



"CAN YOU SEE IT?"

SCRIPTURE: BOOK OF REVELATION 7:9-17

GRACE COVENANT PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH, ASHEVILLE, NC

Sunday, May 11, 2025, Easter #4

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Revelation 7:9-17

7:9 After this I looked, and there was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, robed in white, with palm branches in their hands. 7:10 They cried out in a loud voice, saying, "Salvation belongs to our God who is seated on the throne and to the Lamb!" 7:11 And all the angels stood around the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures, and they fell on their faces before the throne and worshiped God, 7:12 singing, "Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our God forever and ever! Amen." 13 Then one of the elders addressed me, saying, "Who are these, robed in white, and where have they come from?" 14 I said to him, "Sir, you are the one who knows." Then he said to me, "These are they who have come out of the great ordeal; **they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.** 15 For this reason they are before the throne of God and worship him day and night within his temple, and the one who is seated on the throne will shelter them. 16 They will hunger no more and thirst no more; the sun will not strike them, nor any scorching heat, 7:17 for the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of the water of life, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes."

The Word of God for the People of God.

Thanks be to God.

Can you see it?

Empire

Apocalypse—not about decoding, but revealing. Injustice is laid bare.

Social/historical—Emperor Domitian—demanded to be seen as divine.

Not about seeing the future but about seeing the present differently.

Revelation is saying that God is not distant from any of this, but a part of all of it.

Information:

1. Social/Cultural Context
 - a. Empire
 - b. Emperor Deification
 - c. Christianity
 - d. Conquest
 - e. Spectacle
 - f. Grotesquery
2. Authorship:
 - a. The author's self-referent
 - b. Some traditions beginning with Irenaeus (177 CE) of the author being equated with the traditional view of the author of the Gospel of John. There is no real consensus on who wrote the Gospel of John.
 - c. "Trans-local prophet" (ABD Adela Yarbro Collins, 702)
3. Dating:
 - a. Internal evidence is sometime after 70 CE and the Roman destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple.
 - b. End of Emperor Domitian's reign c. 90s is probably the earliest date possible.
4. Socio-Political Context:
 - a. Roman Empire probably during Domitian's reign
 - b. Domitian is an Emperor who insisted on being recognized as divine.
 - c. Multiple attestations of Domitian banishing John to the Island of Patmos—a quarry/ mine. Text says this is where the Revelation is received.
 - i. No other evidence that Patmos was used this way
 - ii. Other islands were
 - d. Addressed to 7 cities that all belonged to the Roman province in Asia in the 1st century.
 - i. How are clutches of Christians in different contexts relating to Jesus' teachings and to Empire?
5. Literary form-Apocalypse:
 - a. Literary type in ancient Jewish literature: visions, disclosures, unveiling, disclosures of divine mysteries.
 - b. Not eschatology for those who want a sneak peak of the future/end times. "As revelations of divine secrets whose unveiling will enable readers to view their present situation from a completely different perspective." (NIB, Christopher Rowland, 519)
 - c. Seeing the present differently

Disaster is apocalypse: Natural, political, personal

John uses spectacle to unveil the grotesquery of Imperial Rome

Can you feel it?

Apocalypse evokes a sense of crisis because it reveals injustice, delusion.

You experience what's happening differently when Divine Love is at the center, and the idols of our time are not at the center.

See yourself in apocalypse

See our country as apocalypse

Reckoning of our past—our country is showing its own fault lines—just like the earthquake, in our foundations. America was actually built more for the Donald Trumps of the world than for the tired huddled masses.

Reckonings reveal the truth. And they give us a chance to respond to the truth—the truth we may not have been able or willing to see fully.

Apocalypses:

- i. Not cookie cutter solutions to human problems
- ii. Some apocalypses can produce more confusion than clarity. Can need translation from angelic sources, reinterpreted in changing times (e.g. 4th beast of Daniel 7 gets new meaning in Roman period. No longer referred to Greeks, but to Rome) (Rev. 13)
- iii. Some revelation does not give answers but say a complete answer is beyond our grasp (4 Ezra)
- iv. Sometimes the only direction is “the need to struggle” (Rev. 14: 12 endurance of the saints)
- v. Have to resist the temptation to decode/interpret/translate
 1. The imagery cannot immediately be put into more accessible language/image without it ceasing to be apocalypse.
 2. Becomes too dependent on “enlightened interpreter”
- vi. John has given us an apocalypse, not a gospel or an epistle or a narrative or a prophecy:
 1. We must engage it as this medium
 2. Emotion and imagination are required (Rowland)
 3. Lots of metaphor (hos): not precise or uncomplicated; the mind trying to point toward something it can't exactly describe.

4. In the ancient world and in other non-Western cultures dreams and visions have authority/status of importance.
 5. Treat it as marginal: something for which we are hard of hearing so we have to listen very closely.
- vii. Be intentional and full of care:
1. Revelation has been used to justify extreme/radical politics.
 2. Revelation has been the handbook of Christian fundamentalism who have powerful and deep impacts on the American religious landscape and political ethos.
 3. Modern exegesis has mostly focused on past meaning (preterist—almost entirely about John’s day) and so there is a huge gap in understanding between radical fundamentalism and contemporary scholarship.

