Unpacking Revelation: Part 3

God’s Not Done

Easter 5c-22

Revelation 21: 1-6, 10, 21:22-22:5

5/15/22

**Prayer for Illumination**

**The Revelation to John 21: 1-6, 10, 21:22 – 22:5**

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them as their God; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them; he will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away.”

And the one who was seated on the throne said, “See, I am making all things new.” Also he said, “Write this, for these words are trustworthy and true.” Then he said to me, “It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. To the thirsty I will give water as a gift from the spring of the water of life…

“And in the spirit he carried me away to a great, high mountain and showed me the holy city Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God…

“I saw no temple in the city, for its temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb. And the city has no need of sun or moon to shine on it, for the glory of God is its light, and its lamp is the Lamb. The nations will walk by its light, and the kings of the earth will bring their glory into it. Its gates will never be shut by day—and there will be no night there. People will bring into it the glory and the honor of the nations. But nothing unclean will enter it, nor anyone who practices abomination or falsehood, but only those who are written in the Lamb’s book of life.

“Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb through the middle of the street of the city. On either side of the river is the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, producing its fruit each month; and the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations. Nothing accursed will be found there any more. But the throne of God and of the Lamb will be in it, and his servants will worship him; they will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads. And there will be no more night; they need no light of lamp or sun, for the Lord God will be their light, and they will reign forever and ever.”

Unpacking Revelation: Part 3

God’s Not Done

You’d think I’d be happier about finally getting to the end of this sermon series on Revelation. Or, better said, “The Revelation to John.”

If you were here the past two weeks, you know this was not a sermon series I’d been looking forward to. I never preached exclusively on Revelation before this series, in part, because of the way it’s been misused by those who treat it as a weapon to judge those they don’t agree with… or by those who think that somewhere within its symbols and numbers resides a mysterious code that tells the future.

But, mostly, Revelation is uncomfortable because it’s apocalyptic. It belongs to a genre of writings that offer visions of the age to come—the time when God’s will is fulfilled and heaven and earth meet as one.

And it offers these visions amid a strange kind of poetry that tries to paint scenes and create feelings and convey truth so radical and world-changing, that the only way the authors could describe them was by using strange symbols and hyperbolic metaphors. It’s why all apocalyptic texts—wherever we find them—seem absurd and fanciful. And it’s why I, for one, wrestle with apocalyptic literature… and struggle to preach on it.

……

But I gotta admit… as much as I wrestled with scheduling this sermon series months ago…

And as hard as I kicked myself earlier this month when I realized I would soon have to preach on this bizarre book of Scripture…

Today, I want you to know I don’t think there’s a better book for us to explore in this moment.

Today… amid 133 homicides in Baltimore City alone this year. 133.

Today… 15 days after the massacre in a Buffalo grocery store.

Today… 14 days after the mass shooting incident at the Geneva Presbyterian Church in Laguna Woods, California.

Today… just five days after the massacre of children and teachers in Uvalde, TX.

……

No. Today… it’s not Revelation I don’t want to preach. It’s the backdrop against which Revelation and the gospel and the Church and this very worship service all stand. That’s what I don’t want to preach. I don’t want to preach about the violence. I don’t want to preach about the brokenness. I don’t want to preach about a society that simply hangs its head, shrugs its shoulders, and moves on in the face of such horror.

But I must… I must preach amid this backdrop. And I will preach about this backdrop because regardless of how some people want to manipulate or limit the Gospel, faith is not simply about the life to come. The Gospel is not just about getting into heaven when we die. That’s part of the story… but it’s not even the primary part.

As Revelation makes incredibly clear, the Church of Jesus Christ is called to proclaim and share the ways of God in and to the world. We’re called to help inaugurate the kingdom of God within us… AND around us… by sharing the Gospel with our culture and society… helping a violent world see the brokenness of its ways… so that it can begin to live into the life-giving ways of God.

So, obviously, I will be preaching amid this backdrop… even if I don’t want to.

