

Our Life with the Bible: The Book of Revelation Confuses Us¹

A sermon preached by Zac Klassen, October 15, 2023

Good morning. The horrific events that unfolded in Israel and Palestine on October 7th and that ushered in a new, brutal war there, have left us all with a loss for words. What can one say in the face of the dark events we continue to hear about every day? It is hard for us to even begin to imagine what innocent people living in Israel and Palestine must be going through. Last week I reached out to some of my Jewish friends to offer words of support in the early moments of this most recent conflict – many Jews living in Canada and of course elsewhere in the world have been in a steady state of shock, many of them traumatized by the events that have been unfolding and living in a constant state of unease with the knowledge that their own loved ones living in Israel have been and continue to be at risk of experiencing violence, and knowing that anti-Jewish violence and sentiments know no borders. It is hard for us to know what our Jewish neighbours are going through and we must pray for them and for all Israelis.

It is equally hard for us to know what our Palestinian neighbours are going through. The despicable actions of the ruling terrorist organization Hamas have drawn so many innocents in Palestine into a war they didn't ask for, with consequences that they do not deserve. Many Palestinians were already living in a situation of injustice prior to the war and now this just piles on more harm to be felt for generations. As they watch from afar, our Palestinian neighbours here in Canada are in shock too, living in a constant state of grief and unease with the knowledge that

¹ Several points made regarding Revelation in this sermon gained their inspiration from Jeremy Duncan's *Upside-Down Apocalypse: Grounding Revelation in the Gospel of Peace* (Herald Press, 2022). Another popular level book that is recommended for a counter-reading to the 'popular,' end-times reading of Revelation is Barbara Rossing's *The Rapture Exposed: The Message of Hope in the Book of Revelation* (Basic Books, 2005). For a more scholarly work, see John J. Collins' chapter "Apocalypticism in Early Christianity," in *The Apocalyptic Imagination* (Grand Rapid, MI: Eerdmans, 2016): 321-351.

their own loved ones living in Gaza and beyond have been and continue to be at risk of experiencing violence, and knowing that anti-Palestinian violence and Islamophobic sentiments also know no borders. It is hard for us to know what our Palestinian neighbours are going through and we must pray for them and for all the Palestinians fleeing for their lives right now.

In the face of these earthly wars and their devastating consequences, what can we, as Christ-followers, do as we gather for worship today, beyond lamenting and praying – beyond crying out: “Lord Have Mercy!” Certainly, we must persevere in prayer for our world. What else can we do? Maybe we should do nothing else this morning – maybe our worship series should take a break. Who, after all, wants to hear a sermon about the book of Revelation with everything that is going on?.... But maybe, just maybe, this strange text from another era and another world has something to say to us in *this particular* moment of time; maybe, just maybe, God has a word for us Christians in this long-ago vision, a word that we must hear in this time of global turmoil; a word that shakes us to the core, yes, but a word that also draws us near to the heart of God and gives us an imagination capable of seeing the Kingdom of God brought near in Jesus in the midst our war-torn world.

So, can I be so bold as to invite us to take that leap this morning – to open our minds with boldness, believing that our imaginations, our way of seeing the world and its future, can be shaped by Jesus, the Lamb of God, and His Kingdom? Can I be so bold as to invite us to open our minds as we ask how the ‘confusing’ text of “Revelation,” a text recounting a wild vision of a 1st century Jewish Christ believer, might be scripture for us today? Can I be so bold as to suggest this text might portray an alternative future for our world – a future in which a Kingdom of Priests called by Jesus, serve God with boldness until the nations no longer rage against each other but are rather drawn together and healed by God? In the present context, such an

alternative future may seem like a pipe dream; it may seem simply like an idealistic fantasy, especially in the face of the horrors of our world. And yet, we must not lose heart and we must remember that all good and honourable revolutions in world history, revolutions of justice and efforts to forge peace, have required great and radical imaginations; imaginations that break out of cycles of violence, imaginations shaped by visions that no longer depict violence as redemptive, that no longer seek peace through conquest, and that no longer establish kingdoms on the destruction of peoples and their lands. I want to suggest, this morning, that as confusing as it is, the book of Revelation just might give us resources to shape our imaginations in such a way as to draw us together into God's *good* future, a future of healing.

