

Lamb Power

A sermon delivered by the Rev. Roger Scott Powers
at St. Andrew Presbyterian Church in Albuquerque,
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Revelation 7:9-17

Over the next four weeks, we're going to be looking at the Book of Revelation. Please note that the name of this last book of the New Testament is "Revelation," not "Revelations." There's no "s" at the end. The book gets its name from the first word of the original Greek text: *apokalypsis*, which means "unveiling," "disclosure," or "revelation." So, from the Greek *apokalypsis*, the book is also known as "The Apocalypse of John."

The author gives his name as John, and says that the book is his record of visions that he received from Jesus Christ while living on the small Greek island of Patmos in the Aegean Sea. According to most biblical historians, John was forced to live in exile on Patmos as a result of anti-Christian persecution under the Roman emperor Domitian, who reigned from 81 to 96 CE.

For centuries, Christian tradition held that John of Patmos was the apostle John, as well as the author of the Gospel of John and the three letters attributed to him in the New Testament. But John of Patmos doesn't identify himself as one of Jesus' twelve apostles or the author of John's Gospel or letters. He refers to himself simply as "your brother and companion in the suffering and kingdom and patient endurance that are ours in Jesus." (1:9) Many biblical scholars today—as well as some early Church Fathers—hold that John of Patmos was a different person from John the Apostle and was not the author of John's Gospel or letters.

The Book of Revelation is written for seven churches that were located in Asia Minor, what is now modern-day Turkey: the

churches in Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea. In the late first century, these churches in Asia Minor were suffering persecution from Rome. And the memory of the First Jewish-Roman War was still fresh in people's minds. The Jewish insurgency against the oppressive Roman occupation of Israel-Palestine went on for four years until Jerusalem fell in the year 70 CE. The Temple was destroyed, most of Jerusalem was left in ruins, and as many as one million Jews lost their lives.

This was the context in which Revelation was written: a time of great turmoil, a time of oppression and violence, death and destruction. It's no wonder that the book has so much horrific imagery in it.

Elaine Pagels, an American historian of religion and professor at Princeton University, calls Revelation "the strangest book in the Bible, and the most controversial. Instead of stories and moral teaching, it offers only visions—dreams and nightmares, the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse, earthquakes, plagues and war." She goes on to point out that the "Book of Revelation appeals not only to fear and desires for vengeance but also to hope."

That is the real point of the book, to offer hope to a people who experiencing terrible suffering at the hands of the Roman Empire, or at the hands of any authoritarian regime for that matter. That hope is found in Jesus, who is depicted in Revelation as the Lamb of God.

"John wrote the book of Revelation in order to lift up the vision of Jesus as a counter-message to the empire's theology of Victory. . . ." So writes Barbara Rossing, professor of New Testament at the Lutheran School of Theology in Chicago, in her book *The Rapture Exposed: The Message of Hope in the Book of Revelation*. "The book of Revelation," she continues, "deals with the opposition between two kinds of power in our lives and in our world: the power of oppressive systems of domination versus the power of God's Lamb to bring life and healing. This is the starting point of

Revelation's theology, the point on which John stakes his strongest claim. In place of the vision of military Victory and power offered by Rome—a vision still offered by imperial powers today—Revelation offers the amazing vision of the victory of God's slain Lamb, Jesus."

We see this in today's lectionary passage from Revelation. It describes a vision of "a great multitude . . . from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne [of God] and before the Lamb [of God], robed in white [a symbol of heavenly existence or worthiness], with palm branches [symbols of peace and victory] in their hands." They cry out: "Salvation belongs to our God who is seated on the throne, and to the Lamb!" This outcry runs completely counter to the Roman Empire's propaganda that salvation—understood as peace, stability, and protection from danger—had its source in Rome. In contrast to the *pax romana*, which was imposed by the brutal violence of military might, Revelation lifts up the alternative of "Lamb Power," what Barbara Rossing describes as the power of "Jesus' self-giving love," "the power of nonviolent resistance and courage in opposition to injustice," "the power of solidarity and forgiveness."

Revelation asserts that one cannot be loyal to both the values of Rome and the values of Christ, the Lamb of God. To live out the gospel of Christ, to uphold the values of the Lamb, will necessarily bring one into conflict with the power and values of empire. This conflict is referred to in Revelation as "the great ordeal" or "the great tribulation."

We learn that the great multitude standing before the throne and the Lamb in John's vision are those that have been through the great ordeal and have come out on the other side. As I read John's description of this great ordeal, I could not help but think of what so many asylum seekers have endured as they have made their way to the U.S. They have experienced hunger and thirst. They have been exposed to the scorching heat of the sun with no

shelter to protect them. They have experienced such pain and suffering that they have been brought to tears.

But now that “they are before the throne of God, . . . 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.”

So, they are celebrating, worshiping God day and night, bringing God their thanks and praise. They join their voices in song: “Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our God forever and ever! Amen.”

Poet and essayist Kathleen Norris also sees Revelation as a book of hope. “As I listened to the Book of Revelation over several weeks,” she writes, “I found in it a healing vision, a journey through the heart of pain and despair, and into hope. And I was consistently reminded of how subtly this vision works on us. It asserts that the evils of this world are not incurable, that injustice does not have the last word. And that can be terrifying or consoling, depending on your point of view, your place within the world.”

Indeed, the Book of Revelation may be more meaningful to people who are suffering from and struggling against oppression than to those who are not. Allan Boesak, a clergyman in the South African Dutch Reformed Church who was also a leader in the anti-apartheid movement, wrote a commentary on Revelation entitled *Comfort and Protest: Reflections on the Apocalypse of John of Patmos*. In it he notes how the Book of Revelation spoke to the oppressed people in South Africa who were struggling against apartheid. For them it was protest literature.

He describes the situation in South Africa at the height of the struggle: “More and more the government is requiring Christians

to obey it without question. . . . Preachers of the gospel were imprisoned in unprecedented numbers. Church services were banned, and police attacked worshippers with tear gas, dogs, and guns. . . . We go to jail by the thousands. It is clear that the government has declared war on our defenseless people as heavily armed police and army troops besiege the black townships and invade our communities, schools, and homes. . . .”

“For people who face situations like these,” Boesak writes, “the Apocalypse is an exciting, inspiring, and marvelous book. It is a book which, in our sociopolitical situation, is a constant call for conversion and change. . . .”

“The clue to understanding the Apocalypse as protest literature—and at the same time the answer to the question as to why so few scholars understand it in this way—lies, I think, in Revelation 1:9: “I John, your brother, who share with you in Jesus the tribulation and the kingdom and the patient endurance [of suffering].” This is the key. Those who do not know this suffering through oppression, who do not struggle together with God’s people for the sake of the gospel, and who do not feel in their own bodies the meaning of oppression and the freedom and joy of fighting against it shall have grave difficulty understanding this letter from Patmos. . . . [The key] is understanding the comfort and the protest, the prophetic, hopeful song of victory that the church already sings, even in the midst of suffering and fear, destruction, and death.”

For Christians in Asia Minor suffering persecution at the hands of the Roman Empire, for black and colored South Africans struggling against apartheid, for asylum seekers fleeing poverty, violence, and government-sponsored repression, the book of Revelation offers a vision of hope that “the evils of this world are not incurable, that injustice does not have the last word,” that Lamb Power, the power of Jesus’ self-giving love, of nonviolent resistance and courage, of solidarity and forgiveness, will ultimately prevail. May it be so. Amen.