

When Things Are Revealed

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Let me just get two things out of the way up front.

First, the Book of Revelation is weird. I say weird because when you close your eyes and picture Jesus I bet you don't see a man with white hair, burnished bronze feet, and a sword sticking out of his mouth. And that is only the tip of the iceberg. Keep reading and you get the famous four horsemen, and the seven seals, and the lesser known, seven bowls of wrath. This book is not written in a way that most of us find accessible or meaningful. It's weird.

And second, the Book of Revelation is perilous. I say perilous because it has proven time and time again to be fertile soil for fanatics. Preaching from this text always feels a bit like playing with fire. Its dramatic and violent imagery has unfortunately not stayed confined to the pages of scripture, but throughout history more than a few misguided and disturbed people have sought to bring its gracious spiritual battlefields to life in our world. It is scary to witness

what people are willing to do, when they are convinced that the world is about to end. It's perilous.

It is for both of these reasons that Revelation almost didn't make the cut when the books of the Bible were being assembled. When the Early Christian community was trying to decide what texts would become a part of their shared canon, not everyone was sold on Revelation.

And those feelings lingered. 1500 years later during the protestant reformation, Martin Luther toyed with the idea of dropping the text from the Bible that protestants would use.

But I am glad that he didn't. And I am glad that we have this wild text to finish off the whole of scripture.

Which is one reason why I am teaching a Bible Study on it over the next few weeks. Thursday nights, 7PM, Centre School lobby. Details in your bulletin.

Because in the end, while Revelation is weird, and wild, and even dangerous. Most of all, I think it is misunderstood.

The Book of Revelation is not primarily a prediction of what is going to happen in some far off future when the world ends.

It is a book that tells us something true about how God is at work in the world today.

Because we live in a world now where Christianity is a dominant cultural force, it is easy to forget that it was once a tiny, minority, faith of outcasts, unwelcome in most towns, meeting in secret, by night, in rented rooms.

The author of Revelation, a man named John, is writing from exile on a tiny island called Patmos off the coast of modern day Turkey where he has been exiled because he was teaching about Jesus.

And right around the time that Revelation was written, Roman persecution of Christians had reached its zenith under Emperor Nero. A civil war was raging in Jerusalem, the local Jewish population giving the Romans the first serious fight of their generations-long occupation of the Holy Land.

Frankly, it did not take a great act of imagination to think that the world was coming to an end. It certainly felt like it was falling apart.

In that context some of the images that you might associate with Revelation made a lot of sense. War-like imagery of horsemen coming in waves of destruction. Images of fire burning ancient cities. They may have been presented cosmically in the text, but these were real life things for Christians a generation after Jesus.

Their world was coming apart at the seams.

Which gets to why I wanted to teach and preach from Revelation right now.

Because I think that our world feels like it is coming apart at the seams too. Between wars and rumors of wars. The rapid erosion of something basic as the idea of truth. A warming world that threatens all we have come to know. And a political system that feels at risk of unraveling.

And it may not even be on such a grand scale for you. It could be much closer to home, a diagnosis or a loss, a relationship that is straining past what you think it might bear,

Just like John, sitting on Patmos, I don't think it takes a whole lot of imagination for us to feel like the world is falling apart either.

What should not be missed in Revelation is the piece that story which does require extraordinary imagination.

The ultimate triumph of God.

Because no matter how deeply we may believe that God's love is stronger than the powers of evil in our world, history does not tend to provide us overwhelming evidence to support our faith.

In fact I speak to people all the time, and I bet you do too, for whom the pain of the world has become overwhelming evidence of God's absence.

Maybe you have been someone who felt that way. Maybe you are today.

The reality of suffering and the persistence of evil, these things have a tendency to wear away our capacity to imagine. They convince us, slowly, and overtime, that they are all the world has for us.

They rob us of hope. They wear us down.

Every so often though, we encounter a voice that interrupts that erosion of our ability to imagine another future. A voice that breaks through.

On this weekend in particular it reminds me of Dr. King, whom we remember in large part because of his transcendent moral imagination that he cultivated despite the constant threat of death.

He had a dream of this nations future that nothing in his world could have given evidence to. His world was police dogs, jail cells, hate mail, and ultimately an assassins bullet. And yet his imagination of what was possible was not dulled by despair.

He had a dream that even his closest allies told him often was too ambitious, not just racial reconciliation but an end to war, a new movement among the poor in America for better work and wages. And yet his hope for what might be was never cheeped by expedience.

I believe that Dr. King was able to keep his moral imagination alive, and continue to be productive and creative even amidst the constant threat of death because he had absorbed into his very bones the words from today's reading.

“Do not be afraid; I am the first and the last, and the living one. I was dead, and see, I am alive forever and ever; and I have the keys of Death.”

Dr. King's faith that God was fighting beside him, and that in Christ God had vanquished even death, meant that death could not stop Dr. King from dreaming.

Fear could not stop him from dreaming. And once he was dreaming, police dogs and jail cells suddenly didn't seem like a big deal, and in fact, even death, he said, did not scare him.

And that is what Revelation is. It is a dream. An imagined future in which God comes thundering to Earth and sets right every wrong,

frees the captive, liberates the oppressed, builds a gleaming new world upon the ruins of the old. Given not so that we will sit back and wait for some hereafter, but so that we will have the kind of courage it takes to bring a bit of heaven to this earth.

The language of Revelation is over the top, it is imaginative, it is figurative, it is symbolic, come to my Bible Study and we will decode it together, its more than we can do here, it will be fun. Thursdays. 7PM.

But I don't think that the specific beasts and plagues are the point of the story.

The point is that the worst the world has to offer is not stronger than God's best.

It does not say that the worst the world has to offer isn't bad. This stirring and striking vision is written by a man whose world was falling

apart, and who was living in exile on a rocky speck of land in the middle the sea.

And yet it dreams, it imagines, it insists that God's love is stronger.

And that if that is true, then we can dare to dream, no matter how bad things get.

I really think a lot of us are worn down. And I think a lot of us have decided that dreams, and hope, and imaginations are luxuries that we cannot afford. Or maybe even fantasies we can no longer stomach.

But I think they are what will save us.

They might seem weird at first. They might even feel a bit perilous, a bit like handling fire.

But daring to imagine and dream, being creative and hopeful about what the world is becoming, those are great acts of resistance against evil and sorrow.

Because if we dare to see the future as it really could be.

Suddenly those dreams become possible.