

Revelation 1:4b-8 11.18.21 Christ the King Pastor Bill Uetricht

If you were here last week, you realize that I started my sermon with a reference to the apocalyptic texts that were given us and how they were too much work for me to attempt to explode their meaning for the sake of modern people. Well, we have more apocalyptic texts this week. I guess I can't run anymore. I am going to have to give in, going to have to do the hard work. Apocalypticism, Revelation and Daniel, here we come!

Generally, Biblical apocalyptic literature was written during tough times, times of oppression and persecution. In the case of Daniel, the time was around 170 B.C.E, a period of Greek persecution of the people of Israel, under the very ugly rule of Antiochus Epiphanes, a leader who forbade the practice of Jewish religion. Antiochus sacrificed a pig on the altar of the temple. And if you know anything about Judaism, that would be the worst possible thing. That action was called the "abomination of desolation."

Today's reading from Daniel is a picture of the divine court that is sitting in judgment of this awful man. God is said to be the ancient one who is on his throne, dressed in white, the color of purity, having wool-colored hair. This one has been around a long time, like...forever. This one is wise. And he's got a thousand thousands (that is, an unending supply of angels) serving him, being the jurors who are helping him with the judgment that he is about to offer.

The part of the text that is left out in our reading for today tells us what God's judgment is. His judgment includes the death of a horrible beast, one who is said to be an arrogant horn. That's Antiochus. He's been miserable to the Jews. And the message Daniel is attempting to proclaim to his audience—a message that is typical for much Biblical apocalyptic literature—is that God is on the side of those being oppressed. Antiochus won't be around forever. We'd put it this way:

“this too shall pass.” So, hang in there. Hang in there with faithfulness. Don’t throw in the towel. Don’t give up on the faith.

You know, in apocalyptic times like ours, I surmise that the same message is one worth our hearing. In light of a virus that just won’t let go, we could easily just give into despair. This is never going to end. Hang in there! And keep doing the things you know are right, the things that keep us healthier and safer. There are no guarantees. The life of faith is never about guarantees. But this won’t be forever. Antiochus, he’s going to go away.

And truthfully, this is also the message of the book of Revelation. Sadly, so many in our times, who, frankly, make loads of money from this, turn Revelation into a book that predicts awful things that are to occur, that anticipates modern nations battling with other nations, producing horrible conditions, resulting eventually in the obliteration of all things, sometimes at the hand of God.

First of all, most Biblical religion, since it is convinced that God’s creation is fundamentally good, would have a hard time seeing God destroying everything he made. Bringing everything he made to a great conclusion, yes. But destroying everything? No way! Not in their theological wheelhouse. Revelation’s primary concern is not scaring you, as much of contemporary approaches to this book try to do. Its primary concern was, first of all, to reassure the people to whom it was written and then, secondarily, is to reassure us.

The book of Revelation is addressing an audience that is living under the oppression of the Roman empire. Persecution is the reality that this sometimes wild and crazy book is addressing. And frankly, the message sometimes is the same as the book of Daniel: hang in there. This, too, shall pass.

In what is a part of an extended introduction to the book, today’s reading speaks of grace and peace, the best gifts that could be offered

in the context of a horrible situation, from the “one who is and who was and who is to come.” This little title for God, which later in the text becomes the “alpha and the omega,” the beginning and the end, is an invitation for Revelation’s audience to see their current experience in light of a much bigger reality. It’s the kind of thing you mean when you say, “Mindful of eternity, does this really matter?”

Now, we must be careful with such sayings because through them we can too easily dismiss people’s concerns and suffering. But Revelation intends to reassure with such words, not dismiss. You are living in light of ancient one, a present one, and one who is yet to come to act to do away with oppression. Don’t give up! This one brings you what you need right now: grace and peace.

And this one, according to the book of Revelation, is accompanied by Jesus Christ, who is the faithful witness, that is, the one who gave up his life for us, and who also is the firstborn from the dead, the first to be raised from death, and finally and probably most importantly for the writer of Revelation, who is the ruler of the kings of the earth. Oh, we thought Nero was the king. We thought any number of Caesars are the king. We thought that those who command or control us with all their military might, those who boss us around, are the kings. We don’t want to, but aren’t these the ones we should bow down to? Aren’t these the true rulers?

No, says the book of Revelation. The real ruler, the true king is Jesus Christ, the one who let go of power as the world defined it, the one who gave up his life, instead of holding onto it, the one who bowed down and washed the feet of his disciples, the one who ate with tax collectors and prostitutes, the one who forgave broken people. This is the one God raised. This is the one who is in charge.

The world doesn’t get this. Pilate didn’t get it. “Are you the king of the Jews?” Pilate asks Jesus. “My kingdom’s very different than the

kingdoms of the world,” Jesus responds. “The kingdoms of the world rely on violence. I don’t. My followers don’t fight to keep me in charge.” And all Pilate can say to all this, “So, I guess you are a king.” He is used to dealing with life only on the basis of power and control. Of course, all he can say is “So you are a king. He truly doesn’t get what Jesus is talking about.

Let’s face it. A lot of Christians don’t get it. How about the well-known Christian public official this week who suggested that if this country is to be one nation under God it needs to have one religion, which we all know meant *his* religion, a narrow form of Christianity. He doesn’t get it. Jesus’ kingdom is not of this world. It doesn’t operate with power, control, and violence as its tools. Revelation would put it this way: Jesus is the king of kings, not Caesar. To think that one religion needs to be imposed on all of us is to forget what Revelation claims really rules the universe: self-sacrificial love that is experienced, as Revelation puts it, in the lamb that was slain who now begins his reign.

Who rules the world? According to Revelation, a lowly lamb that gave up its life. Oh, my! You and I got some work to do. You and I got, for those of you who remember Ricky Ricardo, “some splaining” to do. We’ve too often used Jesus and the Bible to beat people up, to oppress them, to convert them to our narrow view of life. What rules the universe is not power or control, but self-giving love. The king of kings is Jesus, not Caesar. So, as we live our lives holding on to the hope that books like Daniel and Revelation call us to, we do so not imitating the oppressive powers that want to control us. There is a new call in our lives. A call to live our lives on the basis of compassion, forgiveness, love. A call not to roam the streets with arms, live by means of violence. But rather, a call to bow down to wash the feet of others.

It’s a new day when Jesus is the king of kings. Actually, it is not a day without power. It is a day filled with a new kind of power. The kid

who steps away from the fight is much more powerful than the one who participates in. The man or the woman who chooses to not respond to angry and hateful words with angry and hateful words is much more powerful than the one who just gives in to whatever comes to their minds. The people who have enough strength in themselves to give up the spotlight, to allow others to shine, to not need to be right, to not make life all about them, are much more powerful than those whose narcissism insists that they always be at the front and center. There is nothing more powerful than letting go of your self and your need to justify it.

The message of Biblical apocalypticism is really straight forward. Hang in there. Don't give up. And in the case of the book of Revelation, don't give up in trusting what or who *really* runs the universe. Not intimidating power, but power grounded in love, love that is so strong that it is willing to let go for the sake of others. He may think so, but Caesar is not king. Jesus is.