

Anger Management

Pentecost 11, Year C,

Sermon by Rev. Glenn. A. Brumbaugh

24th August, 2019

Revelation 16:1-9 / Revelation 17:1-6, 9-18

Wow. It's even hard to read some of that stuff aloud.

I'm almost embarrassed with such language.

As is often the case, we are so programmed not to say certain things,

especially in church,

that some "problematic" scriptural texts can catch us off guard.

With today's modern sensibilities,

it's hard to use such negative images of femininity,

with words such as "whore"



as well as such violent and vengeful imagery of destruction, pain and death.



While themes of seduction, anger, and revenge can make us uncomfortable, does that mean we should avoid them?

After all, these are all facets of the human condition that we are subject to.

To deny them doesn't make them go away.

Maybe that's part of the message that John had for his first century audience.

The allure of the current Beast was very seductive,

symbolized by the perennial biblical favorite for excess, Babylon.

To follow that Beast meant worldly success and enjoyment of excess.

And when it was time for a new Beast to rise,

that transition was always accompanied by violent change.

For John's audience, anger and acts of vengeance

went hand in hand with the civil worship of the emperor.

As we've learned previously,

the area around Asia Minor led the charge

in promoting the deification and worship of Caesar Augustus.

However, his successors did not match

the perceived glory and successes that he attained.

Nero, Domitian, and Caligula

were certainly powerful personalities to hold that office,

and very willingly embraced their place as "divine,"

even dressing to play the part.

Yet their narcissism and sense of self-importance

left a very bitter taste in the mouths,

not only in the distant territories of Asia Minor,

but also in the elite of Rome itself.

Suffice it to say that it wasn't a high priority

to plan for retirement in the office of emperor.

Frequently one's term in office ended quite suddenly,

generally at the pointed ends of some sharp weapons.

For those who met such ignominious ends,

that was not simply the end of their particular legacy.

It would be common for those who caused great grief for the empire

to be as blotted out as possible from ever even existing.
The Senate would issue an edict called a *damnatio memoriae* decree
which declared that throughout the empire
every trace of his existence should be removed.



Roman historian Pliny the Elder described the relief and jubilation
that greeted the news of the assassination of the emperor Domitian,
as people spontaneously smashed icons of the emperor:
“Those innumerable golden images, as a sacrifice to public rejoicing,
lie broken and destroyed.
It was our delight to dash those proud faces to the ground,

to smite them with the axe,
as if blood and agony could follow from every blow...
all sought a form of vengeance in beholding those bodies mutilated,
limbs hacked to pieces..”

Pretty graphic, huh?

Yet we get some of that same sentiment in our readings from Revelation today.

In our first reading, we are met with plagues

that clearly parallel those from the Exodus story
which rain suffering and pain on those who follow the Beast,
who, like Pharaoh in the story of old, hardened their hearts to God.

In our second reading, it's actually the beast and the royal followers

of the Whore of Babylon
who turn on her and “devour her flesh and burn her up with fire.”

John's letter plays on the emotions and events of his day

to connect his audience with the message he is presenting.

But what exactly is that message?

Is it that anger and acts of vengeance are acceptable if we consider them just?

That's part of the conundrum of Revelation.

It's imagery that flies in the face of those values of nonviolence and forgiveness
that Jesus taught
and we've been conditioned to pattern our own behavior after.

Theologian John Dominic Crossan claims that Revelation portrays Jesus
as bloodthirsty.

He says, "To turn the nonviolent resistance of the slaughtered Jesus
into the violent warfare of the slaughtering Jesus is...
to libel the body of Jesus and to blaspheme the soul of Christ."
He continues, "it is Jesus, the dead-and-risen Lion-Lamb,
who opens the scroll and unleashes its contents upon the earth."

Yet that is the dichotomy that we too often have imagined and accepted
with the imagery of Revelation.

Throughout the New Testament we view Jesus
as the nonviolent sacrificial lamb who willingly walked to Calvary,
yet becomes a vengeful smiter in the last book.

With the rise of concepts in the last century or so of things
such as tribulation and rapture,
this imagery has only been further reinforced,
leading to an escapist ideology,
where we just need to avoid God's wrath at all costs,
by being in the group that jumps ship
before Jesus just goes off.

Another writer, Loren Johns,
agrees that Revelation is
"arguably the most dangerous book in the history of Christendom"
in terms of how it has been used.

