

May 11, 2025
The Fourth Sunday of Easter
Year C
Revelation 7:19-17
Emmanuel Lutheran Church, Norwood, MA
Pastor Amanda L. Warner

The End

I'm not really sure why I decided to do it, but a long time ago, when I was a pastor at Prince of Peace, I decided to lead a Bible Study on the book of Revelation.

I'm not sure what my motivation was. It could have been that I was curious about the book myself, wanting to get to know it better, and, if you've ever taught something you know that one of the best ways to get to know a subject well is to prepare to teach it.

I was probably curious about Revelation because it is a book of the Bible that contains and caused a lot of drama over the centuries. Martin Luther wasn't a fan of the book of Revelation. If he could have, he would have left it out of the Bible entirely, calling it "not theologically adequate." I beg to disagree with him on that point. Other Protestant reformers weren't big fans of Revelation either, I think perhaps giving it short shrift.

Revelation comes up a lot in popular culture. Movies and television shows with end times themes or cult leaders tend to make free use of certain parts of Revelation. Actual cult leaders tend to make free use of certain parts of Revelation, always taken out of context. Many people I know are overwhelmed by or afraid of the book of Revelation.

Maybe that's why I decided to teach it—because of the fear that it creates in people. I wanted to know if that fear was justified.

I know for sure that part of the reason I wanted to teach on Revelation was because I want people to stop calling it Revelations. It's Revelation, not Revelations. And I'm not just being nit-picky, that distinction is actually theologically important,

because, despite what cult leaders and pop culture do to it, Revelation one thing, one revelation. You can't truly get the message of Revelation if you don't take it as a whole. It's not many Revelations. It's many visions that lead to one revelation: one thing being revealed.

And what does Revelation reveal? God's ultimate victory, which is a victory of mercy, of praise, of worship of glory, of the blessing and restoration of creation, and of the healing of the nations. Ultimately Revelation is a vision of the restored Eden and the healed city, where God once again, dwells with God's people, where there is no temple, because God's presence is everywhere, giving God's blessing, God's light to all who dwell there.

Any interpretation of Revelation that does not land us there, in the new Jerusalem, the city of peace, come down from heaven, with its river and its trees and with its comfort and its hope and its purity is a mistaken interpretation of Revelation.

I've taught my Revelation Bible Study three times now, once at Prince of Peace and twice at Emmanuel—run concurrently with daytime and evening sessions, so different people and difference conversations. And, while I don't know if this was my motivation for starting the Bible Study so long ago at Prince of Peace I do know that one of the things I realized as I prepared my Revelation bible study, as I read about it and learned about it myself, was that the society that Revelation was written to and it was written around A.D. 95 or 96 was in crisis.

The Empire was troubled by wars. The army of the Empire had been defeated by the Parthians on their eastern border in A.D. 62, a shocking defeat for the mightiest military force of its time. The shock of that defeat still reverberated in the Roman Empire, even 30 years later.

Rebellions in Gaul, Germania, and Judea had troubled the Pax Romana. While they had been violently and definitively quashed, still, they disrupted the

myth of Rome being welcomed and benevolent conquerors and caused unrest in other occupied territories.

The reign of the insane emperor, Nero, had rocked the empire and caused political instability that lasted for years.

There were famines in the early 90s and natural disasters like earthquakes and the eruption of Mt. Vesuvius in 79, which destroyed the city of Pompeii and covered the surrounding area in a cloud of darkness.

You can see this kind of imagery in Revelation, the shaking of the earth, deep darkness, warfare and violence and insane and immoral rulers fill its pages. And it seems the end is coming.

For Christians living at the time that Revelation was written, they were often seen as scapegoats for the troubles of the empire, because they refused to participate in the cult of Emperor worship, which was considered to be essential to the stability of the empire. Why couldn't these people just say, "Caesar is Lord" like everybody else, and then just go ahead and worship whoever else they wanted to worship?

They were considered to be unpatriotic because of their refusal to participate in the emperor and also because their leader, the one they worshiped as a God, Jesus, had been crucified as a traitor.

