgin of Guadalupe – often depict her with a moon beneath her feet and a heavenly glow of stars over her head - a mix, like Christmas or Easter, of Judeo-Christian symbolism and ancient, so-called pagan imagery.

But the portrayal of a woman here is critical because we are witnessing the beginning of a “re-creation” process in Revelation. This new birth is the start of a larger new birth and women have to be involved because...well...that's how birth happens. But since the writers of not only New Testament works but also many works today cannot imagine God as feminine, this woman must be used as a conduit for God's action, just as Mary was in the gospel texts. Many feminist scholars see this figure as the “cosmic mother” giving birth to a new universe, but still kept subservient – God-like, but not God...for God is a man, right? At any rate, she is birthing the representative of one of our choices – Christ, in this case depicted as the slain Lamb, not as an expected lion of victory. And that word “victory” is where our choice is centered.

In her book The Rapture Exposed, New Testament scholar Barbara Rossing focuses on this word “victory” in Revelation. She advises that you do a word study where you would find the Greek word *nikan* (the basis for the Roman Goddess of victory, Nike) sixteen times in Revelation, more than half of the uses of this word in the entire New Testament. So, victory is important to John – but what *kind* of victory?

As Rossing points out, there is the beast’s victory and the lamb’s victory. The beast’s victory comes with armed combat and war, very much the way that the *Left Behind* series depicts God’s judgment. One very common interpretation by scholars is that the seven seals do not represent future events but things that John expected his audience to recognize as *already* happening. The image of the four horsemen of the apocalypse from chapter 6 is, in this light, not the coming judgment of God but the already present policies and models of Roman Imperial power. The first horseman is international military conflict, the second is civil war, the third is economic exploitation of the masses and the last is an appropriation of God’s authority to judge. The last horseman comes “conquering and to conquer” a double use of *Nikon* which emphasizes the Roman idea of victory.

This reflects history. We have to realize that what has taken place before Revelation is written is nothing less than the crushing of a Jewish rebellion by Rome, the slaughter of innocents that war always brings (especially the “shock and awe” of Roman combat) and the complete destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem in 70 CE, the pinnacle of trauma for generations to come. Violence was all around them...and they knew how Rome worked...they had witnessed that kind of victory firsthand.

In chapter 12, a different model for victory is shown. We begin with this woman who is held as the ideal, the “Mary” figure – who is set before a great deal of promised violence. Pregnant, she suffers in the pains of birth as a great dragon stands before her ready to devour her child. That’s quite a dilemma for this young mother – you can’t exactly stop birth...but the anticipated outcome is too awful to imagine. Then, the child – the one who is to rule all of the nations “with a rod of iron”, a reference to the second psalm’s messianic vision, is snatched away to heaven and the woman hidden away, protected by God.

This is not a new invention. There is a tale in Ancient Greek mythology in which the god Apollo (son of Zeus) is being born via his mother Leto, and the monster Python waits to devour him, but Apollo is delivered safely and then later kills Python in battle. John uses this familiar myth to tell his story, only Python – or in this case a dragon - is symbolic of something very real. It is a symbol for the Empire that controls, strangles and oppresses in order to maintain itself. But Jesus is pulled away to heaven – rescued just as Apollo was – only to have a different kind of victory over the dragon later.

Then, in one of the most stunning images I can think of, war breaks out in heaven. Now, I don't know what your visions of heaven are, mine involve great seats at Fenway Park and a steady supply of Guinness, but whatever your visions are I'd imagine that war is not part of them - war in heaven sounds like an oxymoron. John reverses the story because in the ancient world many Caesars (who were seen as gods after all) literally fashioned themselves after Apollo in iconography, statues and frescos. But, John says, they aren't Apollo...light, order and peace, they are Python...death, chaos and war.

After the war in heaven, the beast, or Satan, or the deceiver, is conquered (victory is won), we are told, by the followers of Jesus, who have conquered with the blood of the Lamb and the word of their testimony. Blood in the ancient world, this was more than just gore, it was a way of saying that a person's life or "lifeforce" was involved. Blood carried life – this was why it was forbidden for kosher food to contain blood, you were not to consume the "life" of the animal...for only God controlled that.

