

May 15 16, 2010

Rev. 21:10, 22 – 22:5, 22:12 – 14, 16 – 17, 20 – 21

John 17:20 – 26

Have we lost hope?

Our two readings today are both by authors named John. But that's about all they have in common. While they shared a passionate faith in Jesus as the Christ and in God as Creator, there's not much more that they shared. Their lives couldn't have been more different. Their understandings of Jesus' role in their future couldn't have been more different. The gospel of John is a poetic and flowery. It speaks to its readers in calm, secure tones about the presence of the risen Christ with them, right then and there. The Revelation of John is intense, full of vivid, strange, and frantic images; the evilness of the present times and Jesus' world changing return.

The reading from the gospel of John we get. Not much need for explanation there. Jesus was urging the disciples to stick together. John was sending a message to his readers not to let the divisions between Jewish followers of Jesus tear them apart. But Revelation is a different story. That John was in exile on the Greek island of Patmos. He used symbolic language, like a code, so that they could safely criticize Rome and its leaders. He wasn't trying to describe the end of the world, or to predict the future. He was describing the reality around him. His understanding of the resurrection was different from gospel John's. Instead of seeing the resurrection as Jesus' presence on earth already, like Gospel John did, Revelation John was looking forward to Jesus' return again, to bring the end to Roman rule of Jews and Christians. The images of John's Revelation are fantastic, bizarre, and the plot seems nonsensical. We're so far from those days and times, it's difficult to decode the symbolism and find meaning. But today's reading from the end of Revelation is very clear. It's full of hope and good news.

If you're like most people, our exposure to the book of Revelation has been shrouded in mystery, and most often, from theological perspectives not our own. We sure heard a lot about Revelation at the end of 1999 with all the Y2K hysteria. And if you're over 50 you remember the Hal Lindsey book, The Late Great Planet Earth. And these days, you may have read one or more of the Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins Left Behind series. And there's the really frightening movie I saw several times as a child going to a friend's Vacation Bible School, "A Thief in the Night." It was about the scary times of the rapture. The whole idea of the rapture is nowhere to

be found in Revelation. It was an 1830 vision reported by a 15 year old girl in Scotland. A revival preacher heard her story of Jesus' cataclysmic return, his harsh judgment of sinners, and he kept talking about it. Then a British book editor, Cyrus Scofield, who just happened to publish the most widely read version of the Bible in the late 19th and early to mid 20th century, the Scofield Bible, repeated the story of her vision in his footnotes on Revelation.

The early Jewish and Gentile followers of Jesus didn't quite know what to do with Revelation. It barely made it into the Bible. There was lots of arguing at the council of Jamnia in the year 90 when the gospels and letters and other writings were given the thumbs up or down for inclusion in the Hebrew Bible or New Testament. Not until the 10th and 11th centuries did Revelation begin to be included in Greek manuscripts of the New Testament. And our reformed ancestor, Martin Luther, only reluctantly included it in his translation of the Bible from Latin to German. Reformers Zwingli and Calvin ignored it when dealing with the New Testament.

We don't know if John received his revelation when he was asleep or awake, but what we read in Revelation is a lot like dreams. In John of Patmos' real world, Caesar wanted to be called Lord, and Rome was worried about Jesus' followers not paying homage to Caesar, so they were persecuted. This book is simply what was revealed to John of Patmos. Like the last half of the book of Daniel, Revelation is apocalyptic literature. The general theme of apocalyptic literature is that the present day suffers under the rule of evil powers that will soon be overthrown and destroyed by God, and a time of blessedness for those who are faithful will begin. The transition from the evil age to the new age is a time of intense suffering. Apocalyptic literature always includes vivid imagery, ferocious beasts, and symbolic numbers. It's clear that John of Patmos knew the Hebrew Bible very well. He doesn't quote verses, but as much as 65% of the verses in Revelation come from Old Testament passages. The New Testament Revelation is a letter addressed to seven churches, so people would have listened to it read in worship. They would have understood John's coded political and religious commentary. They knew that Babylon and the beast were Rome and Caesar. In those tough days the message of the revelation John received was that even though it doesn't look like it now, Christ is Lord and Caesar and Rome are not. And God will do something soon to overthrow Rome. Until then, John's revelation tells Jesus' followers to persevere, to be confident in their faith. Even though it sounds weird and scary to us, it was a clear message of hope to them. Especially the vision of a new Jerusalem Revelation John showed us today.