For America to truly be a multi-racial democracy, white supremacy must be dethroned. We must engage in our current moment in an apocalyptic mode—we must see our time for what it is. And the Emperor isn’t going to be dethroned without a violent attempt at beating back the ascending inclusive messengers and practitioners of multiracial democracy and mutual aid economies.

When you do not deal with truth, the lies begin to consume and destroy—we can’t outrun the truth. That’s what apocalypse is all about. It’s a chance at freedom, a chance to wake up.

John would revel in the spectacle of the new Pope, Pope Leo XIV. He brings his Franciscan values, his experiences in different cultures and communities to this office of the richest institution in the world, this institution that has traded on exclusion and shame, and he uses that office to disrupt the idolatry of the current American administration. This parody, this performance of Imperial Christianity being a mouthpiece of humility, of reversal, of repentance from hegemony and supremacy. It’s our very own contemporary apocalypse.

So is the hurricane and the earthquake and the hail. Apocalypse is revealing, but it can also be used in all sorts of ways—it’s not $x+y=z$. It is unruly in the meaning that is made in its wake.

- Violence:
 - Distortion
 - Stubborn clinging to status quo even when it is killing us
 - Revelation is not an easy picture of consequences
 - ***An emotional response is provoked: anger, sorrow, fear, regret.***

- We are NEVER asked to engage in the violence.
- It's hard to look at this stark picture of humanity, of us.
- God is not separated from it.
- Natural disasters: theophany or judgment or both
 - We are not in control of the cosmos
 - Who has our destiny in their hands?
 - Are we honest with ourselves about that?
- Empire: What is attractive about it?
 - Control, order, borders, provisions, protection, insider status, morality, standard of excellence, emperor's excellence—lead by example.

Apocalypse is not just a way of seeing, but a way of being. Not the expert or inside interpreter, but the faithful, humble participant observer. And the courage to make meaning from the inscrutable indignities of Empire imploding, exploding, unloading all of its deprivation on us. How we participate in apocalypse is part of how meaning is made.

We are co-creating apocalypse. It right sizes our power to resist and retool. We are not helpless, we are humbled.

We are not superior, we are siblings

We are not lost, we are located—products of both culture and divine fidelity.

Can you be it?

How we see ourselves impacts how we see the world, how we see others, how we see God.

Religion can be used in the service of hegemony and in the service of resistance (Steven Friesen)

Shame is the most visceral of all emotions, it can reveal and conceal, it can motivate and paralyze. Our bodies can work so hard to avoid it, to try and hide it, that we also miss the invitation to change our relationship to it.

Look at what Empire and whiteness have done with Jesus—he came to liberate us from the captivity of shame, of debilitating self-loathing, and they turned him into an instrument of shame instead. He got kidnapped and then drafted in the service for those he had come to disrupt.

How do you bring a power analysis about white supremacy culture to what's happening in the world? John saw the way Domitian's claims of divinity and his abuse of power were lining his pockets.

We can say the same for our current president. Power-over is a business plan—and so far, things are going well because he and his band of advisors are cashing in. Not the everyday people who voted for him, but the billionaires who see this unraveling of our democracy as a lucrative money-making scheme.

Our best vaccine against the gas lighting is to see our time for what it is—the withering white lash of those who can't get traction any other way than through bullying, lies, and dehumanization. In the cosmic scheme of things, these strategies are a sign of ultimate weakness.

That's why humans have tried again and again to project this power over, this use of terror onto God. John's revelation tells a very different story—one of causes and consequences, not of punishment and damnation.

The vision in our passage today of all nations and tongues singing in harmony, clothed in liberation, centered not on their own lust for power, but on the equalizing power of God—that creates the conditions for us to take our rightful place in the human family—not in a seat of superiority, but in the heavenly disposition of solidarity.

The radical foil to the Emperor is the Lamb. Not one who rules with brutality and military might, but one who liberates through weakness, through the love that is embodied in complete solidarity. Jesus did not conquer through power over, but liberated by being with us—all the way. By embracing the fullness of our humanity, Jesus unveiled the divinity image in us all. All of us have this capacity for love—the love that knows itself fully only in community, in right relationship, in equanimity with creation and all nations.

John's revelation uses spectacle to kindle confidence in the promise of liberation, justice, freedom, accountability.

It's not that he wants you to believe this is going to happen. It's that he wants you to believe in a world where God will prevail over the forces of destruction and dominance.

Apocalypse reveals the promise of right relationship—a harmonizing of human experience and wisdom that puts no one among us on the throne—but who rightly centralizes the one who made us, the one who empowers us to truly be known—and to believe we are fully and completely loved.

John's question to the people of his day was not just can you see it? But can you be it? The resistance to empire comes from within—and it means the chains the world uses will not last, the cords of love that bind us to love, will.

Thanks be to God.