

**Pentecost 12, Year C,
Sermon by Rev. Glenn A. Brumbaugh
1st September, 2019**

Revelation 21:1-6 NIV / Revelation 21:22-27, 22:1-5, 20

so, After weeks of sermons on Revelation, are you feeling hopeless yet?



After all, we've been barraged by images of terrible beasts with multiple heads, some with an alluring temptress on board to lead the rulers of the world astray. We've heard tales of plagues and suffering, with the violent destruction of the powerful nations of the world described in great detail, with

the blood of the martyrs figuring prominently at God's throne. I just don't understand why folks don't enjoy reading his last book of the biblical canon. It's such light reading.



REVELATION: ROME & THE SEVEN CHURCHES

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All joking aside, it's important we don't lose sight of the big picture in what purpose apocalyptic literature serves and what this particular letter's intent would have been to the audiences that received it.

Just as review, the author, John of Patmos, finds himself banished to

Patmos, either directly or indirectly by the Roman authorities, probably for bucking the system in preaching a way of living that ran contrary to the established system. He was a squeaky wheel that needed to get back in line. He was writing to churches who were in cities that were in the thick of Greco-Roman culture. Their members were constantly being tempted to "go with the flow" and fall in line with the ways of Rome: worshipping the emperor; taking part in civil worship of various patron gods of each city, including eating meat sacrificed to those gods; supporting peace through force and brutality; making themselves and their place in society more important than the welfare of those around them.

As John tells us, some caved and tried to live a dual life: good Roman citizen during the week and good Christian on Sunday. Those that chose a faithful life often suffered persecution, and under many of the emperors, were scapegoated and martyred for their faith. To say that John and probably many of the recipients were frustrated is probably an understatement to say the least; hopeless is probably the better term. So John sends them a letter relaying a series of highly symbolic visions that from our lens seem violent



and horrific, but for his audience would have really struck home. All these images and events symbolized the very circumstances that they found themselves in: a brutal beast, ie Rome, who by force was attempting to lead them away from their faith and the teachings of Christ to worship the empire that beast represented. Those who followed the beast and accepted its mark were reminiscent of those brothers and sisters who were led astray into a shallow faith of only

being Christian when it was convenient. He drew on Old Testament texts to link these visions with those of the prophets of old, and the struggles of old with Babylon and Egypt and the Exodus before that, all of it presented in the context of perfect worship at the throne of God and the Lamb.



Yet in our first week, we also learned one of the purposes of apocalyptic works was to offer hope, that there will be vindication and redemption at the end of the current troubles. Which brings us to the end of Revelation and our lessons for today. It does all come to a redemptive end, though we may not have the right conception of what looks like.

Much of our modern impressions of what the end of time looks like is a relatively recent interpretation. There's a popular interpretation, based on two verses in 1 Thessalonians 4, that have fostered this conception of what's called the Rapture, which is Jesus arriving to greet the dead and living believers in the clouds, in order to whisk them away to a far away heavenly realm. However, that's not what the text really says. It says, "For the Lord himself will come from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. After that, we who are still alive and left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be with the Lord in the air."

The passage says we will greet Jesus in the air when he comes, to be with him forever, not that Jesus is coming like a soccer mom to pick us up after the game and take us home.

The whole message of today's passages from Revelation, and much of Jesus' teaching is not that God's creation is to be tossed aside into the cosmic dumpster, but that all of this is working to renew creation, to return to its original perfection in Eden. Jesus is the new Adam, the Alpha and Omega, the Word at the beginning and the redeemer at the end. The new holy city is coming down to a renewed earth, not the other way around. In the prayer that Jesus taught, which we recited this morning, "thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on Earth as it is in Heaven." In our most basic liturgy, we are reminded of this concept of the kin-dom of God breaking into this world, transforming it towards the heavenly perfection of its origin.

These repeated prayers and various other rituals were meant to keep us connected and focused on our mission and purpose. Revelation is structured and interwoven throughout with imagery of heavenly worship, with strong symbolism and ritual. The flowing water of life, reminds us not only of the garden of Eden, but also of the cleansing and renewal of our own baptism. The multiple references to the cleansing blood of the wounded Lamb brings to mind the elements of communion, Reciting and reflecting on John's letter would have been an act of worship to these early churches. John goes to great lengths to show how easy it is to be tempted into letting the symbols and rituals of the empire, the beast, can replace the symbols and rituals meant to focus our attention on God. The flag can come to replace the cross, the bread and cup with the feasts to the emperor and other pagan idols.

John's focus on worship is a way of leading his readers to realize the importance of that space, that time spent together. It's in the sanctity of worship that the evils of the world can be acknowledged. It's gathering together in worship, as a community, that the individuals can find solace, strength, and support, to not only keep a faithful witness in opposition to the powers of the world, but to continue the gospel mission of spreading the good news that there is another way of being, a better way of living. One that lifts others up instead of tearing them down. One that places the least of these first, not last. One that lifts the fallen and beaten down, not blames them for being oppressed by the beast. It's this blessed community in worship, the bride adorned for her bridegroom, that starts and continues to make all things new.

As we gather in worship, we need to follow John's lesson, the goal of his letter. To truly work together, as a community, as the body and bride of Christ in the world, to bring change and renewal, and seek the kingdom. We need to ask ourselves, do the symbols and rituals we follow turn our gaze to Christ's kingdom, or the beast kingdoms of this world. Do they lead us to care for the other, or turn our backs? Turn our gaze outward, or inward? Lead us to support violence in all its forms, or promote true shalom, and a

peace that ensures the lifting up, not putting down of others. Do we find love or hate in that which we follow? Today's world can leave us just as hopeless, for many of the same reasons our first century forebears lost hope. Christians that follow the rulers of the world into worshipping idols. Violence and oppression of the least of these, the many forms that the "other" takes in our midst, anyone who is different than us, in the many beautiful diverse ways in which God created them. Yet we too have the same hope, together, as a community of Christ.

There is strength in these numbers. There is a difference that can be made. The question is, are we willing to step out together and take the risk of rejection, of failure? Are we willing to take the time to do whatever part we can, something, to help the body of Christ in this room to find God's work that needs done in the community around us? Or will we just go home and complain about the bad state of things and do nothing about it? The choice is ours to make and our choice can very well determine whether we grow and succeed with God's help, or if God moves on to someone else who will act, and leaves us to fade away into irrelevance. We may think we're too small a body to make an impact, But these churches in John's time were so small they met in people's houses. Yet they together they transformed the world over time. I pray we make the right choice together to change our world. Amen.