They were accused of being cannibals because of their communion practices.

They were accused of being sexually immoral, because of their gatherings for worship and fellowship meals were called agape meals, love feasts between people who called themselves brothers and sisters. Of course, we know that the potluck and communion meals of the early church were not incestuous orgies, but it's always easy to accuse people, whose lives and beliefs you know nothing about, of immoral practices when you need someone to blame for your society's troubles.

For the people of the Roman empire things that had once seemed firm, steady, and reliable, had become shaky and unstable. Life had become unpredictable.

When I realized that, back when I first started studying and teaching Revelation, it occurred to me that we, as a culture, had and still have a lot in common with the people who lived at the time that Revelation was written.

- Terrorism, domestic and foreign in this country and around the world.
- Wars on terror that have dominated most of this century, thus far.
- The Covid-19 pandemic and the response to it, including the backlash to that response.
- Natural disasters raging in this country and around the world.
- The scapegoating of minority groups in this country and around the world.

I can't say that it happens every week, but it is not an infrequent thing for someone to wonder in my presence if we aren't living in the end times, like the times described in the book of Revelation.

Because whether or not they've read the book of Revelation—they've heard snippets about it.

The four horsemen of the apocalypse that come with the opening of the seven seals:

- War
- Famine
- Plague
- And death

Earthquakes and the falling of the sun and moon and stars.

Bowls of wrath, pouring out

- sores
- seas turned to blood

- rivers of blood, a scorching sun
- Darkness
- war.

These are the kinds of things many people think of when they think of Revelation. And it is frightening, terrifying, in fact, to draw parallels between what we find in Revelation and what we experience in our time.

But you know what the time I've spent with Revelation reading it, studying it, teaching it has taught me? That's it's not a book about destruction. Yes, the destruction is there, and should be taken seriously, although perhaps not like a literal playbook. Revelation is loaded with symbolic meaning and biblical imagery.

What I've learned is that life, not death, is the story of Revelation, what we're supposed to glean, to learn from Revelation.

And at the heart of it is worship, the presence of God with God's people, and hope.

Scenes of worship, like the one reading we have from Revelation for today and the one we read last Sunday, keep coming up in Revelation. In the midst of the troubles, the destruction, that is a theme of Revelation, we keep hearing good news. We keep hearing the songs of angels and saints and martyrs, the songs of the faithful. We see them healed and whole and praising God. We see them in the presence of the Lamb who was slain and the one seated on the throne. We see them praising the might and the mercy of God. And we hear their good news that,

the one who is seated on the throne will shelter them.

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 7:15b-17)

Because in Revelation, when it seems that the worst is about to happen, when it seems that the end has come and that the end is going to be nothing but destruction, instead, we see heaven. We see God, gathered with all of creation, which has been restored and renewed. We see a vision of hope and are invited to sing the songs of angels:

Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom
and thanksgiving and honor
and power and might
be to our God forever and ever! Amen. (Revelation 7:12)

And that is what we are invited to cling to when things get tough. That is what we are invited to participate in when we gather for worship, in a chilly sanctuary on a Sunday morning, maybe tired, maybe overwhelmed, maybe worried and wondering where this world is headed, in a culture in which many people seem to have decided that brunch or sports or sleep or the newspaper or the yard or the golf course, or the laundry is more important, more essential, more productive.

Instead of all of that we are invited to lay down our worries, lay down our fears, lay down our hatreds and our prejudices, lay down even our productivity, at the throne of the Lamb, who is also our shepherd, and sing our praises to the one who has already won the victory.

Revelation doesn't invite us to wonder who wins in the end. It tells us for sure. The victory belongs to God. We are invited to see it and celebrate it now, for it is our promised future. And the promised future for all creation.

- Salvation

- Beauty
- Peace
- Joy
- Healing
- And God, with us.

That is the hope, that is the promise in which we are invited to live.

Blessing and glory and wisdom

and thanksgiving and honor

and power and might

be to our God forever and ever! Amen. (Revelation 7:12)