

Sermon

May 26, 2019

Easter 6C

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Acts 16.9-15

Psalm 67

Revelation 21.10, 22-22.5

John 14.23-29

If you've never read the book of Revelation, you'd best prepare. Perhaps throwing the *Lord of the Rings* series, the "Harry Potter" series, and a bit of Narnia into a blender might give you a "flavor" of Revelation. And, even if you've only dipped into it, you've probably run across passages with strangely-imagined characters, epic battles, throne room scenes, lakes of fire, or cities of transparent gold (whatever THAT might be!). There's a classic struggle between good and evil, and some suspense about how that conflict might turn out. And, like all of those book series, there is a (relatively) happy ending — that is, good ultimately wins

But Revelation isn't a fantasy novel, as fantastic as it might seem. Indeed, it doesn't really fit into any single *genre* of literature, biblical or otherwise. The underlying theme of good winning over evil, and the "fantastic beasts" would seem to point to "apocalyptic literature", that is, a form of writing that uses striking imagery to "reveal" something positive about the nature of reality and the future. But, it is also set up as a letter, or series of letters, to the Seven Churches of Asia (1.4 - 3.22). Complicating the whole thing is that it also falls into the *genre* of "prophetic literature", as the first verse of the book makes clear: "The revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show his servants what must soon take place; he made it known by sending his angel to his servant John".

"Apocalyptic literature", however, is probably the best description of the book; indeed the book's alternate title is "The Apocalypse". And one of the main things that sets apocalyptic literature apart from fantasy is its function of offering hope to its readers/hearers in their current context. That is, the assumption behind apocalyptic is that there will be a better future. That is so clear in last week's reading, as well as the one we just heard:

[From last week] "Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. . . . [And, then today,] The city has no need of sun or moon to shine on it, for the glory of

God is its light, and its lamp is the Lamb. The nations will walk by its light, and the kings of the earth will bring their glory into it. Its gates will never be shut by day—and there will be no night there. People will bring into it the glory and the honor of the nations” (21.1-2, 22-26).

Of course, the “better future” of the vision also presupposes that the present is problematic. That certainly was the case for the early Christians who received this apocalyptic letter from John of Patmos. While there is some debate over when John had his vision, most scholars situate it during the reign, and persecutions, of the Emperor Domitian, that is, at the end of the first century. He demanded his subjects to render to him the the title of “Our Lord and God”. Christians were unwilling to do so. They instantly became *personae non grata* and began to suffer the consequences. Hope was dim for them; John’s vision was meant to give them hope.

The stories that he told set the earthly struggles of those early Christians in the context of heavenly parallels. The creatures and beasts were stand-ins for Roman rulers. The faithful armies, led by angels, met those of the foe. And while not everyone survived, at the end, Satan is defeated, and there arose a “new heavens and new earth”. The Church was in turmoil. One has to imagine that those early Christians wanted relief; they wanted to know that it was all worth it. John’s vision, in all its fantastic glory, was meant to provide hope, to provide comfort.

But that hope was not static. From the earliest parts of the book, John commends the Seven Churches of Asia for what he sees as their strengths. But he also holds them accountable for how they have not fulfilled their missions. Whether it was becoming lukewarm in their faith—as with the church at Laodicea (3.14) or tolerating false apostles, as was the case at Ephesus (2. 2), or becoming extremely permissive and immoral, as was the case at Pergamum and Thyatira (2.15, 19)—whatever the reason, these recipients of an ultimately hopeful and comforting letter must understand that their faith still demands mission activity. Even in the new heavens and new earth, our reading from this morning asserts that the people will bring into it the glory and and the honor of the nations (21.26)—that is mission!