I’m so mad at the brokenness of our society right now… and all of its violence.

* At the top of the list—without a doubt—resides the brokenness of a culture that idolizes weaponry, and refuses to treat the epidemic of gun violence as the public health crises it is.
* But it’s not just about a culture that seems to love its guns more than it loves its people.
* It also includes the brokenness of an economic system that is so fundamentally built on consumption and greed that it leaves many feeling desperate and taken advantage of.
* It includes a criminal justice system that is fundamentally oriented around punishing criminals rather than doing the essential community-building work that helps prevent people from becoming criminals.
* It includes the brokenness of our educational system that doesn’t prepare or support every child in every school system equally… or sometimes even at all.
* And yes… to be clear… it includes the brokenness of a religious system that has, in far too many instances… sought scapegoats to blame for the ills of society… while theologically perpetuating the suppression of some to the benefit of others.

The list goes on and on… revealing all the broken systems of our society that contribute to the ungodly violence we witness.

……

……

Of course… this violence isn’t anything new. And much of the time… much of the time we’re able to navigate the brokenness and violence of our world in a relatively healthy and faithful manner, right? In fact, much of the time… we don’t even notice the brokenness and violence around us because we’re just… so… used to it. And how ridiculous is that?!

But there are those moments… some moments… that stick out above it all. Tragedies that make us react viscerally. Events like the massacre—the massacre—of children in Uvalde that slap us so hard we can’t help but see the horror of such violence and brokenness.

These are the moments that should make us all mad as hell… and hurt… and scared.

I, for one, am mad… and hurt… and scared.

……

Which, again, is precisely why I don’t think there’s a better book for us to explore this morning than Revelation—a book that was written to Christians in Asia Minor who were mad… and hurt… and scared.

Remember, a man named John wrote this letter we call Revelation to these Christians because he knew they were being explicitly targeted and persecuted for their faith. He knew the Roman Empire, as well as the general Roman public, were making life brutal for these Christians.

It was all because of the notion that to be a good Roman one had to be loyal not just to the Roman economic and political systems… but also the Roman religious system… with its many gods and quid pro quo approach to all things.

So when these early Christians decided to pursue the Chrisitan faith rather than that of the empire… when they decided not to worship the Roman gods or the emperor himself… when they decided not to participate in the Roman religious rituals… when they stepped away from sacrificing animals to idols or eating the meat that had been slaughtered in such a ritual… when they decided not to participate in an economy that obviously exploited some… society turned on them. They were labeled as heretics and deemed treasonous, thrown into jail… and many times… killed.

……

So John wrote to these struggling, suffering communities, in part, to let them know he understood their pain. He understood their fear and suffering. He knew they were hurting and scared not because they had done anything wrong… but because the world around them was so ridiculously broken and violent. Fathers and mothers thrown in jail; uncles and aunts and cousins killed because they wouldn’t acquiesce to the ways of the empire.

It’s why in Ch. 7 John noted that there are places and times in this world that make life feel like a “great ordeal.” A place of great suffering.

He didn’t try to sugarcoat it… Nor did he dare offer empty platitudes that only minimize a kind of pain that should never be minimized.

Rather… he named it. He named the violence and brokenness and suffering for what it was. Horrible… ungodly… and all too real. Just as we need to name the violence and suffering and brokenness for what it is in our day. Horrible and ungodly… all too real AND yet all too unnecessary.

……

But John didn’t stop there.

As we shared two weeks ago… he reminded these Christians that God wasn’t done. He reminded them that God was still at work, bringing about the fulfillment of all things. So he implored these new Christians—suffering and scared, though they were—he implored them to keep their faith. He implored them to keep living into the ways of Jesus Christ rather than turning to the ways of the world. He implored them to keep their eyes set on love and grace and mercy, rather than power and vengeance and greed.

