

Stephen H. Applegate

Fourth Sunday of Easter

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St. Paul's Episcopal Church, Cleveland Heights

+In the Name of God: who was, and is, and is to come. Amen

“They will hunger no more, and thirst no more; the sun will not strike them, nor any scorching heat; 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.” Revelation 7: 16-17

Most weeks I wouldn't give you two cents for the Book of Revelation. The book, from which our second lesson is taken this morning, always seems to me to be more trouble than it's worth. Some branches of the Christian faith focus on it almost exclusively – pointing to its strange prophecies and visions as if they were veiled accounts of what's going on in our world and what's going to happen in the not-too-distant future.

Whenever people look at the Book of Revelation this way, they always claim that they are living in the last days of the earth. They spend a lot of time attempting to read current events through the lens of one of the strange images on the book, or they try to identify the Beast – that figure of evil that appears so prominently in Revelation.

When I traveled for business many years ago, I sometimes drove late into the night to get from one appointment to the next. The nighttime AM dial was full of stations with preachers expounding on some passage from the Book of Revelation and drawing connections from the passage to Black Helicopters, the United Nations, and the New World Order.

So, let me say right up front and as clearly as I can – the Revelation to John is not about Russia and China, the European Union, the selling tags on Procter and Gamble products, the Rapture, the saving of the few and the damnation of the many, the need for the state of Israel to exist in order to ensure that when Jesus returns to Jerusalem there will be some Jews who will either choose to become Christians or will join all unbelieving Christians and others – the list includes Roman Catholics, Methodists, Presbyterians, Disciples of Christ, Mormons, all Muslims, Buddhists, Sikhs, etc., etc., some three billion or so of the world's people – in the lake of fire while the chosen 144,000 will sing loud hymns of praise while they watch their fellow humans writhe in agony for all eternity. If you think I'm making this up, you have not listened to certain Texas preachers expound the meaning of the Book of Revelation for you.

Revelation is instead about one thing: God wins, and the powers of evil lose.

What God revealed to the John as he lived in his cave exiled on the island of Patmos is that everyone – all people – will live together, Jews and Christians and Muslims, and all others. Even the formerly horrid kings of the earth will find their place there. So it will be that those late-night, AM radio, Black Helicopter preachers are going to be more than a little surprised to see who their neighbors are when the kingdom comes! There won't be any sun or moon because all the light anyone needs will come from the brightness of God and the Lamb. Sorrow, and crying, and pain will be no more, and God will wipe away the tears from all eyes. In other words, the world will eventually be what God had in mind for it when God first created it: a place of order, structure, and design – a place ruled by love.

Like every bit of scripture, the Book of Revelation was written at a specific time in history, in a particular place, with a precise community in mind. All the books of the Bible have this in common. They come out of certain “settings in life,” particular sociological and political settings – or as the technical German phrase has it, their “*sitz im leben*.” This is just as true of books that we can easily read and understand, like one of the Gospels, as it is of the books we have to wrestle to interpret, like Revelation. Any piece of a scripture passage's meaning or message is mostly limited to the distinct situation that some community was facing at the time.

Having registered that fact, let me also affirm that human lives and experiences have universal qualities to them. We share many of the same joys and dreams, many of the same worries and fears as our forebears did. And it's when the Book of Revelation speaks to what we human beings have in common that I find I'm most grateful to have its message that God wins and the powers of evil lose.

In order to understand the message of this morning's passage, let me offer a brief history lesson courtesy of my high school Latin teacher, Mrs. DeReus. She was the one who taught me the declension of nouns and the conjugation of verbs. Once we had achieved a certain level of proficiency, Mrs. DeReus had us read Julius Caesar's Gallic Wars. Then we moved on to Cicero, a contemporary of Caesar, who opposed Caesar's rise to power and claims to executive privilege and who advocated for the preservation of the Roman Republic – a democracy.

It was during this period in Roman history that a significant political shift took place. Until Julius Caesar rose to power, Rome was governed by the Senate – a group of 300-500 male members of the gentry who oversaw the governing of both the city and the provinces that stretched from the Mediterranean to the British Isles.

