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Rev

Saving Revelation IV: The Persistent Dream

In the movie *The Shawshank Redemption*, we're told the story of injustice to a particular man – a man named Andy Dufrene. Andy is wrongly accused of murder and sentenced to life at Shawshank prison. A stockbroker and accountant on the outside, Andy adjusts to life in prison through some very brutal and horrific events. Eventually he makes some friends and finds himself a victim of a lot larger and more brutal bully in the guise of a prison warden who uses Andy, and his outside skills, as a cover for a money laundering operation. Andy is oppressed in many ways during the film.

When he finally breaks out of the prison, a story that is told backwards, you get to see a man so grateful for his freedom that he can do nothing but stand, shirtless in the pouring, freezing rain and hold his hands to the thundering heavens. It is a scene of complete liberation.

I have, on more than one occasion, make a link between the men in Shawshank and the lower class of the Roman Empire...the very people who largely formed the early Christian movement. These were people who always answered to someone, were never in control of their lives and who lived at the beck and call of other people and an empire that held them firmly in one place.

But Andy's dream was more than just what happened on that night he followed his elaborate plan and broke out of Shawshank, it lived inside of him. Just before his escape he talks with his best friend Red, played by Morgan Freeman, in the prison yard. Red thinks that Andy might be cracking up, that the true prison that gets established in your heart is finally winning out in Andy. It is

only later, after Red is released from prison and has followed Andy's cryptic instructions to a rock wall in a field somewhere in the country where he finds a package that Andy has left for him – some money, a picture and a note that invites him to Join Andy in Mexico...that note ends with the best line from the movie: "Remember Red, hope is a good thing, maybe the best of things...and no good thing ever dies."

So, imagine that you come in from a long day of work and you gather at a friends' home. It's Sunday, the Lord's Day in ancient Christianity, which was a prescribed day of work in Roman culture. You have had another day of backbreaking labor, perhaps a slave's working day. You are tired down to your bones. But you gather together to worship, maybe it's the only thing that seems good in your life. Every day you live the inequality and you wonder if this is just your fate. This place gives you a safe place to question your role in the big picture, because you know that doing that very publically usually ends badly.

This is the way that empires work. They follow a pattern of peace through victory and maintain order, at least as they define it, through intimidation and coercion. The seduction is in making us all think that this is the way that things are. Think of the movie Braveheart and how William Wallace is depicted fighting against the tyranny of the British Empire. From the Brits perspective, Wallace was a troublemaker and violated the peace, but from Wallace (and many Scots) position, it was empire that destroyed order and violated the peace...maybe the way things were, but not how they should be.

The purveyors of Empire - and Rome was the master of this - tend to try and justify their hold on truth by claiming that their way of life is ordained by god or the gods, but Revelation claims something else entirely. It claims that God's way is diametrically opposed to empire. This is why the early Christian movement, inspired by the very social and political message of Jesus, usurped the Empire's language. Caesar was called "son of god" and "savior of the world" long before Jesus came on the scene. But the early followers wanted to demonstrate that they had a new understanding – true peace doesn't come from *Pax Romana*, it comes from having your life transformed by Jesus Christ.

The early Christian movement is steeped in this. So, you arrive at this house church, you greet one another, sit down and share a meal together – one of the trademarks of church to this day, what we ritualize in our communion – and you pray and sing and then someone pulls out this letter from John...and if you were

lucky enough to have a literate person in the group, that person then reads it out loud...the whole Book of Revelation, from start to finish, out loud.

Maybe “American Idol” is a repeat that night so you stay and listen. And what you hear is a fantastic tale that sympathizes with your own struggles and invites you to imagine a new world in which those who persecute you meet justice and the world is made whole again. But it doesn’t make these promises lightly – it also calls for you to be faithful...to conquer the empire that lives in you and to reach for something else.

This promise is sealed with images of a personified Jerusalem – a bride waiting for the celebration of a new creation. This heavenly city that was to balance out the imbalance of their lives was not unique to John, but was a common theme in Judean thought. The prophets like Isaiah and Ezekiel, even the apostle Paul refers to it. In his letter to the Galatians, Paul writes of the Jerusalem which is now in bondage, one that he personifies as Hagar, the slave, and then provides the vision of a Jerusalem above which is free and is, Paul says, “our mother”.