But let's be honest: this is not the popular way of reading Revelation. And so, before the book of Revelation can begin to function this way for us, we need to spend a few brief minutes dispensing with some common or popular ways of thinking about John's vision recounted there. All too often, readings of Revelation are *not* life-giving *or* life-affirming and indeed do not lend themselves to a vision of a restored future for the nations. There is one popular reading in particular that I want to address this morning. Many people read Revelation as if it were a book of predictions about the end of the world or a script for the so-called 'end-times' in which there will be destruction for most of the earth through epic global wars. Unsurprisingly, this latest war in Israel has been new fuel for the latest predictions to show up all over the internet – I wouldn't be surprised (even if I would be appalled) to hear that there were already books heading to the press about how these latest events are lining right up with scripture and all our present-day national conflicts. In this way of reading Revelation, the so-called 'predictions' are often combined with ideas about a larger than life, mythic, almost Hollywood like figure called the 'anti-Christ' who wreck's havoc on the earth but not before a dramatic rapture takes believers

away to heaven to escape it all. Most of us here today who have been alive for thirty years or longer or who have had the misfortune to get caught up in the “Left Behind” novels craze of the late 90s, will have likely heard these types of ideas at some point. And many of us, I suspect, have lived through many so called “expiration” dates for the end-times given by different modern day prophets; in every new era of history, it seems, we have reason to think this must really be the definitive end this time.

In light of this popular-level approach to Revelation, I think it would come as a surprise to many to find out that the book of Revelation doesn’t really address any of this. Revelation doesn’t offer predictions – at least not in the sense of giving precise details of later world events. And so, despite the TV evangelists who may say otherwise, Revelation does not speak in code about modern-day Russia or the US or Iran or even modern-day Israel and Palestine. Furthermore, there is no mention of a rapture of believers in Revelation, and neither is there mention of a singular figure named the anti-Christ who will take over at the end of days before finally being defeated. Maybe you all know this – and that’s great if that’s the case – you’ve had good teachers. But as we begin to consider the meaning of John’s vision together, it is good to acknowledge first what it is not about so that we can enter with fresh eyes to have our imaginations shaped by what it is about. On that note, to get a sense for what Revelation is about, it is very important first to know the original context in which Revelation was written.

Scholars think that somewhere between 81 and 96CE, John was exiled to the Greek Island of Patmos and had a vision while there and wrote it down. Now who was John and why was he exiled? John was likely a Jewish believer in Jesus who lived during the reign of the Roman Emperor Domitian. Tradition has it that John’s exile came as a result of some anti-Christian persecution that Emperor Domitian executed over various communities across Asia

Minor. John's vision begins with an instruction that he is to send his vision to seven churches across Asia minor to admonish and encourage them in their discipleship. Some of the Christian communities, like the church in Smyrna, were facing persecution, others, such as "lukewarm" Laodicea, were being left untouched and were feeling quite happy and content in their privilege. For John, no matter what context you found yourself in in the church, be it persecution or privilege, you had a calling to follow Christ, although we do well to note that he had harsh words for the privileged Christians he wrote to who took their privilege for granted and lived complacent lives.

Up until now, this style of letter writing might all sound pretty normal, we hear similar admonitions in Paul's letters, for example. And if the rest of Revelation was simply filled with more down-to-earth ethical admonitions to churches like "forgive each other" and "love one another as Christ loved you," and persevere in times of suffering, and "seek justice," we wouldn't need to be very confused, would we? But, almost from the very start, we know that John's vision is going to be wilder and more 'out-there' than that – already at the very start of this letter, we read a text that is so full of strange imagery and metaphors that we are forced to see that John is going to couch his ethical admonitions within a much more dramatic depiction of the world: a world depicted in turmoil, but also a world turned upside down by God for its transformation. John goes on to talk all about how Jesus' life, death, and resurrection has totally changed the world and changed the direction of history, but he does so through using a literary style that we are simply not familiar with – it is a strange text for us 21 century readers to understand. John's hearers and readers, however, would have largely understood what he was up to and been familiar with the imagery he invokes, but until we place ourselves in the first century, and do our own learning around biblical metaphors that were operating at the time, we

will have a really hard time hearing what John was saying. We will be left with questions like this one asked by Jeremy Duncan in his book *Upside Down Apocalypse*:

How does a book about a red dragon, a lamb covered with blood, and a beast with seven horns and ten crowns speak to the divine love we see so clearly in Jesus?"
- Duncan, *Upside Down Apocalypse*, p.30

Now, in this sermon I cannot possibly cover every metaphor and image listed in Revelation and neither do you want me to. Neither can I account for the many complex interpretive issues and tensions that come up when reading an ancient text like this. For those interested in going deeper, I would certainly recommend an entry-level text like Jeremy Duncan's called *Upside Down Apocalypse: Grounding Revelation in the Gospel of Peace*. What I can do this morning, however, is review some of the key literary sources John appeals to in Revelation as well as some of the central images John uses, and by doing so *hopefully* give you a starting point for hearing in Revelation a word from God that is life-affirming, a word that can shape our imaginations for the healing of the nations and indeed of all creation.

First, and briefly, a comment about some of John's sources for the images he appeals to more broadly in Revelation. While we won't be able to cover these in detail, hopefully these comments will help you see how the imagery in John's vision was influenced by at least two primary sources: his knowledge of scripture (the Old Testament) and his social context (Imperial Rome). First, much of the imagery John appeals to throughout Revelation has its source in the prophetic literature of the Hebrew Scriptures. The Hebrew prophets had as their aim to tell the truth about the world as God saw it and declare God's word regarding the fate of Israel and the nations *if* they stuck to their present course. But prophets also offered hope because they believed repentance and a different way was possible for Israel and the nations, and so they often depicted

a *possible* redeemed future if God's people would only walk in God's ways. In many ways, you might say that Revelation is "prophecy" in just this sense.

Now, prophets like Isaiah, Ezekiel, Daniel, and Zechariah all use images and metaphors in their texts to describe different visions of their near future: they invoke images that depict God's heavenly court where important decisions about the future are made, and they invoke images that are meant to describe different geo-political realities that were current in their own times. Some examples might help: take Isaiah, for example, who describes a future when all tears will be wiped away, or Ezekiel who talks about four living creatures in heaven, or Daniel who refers to four beasts coming out of the sea, or Zechariah who talks about four horsemen. These images all reappear in Revelation. Being a student of prophetic literature, hundreds of years later, John simply took these images and "remixed" them to make them applicable to his own time. Daniel's image of the beast became a focal point for John's depiction of all the nasty, imperial powers exercised by Rome in his own day. We must remember, then, that John wasn't using symbolism to predict future kingdoms associated with these beasts, but was referring to *the* contemporary Imperial power most prominent in his day. While we can draw our own parallels to our own violent imperial powers today and call them beasts in their own right, we need not think that John knew about our modern-day nations. For John, Rome is in view.

And that brings me to the second key source for Revelation, namely the context of Roman imperialism as it existed through its Emperors. Throughout the book of Revelation, there is mention made of a "beast rising out of the sea with seven heads" and one of those beasts being associated with the number 666. Here scholars note that the ancient practice of adding up the number values of the letters in a word to form a single number is at play here (kids often still play with this style of writing secret code messages). And, wouldn't you know, if you perform

this practice on 666 in Greek, you get Kaiser or ‘Caesar’ Nerone. So, for John, one of the great enemies of God in Revelation is the Emperor, who sets himself up as “lord and god.” However, for John as terrible and as brutal as the Roman Emperors may have been, they were really just pawns for the power of evil itself, which lures us into glorifying and honoring imperial might and power (cf. Rev. 13:11-18) over divine love. And honor and glorify such might people did – as we continue to do today. Why do we do it? Because these powers exercise so much influence – they have such might and wealth and power and in the short term, they have the capacity to dramatically alter the course of history. This fact was often attested to on statues of emperors through the symbol of the scroll. You will see in this image of Domitian, that he is depicted holding a scroll – an image of the power and authority to declare the direction for history.

