

4th Sun of Easter (17Apr15)

Revelation 5:11-4; John 10:22-30; Ps 23

Throughout this season of Easter, we're hearing from Revelation, from start to finish—from the first chapter all the way to the very final words of our Bibles. Normally we would try to avoid it, thinking of this book as so foreign to our faith, yet in this part of our three-year cycle of lectionary readings, we are exposed to eight Sundays of Revelation. The Greek title, *Apocalypse*, is about, indeed, revealing or unveiling, about making something known. But our typical conception is that this is a strange and frightful book with mysterious interpretations, obscuring rather than revealing or clarifying our faith.

It may also, then, seem unusual that these readings we hear don't seem to have much of the curious imagery and mysterious messages we associate with Revelation. I paged through this week to find out what we're skipping past, and here's a partial list: We skip someone man-like with white hair and fiery eyes and bypass lukewarm Christians and various markings on foreheads. We went past an open door to heaven and "casting down their golden crowns around the glassy sea" (*from the hymn "Holy, Holy, Holy"*) as well as the fiery lake burning with sulfur. There would have been the famous four horsemen and Armageddon the sun black as sackcloth and 100-pound hailstones and stars falling from the sky and a bottomless pit. There's a talking eagle and carnivorous armor-wearing locusts that sting like scorpions. A pregnant woman wearing the sun contrasts with the whore of Babylon (sorry for the language). Plus Revelation has loads of sevens: seven trumpets, seven seals on a scroll, seven stars and seven lampstands, seven plagues, seven angels, and seven thunders, seven mountains and seven kings and also a lot of three-and-a-

halves, as half of seven and maybe implicitly imperfect. There's a seven-headed dragon and a great battle and the beast is conquered by the blood of the Lamb (an important concept we'll come back to). There's "Glory, glory! Hallelujah" (*of "Mine Eyes Have Seen the Glory"*), and "King of Kings and Lord of Lords" (*of "Hallelujah Chorus"*). There's "Fire and brimstone coming down from the skies! Rivers and seas boiling! Forty years of darkness! Earthquakes, volcanoes! The dead rising from the grave! Human sacrifice, dogs and cats living together...mass hysteria!" Okay, that last part I actually took from the movie "Ghostbusters."

So if there's all this other stuff—the creepy stuff and the strange and crazily unusual—we may wonder why our assigned Bible readings for this season ignore it. It's even more noticeable given what we *are* picking up. For example, last week we heard the chorus of all creation singing "power and wealth and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing," and this week that choir's anthem is "blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might." There's some variation, but not lots. They could've chosen a reading that showed some of the diversity of this peculiar book, that exposed us to something less repetitive and picked up the whacky wild weirdness of anything skipped.

So why skip it? Why bypass so much that seems to be the popularly intriguing or memorably fascinating parts?

One reason the Revised Common Lectionary may not choose those parts of Revelation is that they so often have been misread, misused. By skipping them, it is not only a protection for our beliefs, but also a protection for our neighbors on this planet who have been harmed by wrong readings of Revelation. Such wrong reading has most often tried to forecast, as if these images were predicting what might happen in the

future.

That isn't for just a few religious nuts who let their fundamentalism and literalism get the better of them. Rather, it has huge marketing sales, and shapes perceptions of all us Christians, and these problems even warp foreign policy of our nation. A theology invented just about 100 years ago not only came up with the rapture and naming antichrists, but still more outrageously claimed that humans can force the endtimes to begin through the political situation established in the Middle East, that Jesus will return when Israel has enough control, and when Jesus comes he'll wipe out those Jewish people they'd formerly acted like they were helping. This Christian Zionism is convoluted and disgusting and is part of what makes our tax dollars contribute \$10 million per day to Israeli military. To set some of this straight and not be deceived into strange misbelief is part of why I'm eager for you to experience the facts on the ground in the Holy Land with me this fall.

But I'll say right now that Revelation was not written predicting what's coming. It was written about the reality Christians were already facing. For them, it wasn't just fantasy, imagination, and invention but real symbolism. They knew what this all meant because they knew their Bible and knew current events. They knew Babylon was the epitome of the Bible's bad guys and knew seven hills meant Rome, the current imperial oppressor. It wasn't language for us to decode or assign meaning that would only apply at some obscure point in history when the so-called stars aligned. It was sort of a graphic novel, a comic book portrayal of life as they already knew it, using classic creative imagery borrowed from the Bible, the Jewish Scriptures.