This is where the last of the three female images comes into play – this one an idealized icon as well. We have seen the virgin mother and the wanton harlot, this is the faithful bride. Tied up in this image is the city of Jerusalem (which is really portrayed as all three female images), and the patriarchal sense of honor in a so-called “faithful” bride. Using the marriage metaphor for the covenant between God and humankind is a very popular thing to do – I’ve done it before – and this is no different. Still, these were arranged marriages, more akin to business arrangements than romantic epics, and they seem perhaps primitive to our modern tastes. It is part of the trouble with making analogies between what we call marriage and what they called marriage. Still, in this culture a wedding was a huge celebration because it usually meant the joining of families and the impending children, the very lifeblood of the community. Having kids was literally a life-and-death thing in those days. So, it was apparently obvious to John what metaphor he should use to imagine the arrival of God’s kingdom...a new covenant altogether symbolized by the marriage of the husband (Christ) and his bride (Jerusalem and/or the church).

Jerusalem becomes the metaphor for hope. This is hope against fear, hope against the drudgery of life, and hope against the very real presence of forces that will kill you – economically, socially or physically – if you stray too far off the established way of doing things. Revelation calls us to recognition of where

we are in this cosmic battle. It sets out in no uncertain terms what empire does, how it does it and how people who follow God's path are to resist this. This is not God's violence being stronger than the empire's violence – that's empire thinking all the way. Revelation calls us to follow the Lamb to our victory, which means that we free ourselves from the imperial process – from an addiction to violence, greed, fear and the injustice of lifestyles that really hold us and others captive. It calls us to imagine the world in ways that we may not even be fully able to do – in ways that I'm not sure even John was fully able to do. Perhaps as human beings we simply can't imagine an ideal world in which we (however you define "we") are not the victors and our enemies the vanquished and castaway. Perhaps we're not geared towards that kind of grace, but – the persistent dream of Revelation would have us know - God is. We may not be able to imagine it, But God can.

Unfortunately, this is not the predominant interpretation of Revelation. In Kingdom Come: The Final Victory, authors Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins bring their 16 book "Left Behind" series to a close. They tie up the loose ends and interpret Revelation (and therefore the entire Bible) in one neat and tidy package...every "l" dotted and every "t" crossed. And in their interpretation ends with plagues and judgment and the armies of God coming down to earth led by a Jesus whose sword is an actual instrument of violent judgment and vengeance instead of a "sword coming out of his mouth" – a Hebrew metaphor for a person's words or teaching.

This common interpretation of Revelation – the so-called dispensationalist reading – is nothing more than a Biblical western movie with Jesus wearing the biggest white hat and all the bad guys vanquished. It's easier to digest; it just isn't what is going on in the text. Up until this point, we have had massive wars and violent imagery, misogynistic metaphors and fantastic beasts. But Revelation doesn't stop there. You have to read the end...which does not involve all of the "chosen" being whisked away to their heavenly glory.

There is, in fact, no rapture in the text of Revelation. No one is drawn up into Heaven. Quite the opposite...in what New Testament scholar Barbara Rossing calls "rapture in reverse", Heaven comes down to earth. The most common interpretations of Revelation involve destruction and chaos, but that isn't what is going on in the text. The word "apocalypse" has become synonymous to us with destruction, but in Greek it means to reveal. This new heaven and new earth are being revealed, not built from the ashes of the old. The text says that the first earth had "passed away" and that the sea was "no more", but these

are images of things revealed...caterpillar and butterfly imagery...this is not a scene of destruction; it is a scene of new creation.

So what does it mean for us to think that Revelation's story is not the destruction of the planet with God pulling the "right people" up into heaven? What if it is a much more challenging call to all of us...Watch out! God is coming down here and boy is She ticked off! It is why this book of the Bible needs to be saved for this is a very poignant message to everyone. Far from the safe call of judgment from the perspective of the chosen (which is always conveniently the ones interpreting the text) this is a call for everyone to get their own house in order...to conquer, as the text puts it. There is a new heaven and a new earth, but only "those who conquer will inherit these things".

Unfortunately what we get most of the time is the dispensationalist interpretation which would have us believe that this is a prophecy – something that is coming soon, despite 2000 years of being absolutely wrong about that. Yeah, but this time we're really sure! Yet despite the number of inaccurate predictions and sure signs that delivered nothing, millions still subscribe to this theology. Maybe because it is easier to believe that there is some grand prize waiting for us at some point in the not too distant future...some payoff at the end of the suffering and struggle of life.