The model for John is the blood of the Lamb, which means that our model works from the lifeforce of Jesus, and that it is Jesus' *life* that makes for victory, not our own shedding of others' blood or by violence or the necessity of Jesus' sacrifice. This is not blood atonement, it is God's redemption of Jesus in his resurrection that makes the mythic model possible – we are no longer bound by violence but free to understand love to a completely new level...love even to the point of surpassing the power of death, Empire's most potent weapon.

But I think that there is something we must recognize in this heavenly vision. The only "heaven" that is found in the image of a heavenly war is that our good guys win. And here is where the hook of redemptive violence, a common feature of myths, gets played out. The knight defeats the dragon, the rabbit

out foxes the fox and the witch gets knocked into her own oven...myths almost all depend on the idea that violence can be redemptive. Read Grimm's fairy tales again...

Violence, of course, saturates our everyday lives. So the idea that the visions in Revelation would be violent and that this is somehow offensive to us only comes into play when we think that John is saying that this is how God operates. Yet, I would hold, we sometimes think the same way – with a certain kind of violence. Take this example, for instance. Violence against women is on the upswing, a common parallel with a floundering economy, and in Oklahoma in 2008 there were more than 23,000 reports of domestic violence, according to the Oklahoma State Bureau of Investigation. Those are the reported cases, and most experts believe that the sad truth is that these numbers might only represent ½ of the actual assaults, rapes and abuse events that are really occurring. There is simply no way to know what an accurate number is. And, for me, this kind of violence – the strong over the weak – is what cries out for justice and is sometimes where I buy into the myth of redemptive violence - it is just as negative but can be pretty satisfying.

Take for instance a song like “Goodbye Earl” by the Dixie Chicks. In this song, these two high school best friends go their separate ways – one, Mary Anne finds a whole new world outside the small town they grew up in, and the other, Wanda, marries a local guy named Earl. The lyrics go on like this:

Well it wasn't two weeks
after she got married that
Wanda started gettin' abused
She put on dark glasses and
long sleeved blouses
And make-up to cover a bruise
Well she finally got the nerve
to file for divorce
She let the law take it from
there
But Earl walked right through
that restraining order

And put her in intensive care

Right away Mary Anne flew in
from Atlanta
On a red eye midnight flight
She held Wanda's hand as they
worked out a plan
And it didn't take long to
decide

That Earl had to die

In one verse the Dixie Chicks manage to take me from pacifist to primary cheerleader for the judge, jury and executioner system that these two women become. A carefully poisoned serving of black-eyed peas does Earl in and the girls go on living sort of a “Thelma and Louise” life with a road-side produce

stand and no ramifications of their violence at all – turns out, the lyrics say, that Earl was “a missing person that no one missed at all”.

Here the ones on the tail end of oppression and violence finally get some justification – and the “guilty” get what they deserve. As satisfying as that song is, and believe me it makes my heart stand up and cheer, it still embraces the same construction that Revelation does, that “myth of redemptive violence”. Star Wars, The Lord of the Rings, The Matrix – they all use this same myth to promote a violent solution which is somehow acceptable to us because it is the “good guy’s” violence against the “bad guy’s” violence.

The ancient world was like this too, both on a personal scale and a broader one. The “peace” that Rome brought was at the end of a spear. The devastating civil wars that the murder of Julius Caesar in 44 BCE brought about were ended finally by the victory in war of Augustus, the adopted great-nephew of Julius. Augustus represented the pinnacle of Roman values and began the era of emperor worship – he was called “savior of the world” and the “son of god”, just like someone else was later. He was celebrated as having “ended war”. Augustus was emperor for 41 years, an enormous amount of time, and during his reign the military was not involved in a combat mission of some sort for exactly one day. One. The *Pax Romana* was not the end of war, it was peace through victory, oppression and hoarding power. Empire is built on the idea of redemptive violence.

