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First Presbyterian Church
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Revelation 21: 1-16

Rescuing the Bible from Fundamentalism: Left Behind and Loving It

The other day I passed a car with a bumper sticker that said “Jesus is coming. Look busy.” I chuckled.

But it’s not funny for everyone. For people who read the book of Revelation as a doomsday prediction about the end of the world, Jesus’ return has the potential of being catastrophic, especially if you’re not one of the busy ones.

I ran into a church member the other day who asked for a copy of today’s sermon b/c she wasn’t going to be in church. “I don’t like the book of Revelation,” she said. It’s not an uncommon opinion – nor a surprising one since there are parts of Revelation that are troubling and scary. But Revelation was actually written to people who were living in exile and needed to be assured that there was a reason to hope.

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, and I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God.

The writer of those words was an outcast, a prisoner in a hopeless situation. He was a Jewish Christian by the name of John, and he lived a generation after Jesus. He may have known Jesus, and he’s the author of Revelation.

John wanted to write a letter of encouragement to his friends who were being persecuted. And so, just like the author of Genesis did, he looked out that small window in his prison cell, saw the sky and the sea, and wrote the words that have given hope to countless people ever since:

And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “See, the hope of God is 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 . . .”

Comforting, yes?

But we don't usually associate the words from Revelation with comfort, do we? Most of us think of the book of Revelation as something scary that predicts the end of the world. How many charismatic leaders have found ways to apply Revelation to their time and situation and concluded that the world's coming to an end, so you better get busy and make sure you're right with the Lord or else you'll be left behind to die a painful death.

You might be surprised to learn, though, that apocalyptic literature, which the book of Revelation is, is not a literal prediction of the future. The main purpose of apocalyptic literature in the Bible is to give hope to people who are suffering and need to be assured that God will enter the scene and make their lives better.

John was writing during a time when people needed to be assured that God would come and make their lives better. The world was collapsing. The capital city of John's nation was gone. Jerusalem had been flattened and burned by the Romans in 70 CE because they had finally gotten tired of the protests and political demonstrations and revolts among their Jewish subjects.

So the soldiers gathered up all the troublemakers, revolutionaries, and everyone who was out of line, and killed every last one; and in the process, they cornered a group of Jewish refugees in the fortress at Masada, a dramatic high plateau where hundreds lived under siege for years until they decided taking their own lives was better than surrendering to their enemies.

And Jerusalem, the home of David's throne and Solomon's temple, the heart of Jewish life and culture, a symbol of God's love and protection, was leveled and its citizens exiled or executed. It was the only way Rome knew how to take care of its Jewish subjects.

But the Christian community was violently persecuted too. Its leaders were also executed or exiled or in prison. And so it was that John found himself far from home, a prisoner on a small island by the name of Patmos not far from Greece.

Looking out his prison cell window, I imagine John wanted his community to know that the suffering and persecution they were enduring would not be the final word. John wanted them to know and believe that God would, in the very near future, intervene on their behalf and give them a new start with a new landscape populated by the faithful few. So for the Christians who were being arrested,

executed, or imprisoned as traitors of the Roman state, and for the Jews who were being stamped out by the most powerful, violent political entity the world had ever known, John writes to tell them not to worry, that God will come and give those Romans their just due. Babylon, aka Rome, will fall – tossed into the sea by God’s angels. And the beast, whose popular symbol is the number 666, the beast who represents the Roman emperors, will be slain. I wouldn’t be honest with you if I didn’t tell you that parts of Revelation are gruesome; it’s not all comfort and hope.

Believing that God will be victorious in battle and do to your enemies what they have done to you?

Believing that the only way to solve one’s problems is for God to wipe away one’s enemies? How can this be God’s Word?

This extreme view is hard for many of us to wrap our heads around, and it’s also one of the reasons why the book of Revelation almost didn’t make it into the Bible. People were rightly offended by the nature of events it describes. Even Martin Luther rejected the idea that Revelation was inspired by a loving God. After all, it’s hard to find comfort in the idea of God pouring out wrath on earthly enemies, even if they are your enemies because what if someone thinks you are the enemy?

But friends, as with so many other Biblical passages that can lead to harmful interactions with other people, or to hateful judgment between people, we do not have to agree with the tactics used in Revelation.

And we don’t need to wait for God to intervene to right the world’s wrongs; to slay the beast and demolish Babylon, if you will. We also don’t need to be so smug and think we don’t need God’s help in righting the world’s wrongs. Instead, we could collectively work together, with God’s help, as disciples of a Peacemaker who came to turn this world into a world of peace and justice. That we can do.

I’d like to believe that the reason Revelation was included in the Bible is that underneath the vision of blood and beasts, John had a deeper vision of what God had in mind for creation, and that that vision transcends his time and even our own. That bold vision is of a new heaven and new earth – a new Jerusalem – where there is the promise of a new political order where there will be no more

weeping: no more injustice, no more oppression, no more cruelty and persecution, no more racism, no more homophobia, no more unkindness and meanness, no more misogyny; no more war, and no more death. In the New Jerusalem, God will tenderly wipe the tears from the eyes of the precious suffering, whomever they are. (John Buchanan, "Memory and the Peace of God", May 27, 2001).

I'd like to believe that this is the reason Revelation was included in the Bible so that we, too, can be assured that the world can be, with God's help and our hands, a better place.

Friends, there are people who want to read ugliness and divisiveness into the Bible. And on the surface, there's a lot of it there. But dig a little deeper, and you'll find beauty and God's word as it comes to us today.

You'll find hope.

You'll find a God who loves us more than we deserve to be loved.

You'll meet a God who loves us no matter what.

And, you'll meet a God who loves us, and wants better for us, and believes we can be better and therefore, so can God's world.

See, the thing is with the Bible, anyone can take a verse and twist it and distort, but they can't take away its overall message, a message that is authoritative for how we are to live as Disciples of Christ.

For you see wherever there is a "bad" verse, there are ten more that speak of turning to God and that express hope and protection for all people.

So perhaps the point isn't that we need to look busy but that we should get busy so these words of comfort and hope ring true for all.

Amen.