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Revelation 17:1-7, 9, 15-18

SAVING REVELATION III: BEAUTY & THE BEAST

If I were to ask you about the most famous National Geographic cover of all time, quite a feat given the amazing photography that magazine has always been known for, would you know what image I was referring to? Would you be able to picture it in your head? Could you imagine now the red scarf draped over her shoulders, hints of a green shirt peaking between the well-worn fabric? Imagine the dirty face and the olive skin, the raw simplicity of the picture? Of course, the thing that everyone remembers is her eyes. The piercing stare of these brilliant, angry green eyes of a young girl, staring at the camera as if she is trying to pierce a hole into the lens. It is an amazing photograph and I'm sure that most people here have seen it.

The funny thing is that until pretty recently, no one knew who she was. A seventeen year search for her finally succeeded in turning up a solid lead. Her name is Sharbat Gula and as of 2005, she lived in a remote region of Afghanistan with her husband and three daughters. She had no idea of her "fame" and until the photographer who originally photographed her found her again, that was the only photograph she had ever had made of her.

She lives as a member of the Pashtun ethnic group in Afghanistan and was actually a supporter of the Taliban who she felt brought peace and stability after the Soviet invasion. She was not allowed to meet with the photographer, who is male, because of the strict doctrines against male and female interaction, which are tied to a fairly fundamentalist version of religion, but more so to

culture. Her marriage was arranged, her daily life controlled and her sense of normalcy is what many here in our context would describe as “primitive”, oppressive or even backwards.

I bring up her story because that picture provides a glimpse into a world that most of us know nothing about. And Sharbat Gula’s world looks a whole lot more like the world of a common first century woman than it does any of ours. There are ways in which all we know of her world is that haunting photograph, but other ways that we are not so different. Yes, she represents a whole group of women in this world who are subject to extremely patriarchal systems, who are oppressed and controlled and who are defined completely by their gender. And yes, there would be a fair number of people, myself included, who would argue that the system under which she lives should change and she should know something of the freedom that women in the United States know... even though we can say in the same breath and in full recognition of International Women’s Day (which just occurred over a month ago) that we have a long way to go here in our “more advanced” culture. Just a few days ago we held “Equal Pay Day” in this country and recognized that even though employment opportunities have advanced for women, on average, a woman makes only 77 cents for every dollar that a man makes. The circumstances are even worse for Latinas and women of color. Domestic abuse stats, job placement, gender bias in the media, workplace and most glaringly in the church make me realize that while we have perhaps come a long way, the idea of portraying this country as progressive when it comes to the status of women is a relative claim at best. So if we're being honest, a mission to "rescue" the women of Afghanistan and bring them "up to our standards" is a relative move...a shift from being mostly oppressed to just somewhat oppressed. A good move, but not exactly the exodus from slavery to freedom...

All of this is a preface to dealing with an obvious issue in the Book of Revelation – its portrayal of women. As I have mentioned before, I have centered on the use of three women figures in Revelation to help facilitate our entry into a rather dense and complicated mystical text. The next female image to contend with is the woman I delicately translate as the “harlot”. You can hear from Robin’s reading that this is not the word that some translators go with – and, in fact, they are correct. The word, *porne*, is the basis for our terms like pornography and it means something much stronger than harlot. But I just can’t bring myself to say that “w” word so many times in the span of a sermon – as one of my seminary professors says in regards to this very same issue - it’s

just not how my momma raised me, I guess. So, I will tame it a bit, but you can just insert the rudeness if you'd like...it's meant to be there.

As Wes Howard-Brook and Anthony Gwyther point out in their book Unveiling Empire: Reading Revelation Then and Now, it is small solace that a privileged, white heterosexual male like me would definitely choose different images than a woman's body to express a vision of empire and its ability to both seduce and corrupt, but this is the image that John used and we have to contend with that. Even in our so-called "advanced" world of women's rights, it still must be clearly stated that the portrayals of women in Revelation must be understood metaphorically and *in their context*, not as legitimating violence against or subjugation of women. In the end, as I hope to clarify, these images were not meant to be taken as actual women but representative of apocalyptic archetypes of cities. When these texts get literalized, very dangerous things happen. So we must acknowledge the horrific side of this imagery and how it played off of a patriarchal system that still oppresses women to this day, and also look through the metaphors to what John is actually calling out.

The first woman we dealt with last week – the Mary figure from chapter 12 who represents the "good" side of women according to the Revelation schematic. Mary is the "God-tool" who helps to create by birthing into the world the figure of Christ. She is protected and honored, but clearly a bit player in a much larger scheme that is controlled by the males – God included.