Comfort and mission . . . or . . . hope and mission. Both are intertwined in the Revelation to John, as well as in our other lessons this morning. You have to assume that Jesus’ disciples were feeling pretty hopeless they sensed Jesus’

public career was heading towards its end. He at least seemed to recognize it, and his discussions with his followers were getting more and more confusing. Last week we heard him tell his disciples, “Children, I am with you for only a short time longer. You are going to look high and low for me. But just as I told the Jews, I’m telling you: ‘Where I go, you are not able to come’ (John 13.33). And this week we hear him telling them that he was soon leaving, and going to his Father. But Jesus was not insensitive to their concern. He knew that they would be anxious and so he promised them that the “Comforter” or “Advocate”—both translations of the Greek word, *Paraklete*—that *paraklete* would come to be with them, “teach [them] everything, and remind [them] of all that [Jesus had] said to them”. Jesus seems to imply that, in their moment of stress, anxiety, and uncertainty, there is hope—there will be a future . . . a future, however, that would continue to demand witness from Jesus’ followers to the wider world.

Hope in the midst of uncertainty stands behind the reading from Acts as well. Immediately preceding the passage we heard this morning, Luke wrote, “Paul and his companions] went through the region of Phrygia and Galatia, having been forbidden by the Holy Spirit to speak the word in Asia. When they had come opposite Mysia, they attempted to go into Bithynia, but the Spirit of Jesus did not allow them; so, passing by Mysia, they went down to Troas” (16.6-8). “Forbidden by the Holy Spirit” and “the Spirit of Jesus didn’t allow them”—it sounds as though the mission to the Gentiles was going nowhere fast in Asia Minor. Yet, in that time of doubt and uncertainty, Paul had a vision that in which a “man from Macedonia pleaded with him” (16.9) to cross from Asia Minor into Europe. He followed that lead and found his way to Philippi and, there, was successful in convincing Lydia that her search for God was to find success in Jesus.

Aside from these two stories from John and Acts being about hope in transition, or trouble, there is another, I think, significant feature, and one which I’ve not often remembered. In my comments about Jesus’ promise that the Father would send the “Comforter” or “Advocate”, I mentioned that the Greek word that is translated there is *Paraklete* (not “parakeet”, which my auto-correct keeps suggesting), which is derived from another Greek word, *parakaleo*. That word has multiple connotations, including “calling to one’s side, summoning, inviting, calling for aid, encouraging, and comforting”. We, of course, in English (or any other language) must pick one of those options. Most frequently translators have

found “Comforter” and “Advocate” to fill the bill. But that seems to limit our view.

The reading from Acts also uses the word *parakaleo*, although, in translation, we probably miss it. In Paul’s vision of the future, of a new hope in a new land, the man “pleaded” (*parakalon*) with Paul to come to Macedonia. Same root word, but a different nuance. As the story plays out, we might assume that Paul’s missionary visit to Europe would be an aid, a comfort, and an encouragement to those like Lydia, who, in today’s terms might be considered a “seeker”, in places like Phillipi - a cosmopolitan city with many attractions but few promises of hope beyond those an economy might provide a prosperous business-woman.

Our reading from John’s Gospel this morning introduces us to the *Paraklete*, a character that appears numerous times in the Gospel and the Johannine letters. It is no surprise that we hear it this morning, a few Sundays away from Pentecost, our celebration of the coming of that “Comforter”, which the Church has identified with the Holy Spirit. But our celebration of Pentecost isn’t simply a celebration of being comforted. That Holy Spirit, that *Paraklete*, that fell on the apostles that day drove them to mission. The Comforter pleaded with them to spread the good news . . . and they did. In those days following Jesus ascension—the disciples’ final earthly “loss” of their leader—they had to be upset and anxious once again. And, then, the tongues of fire fell . . . and the rest, as they say, is history.

Our readings this morning remind us that the same Spirit of God that is our Comfort, promising hope in difficult time, that Spirit that stands with us, advocating for us, before the throne of God is the same Spirit that summons us to mission. We, like Paul, are called into our cosmopolitan city, our Phillipi, to reach out to seekers like Lydia with a message of fulfillment. This-coming week we should receive the results of the Congregational Vitality Survey; it will tell us about our strengths. Our challenge then, as a congregation and as individuals, is to be open to the Spirit, to take into account what we do well, to listen to our “man from Macedonia” summoning us to mission, and to respond with hope.

Amen.