Now, I know this already has been a lot to take in this morning, but with this broader context in mind – the context of prophecy and of Roman imperialism, let’s turn now to consider what I think is *the* central image of Revelation – the image that has the potential to shape our imaginations in such a way as to draw us together into God’s good future, a future of healing. The image I am referring to, you can already guess, is the lamb that was slain. In our passage for today, we start off in a setting that is akin to Rome’s imperial court – except this time the court is actually the heavenly court and all the court elders and the representatives of creation are looking around to see if anyone will be worthy to open the scroll – that image again of the course of history. Who will set history on its redemptive course? Anybody? Certainly, with all the violence and evil in the world, history seems to be hurtling to destruction unless someone appears who will be worthy enough to open the scroll. John starts weeping. It appears no one will be worthy. But suddenly, an Elder steps in to comfort John saying “Do not weep. See the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has conquered, so that he can open the scroll...” Here hopes are set

high now – we are looking for a ferocious lion – strong and mighty, like a Roman Emperor but only stronger yet. But what does John find instead as he frantically looks around: the lion of Judah is a Lamb standing as if it had been slaughtered. This lamb, in fact, was a victim of Rome, politically executed for making trouble for the Roman Empire. But this lamb *lives* and is the only one who is worthy to open the scroll to set the course for history and to lead a kingdom of priests from every tribe and nation. This lamb is Jesus.

This is a drastic turn-around, a total flipping of the Imperial script, a mockery, really, of Empire and its attempt to set the course of history through violence and spreading fear. An executed Jewish Rabbi who taught love of God and neighbour and who stood up to power through non-violent resistance and love is the one worthy to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing – all things that were traditionally ascribed to the Emperor. Note that this is also a drastic flipping of the popular end-times script and its tendency revel in the destruction of the world while mapping out an escape hatch for Christians. The lamb who was slain does not whisk a select few out of the fray beyond the world but rather calls forth servants from every nation to follow him courageously in the world.

With this image of the lamb in mind, I hope you can begin to see hear a word from God in Revelation, a word of prophetic protest against Imperial power. Worthy is the slain lamb, not the Emperor. Revelation is also an alternative vision of the redemptive power that is rooted in Divine Suffering Love. The course of history, says Revelation, is not *finally* determined by those with the most might and weaponry, but by that one who refuses violence as the means to victory, even at great cost. Again, in our present climate, these words might sound just like abstract idealism – like all too easy to say when you are not the ones being bombed or killed. And yet, we do well to remember that John’s words are not cheap words – just as Jesus’ words were not cheap

words. We do well to remember that imaginations that change the world always cost something – they don't come without struggle and pain. We do well to remember that Jesus, and John, and all martyrs of the faith had to pay for their imaginations and their words with their lives. In the face of the pain of our world, would we be so willing to lay down our lives in love instead of choosing violence to secure our own? This is a hard question to consider, but consider it we must as we seek to be a kingdom of priests following a slain lamb.

I hope that in our present day global climate, that this morning's brief entry-way into the context of Revelation has helped us hear a life affirming word from God; a word that shapes our imaginations for an alternative future for our world – a future in which a Kingdom of Priests called by Jesus serve God with boldness until the nations no longer rage against each other but are rather drawn together and healed by God. So might I be so bold as to suggest that we dwell often on John's depiction of Jesus as the Lamb who was slain yet is the one who is worthy to open the scroll of history, the one who is worthy to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing! For this lamb is the one who boldly proclaimed good news to the poor, release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, freedom for the oppressed, and the year of the Lord's favor on a world subject to the curse of war and violence. This Jesus is no violent emperor, but as Christians we must believe that that makes him no less powerful. This Jesus is no vengeful servant of God, but that makes his words no less biting and powerful to tear down strongholds. May we dwell often with this image of Jesus, the lamb that was slain. I happen to know that a number of you singing in Menno Singers and in the Messiah mass choir will be afforded time to dwell on this image as the climax of the Messiah performance, when "Worthy is the Lamb" is sung out in great praise to God and to the lamb, from whose thrones come the river of the water of life, a river accompanied on its side by the

tree of life...and the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations. May it be so, Lord Jesus. May you bring healing to our warring nations, may you protect the little lambs of this world, the powerless that die at the hands of the powerful, and may you bring healing to our hearts, to make us courageous as we follow you through lives of justice and peace. AMEN.