That isn't exactly our circumstance. If I'm behind on the news or if I need to explain in a sermon why climate change is real and relevant,

then we can't do what Revelation was doing. The same if you don't know the stories of Elijah and Elisha raising people from the dead to see the parallels in the Acts reading, or if you didn't recognize that the "Ghostbusters" line wasn't actually part of the Bible. Those realities for us change the playing field as we encounter Revelation.

What isn't different, or may at least have remarkable parallels for us, is what those early Christians were going through. That they were using stories of faith, using the Bible to understand their circumstances is a valuable model for us. Faith isn't locked up back in the past, nor waiting for some mysterious impending turning point, but is about God's presence with you and assurances now.

Revelation, at its heart, is a message of encouragement, about persevering, about hope that endures. It becomes almost a refrain repeated over and over in the book. There is a long litany of all the terrible stuff, but then suddenly hope returns, reassurance is voiced, good news triumphs. A professor at the Lutheran School of Theology in Chicago, Barbara Rossing, phrases it that "just when we're expecting more destruction" then comes a "salvation interlude." That can be too true and too relatable for our lives, that you expect catastrophe after catastrophe, calamity after calamity, the other shoe dropping, and more bad news, when you can't catch a break, and things continue to go wrong, and doubts really haunt, and the temptation is to give up. You know those moments? If so, you need a salvation interlude!

We should note that, in the original meaning, this wasn't only the worst things that could happen, not just being thrown to the lions in the gladiator pits or persecutions threatening genocide or the capital-M martyrdom of dying

for faith. Professor Rossing also points out that the word we have here as "the great ordeal" (in older versions "the great tribulation") that word (q̄liyews) isn't about state oppression but applies more to "social, economic, and religious marginalization." This is about choosing to live in a way that doesn't make reasonable sense to society, because of your convictions hazarding to confront prevalent wrongs. One example would be that understanding God as Creator could lead to hurting your pocket book by divesting from fossil fuels. Even though it would cost you, it is believing the cost is worse by not doing it. Still at this point in history, that faithful decision would result in being marginalized socially, economically, and maybe even, unfortunately, religiously. Would you choose that? Are you ready for that uphill struggle? Are you able to persist in doing what you believe is right? Can you continue on when you're frustrated and exhausted?

We're at this intense point in the season of Easter. You can feel the move deeper and deeper into it. We go from the surprise proclamation of resurrection on to the second week where Easter means a commissioning for us and where we also, with Thomas, ask what it means if it seems too hard to believe and we just can't quite grasp it for ourselves yet. Then last week was the moment of asking what Easter means for our regular daily lives, what this has to do with our jobs and school and distractions and meals and being at home. And now, on this 4th Sunday of Easter, there's the still harder question of what good news could mean when we're facing too much bad news, what this new beginning of Easter means when we're stuck in too much that's old and rotten and harmful.

Matching the trajectory of the 23rd Psalm, with Shepherding gifts we've been sustained in green pastures and led beside still waters and along right pathways. But then we get to the

darkness, to valleys of the shadow of death. Yet the Psalm declares, "I fear no evil, for thou art with me." That's the message we've been hearing in these passages from Revelation, too.

And that may be the central reason the lectionary skips the gruesome and awful scenes, that whole long list we went through before. Those passages aren't interesting or entertaining but are about your reality. And your life already has too much nastiness and violence and sadness. You don't come to church for caricatures of corrupt leaders and images of intolerant injustice, don't come to be entertained by bad news. You come needing a salvation interlude, needing God. You need Jesus, you come here in need of relief, for hope, for good news, for a way to endure, for encouragement to continue striving for justice.

This is where you gather with that band of saints, "the great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages," to know that you are joined in the hymn of all creation, to be reminded that you are not alone in your sufferings or struggles to do right, to be assured that you will come through the great ordeal, that God will wipe out hunger and wipe away your tears, that power and might don't belong to those who oppress and manipulate and threaten, but belong to God and the Lamb, forever.

The most amazing, the wildest image in Revelation that appears over and over is of this Lamb who was slain, slaughtered yet alive. The portrayal in this last book of the Bible, then, is not of a bullying God coming to conquer and wipeout the infidels with a battle sword in a violent bloodbath. Just the opposite, here nonviolence triumphs, a victory not in murdering but in dying and rising. This features death and resurrection, the one who was killed as alive, of the one who was despised as adored on the

throne, of the Lamb of God who has become the Shepherd, of Jesus. Today the vision is those who wash in the blood of the Lamb, a vision that your sufferings are the sufferings of Jesus. In your suffering, he suffers. Yet those are not the end. The story continues that he will bring you also to newness of life. This is all so that you may hold onto and trust that, as Jesus himself says, "I give them life, and no one will snatch them out of my hand."

This is how we continue to proclaim: Alleluia!
Christ is risen!