The myth of redemptive violence is not something that we can ignore in Revelation, in myths in general or as a central part of our own cultural references and systems. This myth is ancient and even though it is played out for us now in stories like Iron Man, Rambo and Harry Potter, it began much, much earlier. The classic example of this is the creation story of the Babylonians, the *Enuma Elish*. In this story, Apsu, the father god, and Tiamat, the mother god, give birth to the other gods. But the noise of the god children disturbs the parents so much that they resolve to kill them so they can get some rest. The young gods discover this plan and they kill Apsu before the plot can be carried out. Tiamat plans her revenge.

The younger gods turn to the youngest brother to save them from their mother’s wrath and Marduk seizes the opportunity to exact a high price – if his plan succeeds, then he must be given complete and undisputed power among the remaining gods. They agree and Marduk carries out a bloody scheme where he captures Tiamat in a net, shoots an arrow into her stomach and then splits

her skull with a club. He then dismembers her and uses her carcass to create the universe. In other words, in the Babylonian ethos, creation is an act of violence.

As Wink points out, the Genesis myth plays against this idea. In the *Enuma Elish*, chaos creates order, but in Genesis, God creates order from chaos. But still, it is not long before Cain and Abel pull us back into the world of violence. And by the time you get to our Christian myths, we are the product of a religion of deicide – purchased by the blood of an assassinated god, as the traditional interpretation of scripture has us believe. So blood is present throughout scripture, and God’s role in that blood is sometimes palatable to us, sometimes not. Perhaps this is because the experience of God is always mediated through our human lenses, so that when what President Lincoln called the “better angels of our nature” show up we get one image of God and when our darker selves come out we get another. Sometimes I can read that blood as just representing lifeforce, but sometimes it is just blood.

Whatever the case, the dichotomy is there. And, of course, the not-so-hidden message of the Babylonian creation story is that femininity has to be suppressed in order to have social order or creation, an underlying misogyny we will deal with next week. This happens in both the Babylonian and the Jewish/Christian creation story, just in different ways. It is no wonder that both cultures were also patriarchal in nature – myth reflects culture.

This is a mystical vision, and we cannot lose sight of that. John himself says that he has these visions while “in the Spirit” and such visions are notoriously difficult to translate. Language, they say, is “an imprecise means for communicating mystical experiences”. I believe that some of John’s visions are critiques of his time and some are meant to imagine worlds which may never come. This flow of violence and peace, justice and judgment must exist in a “bifurcated reality” like everything else with which we contend.

In this bifurcated world of Revelation, God’s justice eliminates evil, while God’s mercy grants always more time for people to turn from violence and evil to God’s path of justice and peace. I will grant you that this is a hard thing for me to accept – but perhaps no harder than it was for a group of disciples over two thousand years ago to accept that the messiah was dead – killed by Rome – and then that he lived again and was messiah in a whole new way. For the underlying current of Revelation is declared in a quote from Isaiah 55 - "For my

thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways," declares the LORD.

Revelation does not advocate violence for the followers of Jesus, nor does it place violence in God's model - it criticizes the violence of the Empire. Empire conquers with violence - it is countered with the Lamb's model...sacrificial love and testimonial truth. We are to testify - a very legal model - to the truth that victory is not won with violence, but with love. This should call us to stand against oppression wherever we encounter it because it is not love. In a post April 19th and post 9/11 world, we should be the messengers of such a testimony...harbingers of God's miraculous love in the face of the most monstrous evil.

Next week we will move from the violence to judgment by looking at the second woman - who is often gently translated as the "harlot". We will see God (and John) calling down judgment and, no surprise, God's list and John's list will pretty much line up - funny how that seems to happen a lot. Still, I hope to convince you of one thing - that Revelation is not as unapproachable as it may seem at first - it's just that it deals with some very hard topics and often uses a mirror to a very uncomfortable degree. But despite its flaws, some of which we have yet to reveal, its refrain echoes through the centuries and we will sing it together in just a few moments...despite the pain, regardless of the despair...we shall stand with the life of love...we shall depend on the truth of peace and, the audacity of Revelation says... we shall overcome...

AMEN

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