This has always been my issue with the whole Mary archetype...I like the idea of God incarnated in flesh, that is a beautiful image to me, but the accompanying storyline has this incarnation occur in conjunction with Mary's virginity remaining intact. So, how human is it? And, the more glaring offense to me, it washes away the sexual side of creation...as if Mary is the ideal because she manages to do the holy thing (create) without the unholy thing (sex). It seems to always be that cultures which are largely patriarchal manage to create two kinds of women – those who are pure and chaste and those who aren't. Again, we aren't too far away from this. Although we may not have the same sense of purity and impurity that John's culture has, we do maintain this sense of dualism for women. Women are compartmentalized in their sexuality in a way that men are not, and – ask any teenager - still have this undeveloped sense of women as either promiscuous or prudish, with no middle ground.

In the patriarchal culture from which John writes this purity battle plays out in combination with an honor system. Think of the role of women in the Godfather

movies. It was quite routine for men to be married and have mistresses – the two “kinds” of women. In the honor system it’s not *if* you do this but *how* you do this, at least from a male perspective. In this ancient context, adultery is defined as a wife having sex with a man other than her husband...or a husband having sex with any other man’s wife or any woman betrothed to another man. It was not adultery, for instance, for a man to visit a prostitute (that involved only her impurity) or for a man to have sex with a woman otherwise “unmarked” by another man. Men held power over women’s bodies and to cross that line violated the other man’s honor. It had nothing to do with feelings...it was a statement of disloyalty, a slap in the face to the other man.

This is why the image of adultery so often gets used by prophets to depict a personal or corporate turn away from God or violation of God’s laws. Ezekiel evokes this to the Nth degree in his prophetic rants as he shouts to Israel, “This says the LORD God, Because your lust was poured out and your nakedness uncovered in your harlotry with your lovers, and because of your abominable idols...I shall satisfy my fury on you”. Ezekiel equates a turn from God’s commandments as being equal to the dishonor a woman bestows on her husband if she cheats. The relationship between God and Israel was a covenanted relationship, just like a marriage, and the violation of the covenant of faithfulness was found in disobeying God’s commandments – captured in the imagery of adultery and always with the feminine in the role of perpetrator.

But here’s the paradox: The commandments of God that Ezekiel evokes are things like economic justice, kindness to the stranger and care for the weak. That’s hard for me to argue with. Yet he chastises this using a model of women I can’t agree with, a level of violence I find disturbing and a double standard of a system in which a woman’s adultery and a man’s adultery are not only not even defined the same way, but not even evoked the same way. The consistent image used to portray evil and corruption in both apocalyptic and prophetic texts is the adulterous woman, as if the men who wrote these texts could imagine no worse possible metaphor.

And I’m sorry folks, there’s no way around that. I have a bunch of cute exegetical tricks to use on things like the number 666 or the references to Babylon, but I don’t have anything for this. This is misogynistic imagery from a misogynistic culture and as readers today - here in our context - we are both steps away from that and in a whole new world. I both want to distance myself from what I see as offensive and also use that opportunity to have us all look in the mirror.

Our laws about adultery have changed, but our images of women still portray a lot of this dualism. We still deal with horrific levels of violence against women, we still have sex slavery and domestic servitude, and this week of all weeks we should remember how we still abuse the most enduring feminine image - Mother Earth. Women are still portrayed largely in sexual terms and men are portrayed as impulse-driven beasts, subject to the feminine wiles of you fiendish women. The myth still plays out. It is as if the most compelling metaphor that men can think of for seduction is a sexual one - with the temptress luring us into our baser impulses as if how we decide about our sexual lives is no different than how we deal with someone bringing donuts to the staff meeting...impulse control.

So here we stand with this troubling imagery and what it says about the iconography of women, some of which is still around, and yet trying to hear what John has to say about this. Why is he (and the prophetic tradition) using this dramatic an image? Why is he jarring our senses so forcefully and rudely? What is he trying to get us to see?

Both apocalyptic and prophetic literatures have long histories of using the idealization of women to reflect goodness and the demonization of women to reflect evil. It is part of a code language that helps the writer be brazenly prophetic but also dismissively metaphorical. In Revelation, Rome (under the code name of Babylon) is called a woman six times, a harlot three times and the mother of harlots once. There is little doubt that Rome is being referred to here, since in verse 9 the angel says that the woman is seated on seven mountains, a clear reference to the seven hills on which Rome was founded. And the use of the name Babylon would have been well understood by the audience. John uses heavy Hebrew symbolism and scriptural references throughout Revelation - as if he is speaking to an audience that is Hebrew in origin. By this time people who were Hebrew knew all about empire.