He cites various millennial and apocalyptic movements,
including the Branch Davidian cult in Waco, Texas,

whose leaders quoted Revelation
and steered their followers to catastrophe in 1993.

Johns concludes, however,

that the “more closely the symbolism of the book is read
in light of actual first-century people and events,
the more clearly does the book empower readers,
ancient and modern alike,
to adopt an ethic of nonviolent, faithful witness.”

As we have learned, John and his audience

lived in a hostile and potentially violent world.

Real, physical, and often lethal persecution for one’s belief

was often a fact of daily life.

We need to take into account the realities of their existence

when we choose the lens through which we view this text.

Fear was real for them, and so was anger:

anger at the injustice all around them;

anger at the oppression they often suffered under;

anger at their own inability to change things

or seemingly make a difference.

These are real feelings that need to be acknowledged,

as are the feelings of joy and jubilation when a tyrant is removed,

when there is that reprieve, however momentary,

from the weight of the current Beast in their lives.

Yet I would argue that despite the violent imagery and sense of vengeance,
however just it may seem,

the overarching theme of Revelation is quite different.

Revelation, first and foremost, is set in the context of worship.

It is not a strategic manifesto for bringing down a regime.

To be sure, the book has all kinds of implications
for political, social, and economic behavior.

But the central focus is the worship of God and the Lamb,
not on political violence or activism.

Yet we would remiss to ignore the violence and its related suffering throughout the text.

However, a large part of the suffering is borne by the *followers* of the Lamb,
not only the followers of the Beast.

Looking under the altar in heaven,

John sees the “souls of those who had been slaughtered
for the word of God”

and learns that soon more will be killed.

However, the effect of the prolonged suffering

brought by the plagues and the persistent witness of the martyrs
has the effect of bringing more people to salvation.

Early Christian author Tertullian famously said

in his second century letter to rulers of Rome,

“The oftener we are mown down by you, the more in number we grow;
the blood of Christians is seed.”

That doesn't mean I'm advocating

that we start spilling blood to grow our Sunday attendance,

but that was the pattern in the early church.

The more people were martyred, the faster and bigger the church grew.

Being a living witness is a powerful tool of influence.

However, as a book of worship, it's important to stay for the whole service in Revelation.

Yes, we move through long passages of suffering and violence,

but we end up with a vision of hope, a New City and New World,

one free of the trials and tribulations of the old.

Still Revelation can be an angry book, it can be a violent and vengeful book.

Even today, especially today,

we can identify with frustrated anger at our own circumstances.

The Beast is alive and well, as is the siren call of one who rides the beast.

It seems our rulers and even the leaders of our culture

become more and more aligned

with the values being promoted

in opposition to those of God,

and the teachings of Christ.

We can take comfort that we're not alone,

that those in John's time had the same anger,

the same urge for retribution,

and the same sense of jubilation when tyrants do fall.

We should be angry:

Angry at the injustice;
 Angry at the spread of hate and division;
 Angry at the meanness that pervades our world.

What is important is what we do with those emotions.

While Revelation's imagery can be violent and vindictive,
 the counsel for actual Christian behavior is still nonviolence.

John repeatedly uses the Greek word *hypomone*,
 which translates as endurance,
 connotating sustained nonviolent resistance.

Immediately after contrasting worship of the Lamb and worship of the Beast,
 John says, "Here is a call for the endurance of the saints,
 those who keep the commandments of God
 and hold fast to the faith of Jesus."

This emphasis on endurance is a clear "no"
 to the possibility of humanity's bringing in the fullness of God's reign,
 and a joyful and confident "yes" to the way of Christ
 in our own faithful witness,
 a way that led humbly to death on a cross."

To be angry at injustice and oppression is human.

To seek justice is human.

It's how we manage that anger that matters.

The martyrs of John's time show us the proper anger management.

We live our lives exactly as Jesus taught.

We stand in opposition to the Beast

and the current version of the rulers that make up the horns on its head,
without violence, without vengeance,

with compassion even for those who would beat us down.

We seek change, but most of all, hope.

The hope that is the ultimate message of Revelation:

that all of this will come to an end;

that God at work to renew all;

that the arc of time always bends towards justice.

May we all strive to be the witnesses we are called to be, and live into the hope that
only the Lamb can give us. Amen.