Which is precisely why—and this is remarkable—**John never told these suffering, persecuted Christians to fight back.**

Imagine that if you can. He’s writing to a group of Christians being arrested and killed for their faith, but John was so concerned that they keep pursuing the ways of God… the ways of grace and love and compassion Jesus came to reveal… that John never once, not once, even implied that these Christians should defend themselves… meet violence with violence… or take up weapons against those with weapons. Not… once!

For John had seen God intentions for the world. And John knew this world would not be able to heal… this world will not become all that God intends it to be… if God’s people keep responding to violence with more violence… if God’s people keep acquiescing to the ways of the world, turning from the ways of love and grace in order to adopt the ways of might and vengeance and greed… regardless of how many times the world insisted the ways of might and vengeance and greed are simply the way things have to be.

……

And this… this… more than anything else… is what Revelation is all about: the healing of the world. This is what John wrote to convey: God is still working to fulfill God’s will for all of Creation. “So seek the ways of God,” John cries. “Seek the ways of God as God seeks to inaugurate the kingdom of heaven on earth.”

Listen again to the first part of our lesson this morning.

“Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea (which stands for chaos and disorder) was no more. And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband… And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “See, the home of God is (now) among mortals. He will dwell with them; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them; he will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the old things have passed away.”

……

……

This is impossible for me to overstate. Twentieth century Christianity did a great job manipulating and twisting the gospel into a focus on getting into heaven when we die. The Church made faith more about fearing hell rather than living into the ways of God. But according to Revelation, the whole reason people of faith are called to live out their faith… is not to get into heaven when we die… but to prepare the way for God to bring heaven down to earth. It’s to usher in God’s kingdom around us.

Which is why John was so insistent, even to Christians who were suffering, that they were not to take up the violent ways of the world… but keep pursuing the love and grace and peace of Christ, even at personal cost. Even amid personal pain. Because the ways of the world… the ways of brokenness and violence and greed… all they ever do is lead to more brokenness and violence and greed!

So while some insist that the best response to violence is more violence… and while I understand—I definitely understand—the desire to respond to violence with the threat of more violence—Christians are called to something else.

In the face of hatred, we are called to model love.

In the face of brokenness, we are called to seek grace.

And in the face of violence… such unspeakable violence… we are called pursue the things that make for peace.

Peace that is not only possible, but as John makes clear peace that is already being prepared. Listen to chapter 21.

“I saw no temple in the city, for its temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb. And the city has no need of sun or moon to shine on it, for the glory of God is its light, and its lamp is the Lamb. The nations—all the nations of the earth—will walk by its light, and the rulers of the earth will bring their glory into it. Its gates will never be shut—because all—all will be welcome within it. All people will bring into it the glory and the honor of the nations… And there will be no more night; no more darkness; they need no light of lamp or sun, for the Lord God will be their light, and they will reign forever and ever.

……

So at its end, friends, despite all its strange symbols and hyperbolic metaphors, this bizarre yet beautiful book of Revelation closes out God’s holy word of Scripture by calling God’s people of faith to resist the ways of the world and all its violence, while trusting and living into the ways of God… the ways the Lamb… the ways Jesus Christ has revealed to us… the ways of God’s kingdom that God is seeking to inaugurate not up in the heaven for when we die. But here… and now.

The kingdom of God… right here.

The kingdom of God…

* Where God will wipe away every tear from every eye.
* Where darkness will be no more.
* Where death will be no more.
* Where mourning and crying and pain will be no more.
* And every weapon made for killing or harm will be turned into instruments of harvest and nourishment.
* For the old ways of brokenness and violence… they will all, at last, be no more.
  + They will at last be no more.

Picture it, friends. Picture the kingdom of God not in heaven but on earth. Picture the day you and I at last put away the ways of the world. Picture our society finally setting down its ways of violence and greed to pursue the things that make for peace.

Can we picture it? Can we picture the salvation Revelation sets before us?

Make no mistake… as disciples of Christ… as children of God… we must picture it. Because we must find the courage of our faith to pursue it.

With every fiber of our being, we must find the courage and strength of our faith to help God make it so. Amen.