The land of the Hebrews, ancient Judea, sat on the major trade routes between the superpowers of that age - the Egyptian, Assyrian and Babylonian empires. As each one took turns being king of the hill, they conquered Judea - for the empire that controls the trade controls everything. The Judeans then experienced life mostly being handed off from one empire to the next...only occasionally being strong enough to hold off the invading armies and rule themselves. As we get to the time in which John is writing, the cultural ethos is one of a conquered people and the generic name for empire is "Babylon". Babylon and Rome are the worst of the conquering forces - they are the only

two empires to ever destroy the temple, the focal point of sacred ground, in Jerusalem. Babylon destroys the first temple in 586 BCE and Rome destroys the second temple in 70 CE – and these two events mark perhaps the central theological and cultural crises for ancient Israel. So this code language is a way for John to talk about Rome without *saying* Rome...but everyone knows who he is talking about.

Empire, John tells us, conquers in order to concentrate power in the hands of the few at the expense of the many. Empire uses war, violence, commerce, economic exploitation and religion to control people and to treat them as commodities. And empire does this as often as possible by co-opting people, though coercion is always there if needed. In Revelation's terms, we are seduced into participating in the evils of empire so that even as they do us harm we continue to play along. John warns that one can be seduced into believing the imperial myths like "might makes right", "war brings peace" and the exploitative ancient version of "trickle down" economics, where wealth is hoarded by a few so that the many starve. Believing those things breaks the covenant you have with God, for you have to place your faith in the exact opposite of what God calls for.

Babylon may be clothed in royal colors and adorned in gold, but her cup is full of abomination and impurity – the most vile things in an ancient Hebrew imagination. The same cup of communion that is central to worship for these communities, still somewhere between Judaism and Christianity, is now perverted into a cup of evil. The ancient prophetic tradition that used harlotry as a metaphor for breaking covenant with God is used by John to demonstrate the seductive power of empire. Why do people go along with such cruelty? Why do people participate in such violence? Because, John says, they are seduced into it...and if seduction won't work, then intimidation will.

This seduction is so built into the imperial system that it is often hard to spot. The Hebrew word *zana*, the word that is translated "whore" in Isaiah's prophetic verses – the same verses that John borrows his metaphor from – that word is translated into Greek into *estai emporion*, which means "to be a market". So even the ancients understood that this metaphor is an economic one – it is a commentary on how you acquire, use and interact with money. Revelation draws upon this awful misogynistic metaphor to demonstrate a lack of faithfulness to God's way and an adulterous turn to the imperial structure.

Make no mistake, the “martyrs” that show up repeatedly in Revelation are not killed by empire because of their religious affiliation. Rome cared little for your religious beliefs *as long as* you left room to also bow down and worship empire. You can pray to whatever god or gods you wish, but you’d better play along with the system. This is the same reason Jesus was killed – not because he was a spiritual teacher, but because he was teaching the Kingdom of God...not the kingdom of Caesar. That kind of subversion carries real costs...but I believe that we must realize that being followers of Jesus means that there are costs and that things will be required of us – things like selfless love, conscientious resistance of violence and evil and even, at times, the examination of and renunciation of privilege.

John is pleading with these seven churches to which he has written this bizarre set of images to remain faithful. But this is a hard argument and perhaps why he has to use such graphic metaphors. Resisting wealth, relative peace, the increase in products, goods, services and technology...the comfort that empire brought to people in the middle (and that’s mostly who John appears to be talking to)...these are hard things to resist.

How does our own empire seduce us? I mean, do we really have to think about where our clothing was made? Do we really have to know that the soccer balls our kids play with on Saturday mornings were probably made by kids the same age working 14 hour days in Pakistan? Do we really have to understand where that hamburger comes from or how we waste water or what our actions and choices mean for a world that is caught between imperial systems? Must we trouble ourselves with things like NAFTA or the World Bank or the nature and impact of immigration, especially from the immigrants’ point of view? In our culture are we drunk on fame or power? In our politics are we drunk on money or privilege? In our lives together are we drunk on limitless resources or remarkable excess? In the church, are we drunk on dogma or the exclusive hold on God?

John means for us to have our eyes opened –as blazing and intense as those on that National Geographic cover. The church, John would have us know, is here not to cooperate with the seductive and insidious tools of empire, but to resist those tools in the name of God’s Kingdom – the kingdom in which there is enough for all, where the tears are wiped away and the sorrow is healed, where it is like we are at a big party, a gathering of friends and family where joy and celebration rule the day. This party will take place at a new city - a ruling city that doesn’t coerce you with violence, but infects you with love. We still know

something of empire, and Babylon is a harsh and seductive place...but this is not where John ends his dream...so come back next week and see the rest of the vision:

Behold...the New Jerusalem coming down to earth from heaven...and the words of God, "See, I am making all things new"...

AMEN



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