So even as different as gospel John and Revelation John are, their conclusion is the same; Christ is risen, God is still God, and keep your faith strong. John of Patmos' turned out to be wrong. God didn't defeat Rome. Rome ruled for 300 more years. And in that time one of its emperors became Christian, an idea so surreal that even John of Patmos would never have dreamed of it. But in his last chapters we can share his vision. A vision of no separation between the sacred and secular, of God being in and through everything. Of Jerusalem without a temple – an amazing thought because the temple had been the center of their religion for centuries. John's vision sees everyone welcome in that city and no one taking advantage of another, no one having power over another, holding them in bondage. It's so much like Isaiah's banquet images. Remember those? Everyone sitting together on top of a mountain, at feast tables, and there be no need for diplomatic seating arrangements. People whose countries hadn't gotten along for ages, could sit next to each other peacefully. Ahmadinejad and Netanyahu sharing pictures of their children.

It's easy to see how that vision of a new Jerusalem would have been good news to those living in occupied Jerusalem. Even John's coded language about the earth burning, the sea turning to blood, and the sun and moon being dark. John's honest and courageous indictment of the unjust empire of Rome must have been refreshing and liberating to his listeners. That awful oppression forced them to hope for a new future, to see the vision God wants us all to see; that God's will be done on earth. I worry about us. Living in relative comfort. Sure, we wish desperately for healing of loved ones who are so very sick. God wants that too. But our readings today are on a global scale, not personal. What do we hope for that's of any global consequence? This may sound backwards, but as tough as suffering is, it sure gives your faith a better work-out than comfort does. It's too easy for us to ignore other people's suffering, the injustices around us, and in far corners of the world. I worry that we have lost hope. Our comfort makes it too easy to lose our passion for the world that Jesus asked us to help with; feeding the hungry, healing the sick, welcoming the outcast, rejecting violence. Sure, some of us do a good bit of that. But as a church, national and local, we've lost the passion of Revelation John. The powerful vision and commitment for what this world should look like. There's so much we could be doing with our intellectual, financial, and community resources, our safety, our faith. I do worry that we don't know how to hope on a biblical scale. What could we accomplish as followers of Jesus, if we put Revelation John's vision of a better world, of the

rapture in reverse, heaven come down to earth, together with gospel John's vision, Jesus' vision that all may be one?

For those of us who have lived through scary times in our own lives, we've got to admire Revelation John's ability to weave such a hopeful vision of the future. I don't know if I could do that. Suffering and uncertainty make me much more likely to respond with fear and paralysis, not lovely visions of light and beauty. That's why I find the popular interpretation of Revelation as a violent rapture troubling. It affects your whole outlook on life. It asks us to live in fear, to deny the power of the risen Christ among us here and now. It takes our focus away from the work Jesus asked us over and over to do –feed the hungry, live together in peace, bring justice to the world's inequality. The Jesus I know, the God I serve, ask me to live this amazing life in a spirit of joy and love and gratitude, not fear.

What a great combination we have in these readings this last week of the Easter season when we celebrate how Jesus' resurrection changed the world. Revelation John's passion that our faith can keep us strong and faithful in the tough times, never losing sight of how God wants this world to run; and gospel John's peaceful call to unity in the long haul. John's Revelation of the New Jerusalem is a great way for the Bible to end. That vision speaks of the reunion of God with humankind. John's closing vision overcomes the separation from God that began in the beginning of the Bible, in the garden of Eden. It is difficult to imagine a more powerful ending to the Bible. Very different visions have brought us to the same place. Giving thanks for the God who created everything, and the Christ who lives among us. May gospel John's passion for unity and revelation John's passion for a just society give us hope, give us a vision of the rapture in reverse, so that God's will be done on earth, for all God's people.