However, the Republic was – like all democracies – fragile. Caesar's military successes and shrewd maneuvers to amass power caused a shift from democratic rule to rule by an Emperor.

Shakespeare reminded us that Senators assassinated Caesar on the Ides of March. His adopted son, Octavius, assumed power and was granted the title Augustus in 27 B.C. making him the ruler and monarchical head of state. Augustus saw to it that Julius Caesar was deified after his death; he wasn't considered divine in his lifetime. However, subsequent emperors – Augustus, Caligula, Claudius, Nero, and others – began to be seen as divine during their lifetimes, and an imperial cult developed – one in which the worship of the emperor was tied to the loyalty of subjects to the Roman Empire. And this is where early Christians began to run afoul of the state.

Christians were persecuted for many different reasons. Widely criticized after the Great Fire of Rome in 64 AD, the Emperor Nero tried to divert attention away from his own failings by providing the Christians as an easy scapegoat. But as the imperial cult developed further and as sacrifices to the Emperor-God were increasingly required, Christians faced a stark choice: either perform the mandatory sacrifices to the Emperor or suffer the consequences.

Christians who stayed true to their faith were persecuted, tortured, mutilated, raped, and massacred throughout the Roman Empire, beginning in the 1st century AD and ending in the 4th century. And as Christianity spread through the empire, it came into ideological conflict with the imperial cult. Making sacrifices to the deified emperors was abhorrent to Christians since their beliefs prohibited idolatry. Not making sacrifices to the emperors amounted to treason.

Let me invite you to imagine an imperial court. The emperor is surrounded by courtiers who wield influence so long as they maintain his favor and not a moment longer. The last time he heard the word “no,” or was told, “I’m sorry, sir, you can’t”? was a long time ago – in a previous administration. He is surrounded by prized loyalists who will do what they’re told and enforcers who will ensure that others fall in line as well. The levers of power are carefully rigged. The legal system is used to punish anyone who opposes the administration, and laws from hundreds of years ago are dredged up to legitimize banishing enemies to exile – to places like Patmos. If any of what I’ve just said sounds familiar, it shouldn’t come as a complete surprise.

Some of the words used to describe the emperor’s court are lifted directly from Ezra Klein’s Op Ed that appeared in last Sunday’s NY Times.

You see, the author of the Book of Revelation is writing to a community of people who have experienced tragedy and loss at the hands of the Empire and who continue to experience these things on an ongoing basis. They have been subject to attacks by a government bent on hurting them. They have lost people they love, and they are looking at an uncertain future. These things are mostly happening because they refuse to worship the Emperor. There is no separation of church and state.

The Emperor has become the embodiment of the state and has usurped powers formerly held by the Senate and the Courts.

Given their situation, the people for whom the Book of Revelation was written have every reason to wonder where God is. They have every reason to ask whether God cares. They have every reason to doubt that good will triumph over evil. And what the author of Revelation offers his community is a vision of what lies behind the harshness of current events. People's troubles will not go on forever.

Their ordeals will come to an end. And all the heartless government-sponsored cruelty and death-dealing decision-making will be swallowed up by life.

This, of course, is the great theme of the Easter season. No, it's more than that. It's the great proclamation of the Christian faith – the Good News on which Christians have based their hope from that very first Easter Day until this morning.

So let me end with this, and may it find a place deep in our souls: God has not forgotten us. Not in times of fear, not in the face of oppression, not in moments when darkness seems to gain the upper hand. The Book of Revelation – strange, unsettling, and often misused – is at its core, a defiant declaration of hope.

It declares that the cruelty of empires will not have the final word. That suffering is not eternal. That power built on fear and lies will crumble. And that the Lamb—Christ himself—does not lead with a sword, but with mercy, with healing, with living water that quenches every thirst and soothes every wound.

As Christians we proclaim: God wins. Love wins. Justice wins. The Lamb who was slain is on the throne, and in the end, every tear will be wiped away. Let us live as though we believe it – daring to hope, daring to love, daring to resist evil with gentleness and truth. Because the day is coming – and even now is – when God will make all things new.

Amen.