How does this even make sense now? I can see how this kind of prophetic promise helps to contend with the same anxiety we all share...how do we deal with the gap between what the world is and what the world should be? The Left Behind answer is that God will deal with it, so just get saved and sit back to wait for the airlift to heaven. But this is again not what the text says. This heavenly, idealized city of Jerusalem, unlike most apocalyptic texts, comes down to earth. It is the promise that another kingdom is possible – here in this place, not in some form of an afterlife.

But I think that this vision of an idyllic city from the heavens where all of God's promises are fulfilled is a hard pill to swallow. In a post-Hiroshima, post-Holocaust, post-9/11 world, can we embrace that claim? In a world in which countless prophets have promised the fulfillment of this dream to no avail, can we even take it seriously anymore? Even this morning we could go and sit on the beaches of Louisiana or Alabama and wonder how large the gap is between what we risk to continue our "way of life" and the need for us to care for God's creation. One way of interpreting Revelation would have us believe that gap

doesn't matter, but another would say that it might be the only thing that matters.

One way of interpreting Revelation would have us believe that there is a timetable. The years are approaching and the signs are clear. First the rapture of "true believers", then a series of calamities followed by the seven years of tribulation, a thousand year millennial reign and the last judgment. So, even if the end times are here...it's still going to be a while.

Another way of interpreting Revelation would have us believe that this is not a chronology or a map of future events, it is a mystical vision. It does not operate in linear fashion, which is the predominant way of trying to interpret it. A phrase you most often hear sung in Handel's Messiah opens chapter 11, where the seventh angel says, "The kingdom of the world *has become* the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ". It *has become*...as in already. In the dream-like world of Revelation the description of God as the one "who is, who was and who is to come" moves throughout the whole book making the entire vision fulfilled, being fulfilled and not yet fulfilled. It is all three things at the same time, which is not a linear process. As Rossing notes, "Revelation invites us to enter into God's vision for our world even now, and to live in terms of this vision."

Think of it like those three-dimensional "Magic Eye" pictures...you know, the ones with all of the dots that you have to look at with just the right balance of focus and lack-of-focus. I can never get them to work. Only once have I ever seen what is claimed to be there, and it was only for a second before I focused too much, or not enough, or didn't hold my tongue right, or whatever. That's what the kingdom can be like – deceptively close, but maddeningly hard to see.

But this new city of Jerusalem is a remarkable place. Full of natural beauty and spiritual comfort, it holds all of the promises of God as fulfilled. Adorned with jewels and radiant light, the city has all of the features of a fortress city of that time – with very distinct differences. This is a city of all nations, a welcoming place not a gated, fenced off fortress. A river flows from the city and on the sides of the river are trees of life – the very same tree of life that Adam and Eve were forbidden to touch in Eden. This vision is Eden recreated, only completely reconciled. This is both a call to enough food for all people and a reversal of the Genesis prohibition – God is now with us.

And the most amazing aspect of all to me – there is, in this New Jerusalem, no temple. God resides with each and every one of us – living with and among us.

There is no need for a mediating place; no call for an intercessor...God is present completely. The imperial way of intimidation and violence is the only thing left behind. God's victory is now in place. This is a victory that does come in very threatening language earlier in the text, like a prophetic wake-up call, but, as Rossing points out, the "function of such threats is exhortation to faithfulness", to transformation of our lives, "not prediction" of some historical event.

Revelation offers us a different definition of victory. We are victorious when we resist the call of Empire...when we resist the temptation to exploit others, to hoard resources or money, to use the environment instead of caring for it. We participate in Empire when we exclude, when we oppress, when we live corporate lives instead of communal lives. For the resistance of empire begins with us and is lived out in community...a community in which our neighbors are no longer strangers, our lifestyles are sustainable and our dialogue builds bridges instead of burning them.

Be careful! Don't let the language of conquering fool you...this isn't militaristic lingo and it is much more than just saying the right combination of magic words and being doused with water the right way. This is transformation talk. If you seek to conquer you have to work, you have to be willing to change things and to be changed – you have to first seek love in your own heart and then carry that out into the world. If we want to build the community of God, then we will stop thinking of other people as "them", whether they are legal or not, we will stop confusing safety with comfort, we will question consumption, the objectives of global economics and we will take time every once in awhile to step outside on a cool, clear night...look up at the moon...and imagine someone else looking at the same moon too.

Remember Red, hope is a good thing...maybe the best of things...and no good thing ever dies. It was..it is...and it shall be.

AMEN.