

We near the end of the pastoral letter of encouragement we call Revelation. Remember that the title in Greek is "Apocalypse" with means a disclosing, a revealing, a pulling back of the curtain to see what's behind it – what's been there all along even if not seen. Today's selection straddles 2 portions of the book which set up another contrast, perversion of parody between the City of Evil (Rome or Babylon) and the City of God. The Fall of Babylon, the city of empire and beastly resistance to God, is told in 17:1-18:24. Then begins the final section in which God redeems the Holy City and all of Creation in 19:1-22:21. Don't forget that this letter, filled with this epic cosmic battle is one of concrete encouragement, written to the church of Asia Minor during the consolidation of Emperor Worship in the Roman World, which resulted in the persecution of Christians.

The struggle for those who want to persevere is not against a specific beast, or person, but rather against the forces of chaos and death which are at work behind visible things, in the foundation of the Roman Empire, in the currency of the international marketplace. To present that vision John uses evocative symbolic language torn from throughout the Bible to explain that evil is doomed because it's already been defeated by God's act in Christ. It's "not a prediction of future events that we must decode, but the revelation of the nature of God's final victory.." (M. Eugene Boring)

the great whore | a woman:: later we read that the woman "is the great city that rules over the kings of the earth." (17:18). Representing the city (or forces opposed to the will of God) as a woman was a common prophetic Jewish literary device. Jerusalem was presented as a virgin (Isaiah 37:22; Lamentations 2:13); and a faithful wife and mother (Isaiah 66); and when disobedient as an unfaithful wife (Ezekiel 16). Nineveh and Tyre (enemy cities) were presented as harlots and whores (Nahum 3:1-7; Isaiah 23:7). Even John is tempted by her beauty, power and potential.

many waters:: In 17:15 we're told that "The waters.., where the whore is seated, are peoples and multitudes and nations and languages." This language points to the biblical symbolism for the city of Babylon the inhabitants of which the prophet Jeremiah called those "who live by mighty waters, rich in treasures." Babylon was a common image for Rome: the greatest of cities, ruling the nations, setting the tone for the global marketplace, seeking to be adored and worshipped in the place of God. The many waters is the home of the beast Leviathan (the personification of chaos and death). It's the foundation for all resistance to the good will of God. Babylon destroyed Jerusalem in 586 BCE just as Rome would do so in 66-70CE.

So he carried me away in the spirit into a wilderness, : The language reminds us of Jesus before he begins his teaching ministry: "And [after his baptism] the Spirit immediately drove [Jesus] out into the wilderness." Mark 1:12; Luke 4:1; Matthew 4:1. In Greek and Hebrew the same word means both desert and wilderness. It's the opposite of the city, the place where you must rely on God for sustenance, repeatedly the place prophets retreated to in order to receive vision, hear God, and see the world as God sees it.

SCRIPTURES FOR

SUNDAY 5.20.2018

Revelation 17:1-6(14)

New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)

¹ Then one of the seven angels who had the seven bowls came and said to me, "Come, I will show you the judgment of **the great whore** who is seated on *many waters*, ² with whom the kings of the earth have committed fornication, and with the wine of whose fornication the inhabitants of the earth have become drunk." ³ *So he carried me away in the spirit into a wilderness*, and I saw **a woman** sitting on a scarlet **BEAST** that was full of blasphemous names, and it had seven heads and ten horns. ⁴ **The woman** was clothed in purple and scarlet, and adorned with gold and jewels and pearls, holding in her hand a golden cup full of abominations and the impurities of her fornication; ⁵ and *on her forehead* was written a name, a mystery: "Babylon the great, mother of whores and of earth's abominations." ⁶ *And I saw* that **the woman** was drunk with the blood of the saints and the blood of the witnesses to Jesus.

When I saw her, I was greatly amazed. ⁷ But the angel said to me, "Why are you so amazed? I will tell you the mystery of the **woman**, and of the beast with seven heads and ten horns that carries her. ⁸ The beast that you saw was, and is not, and is about to ascend from the bottomless pit and go to destruction. And the inhabitants of the earth, whose

names have not been written in the book of life from the foundation of the world, will be amazed when they see the beast, because *it was and is not and is to come*.

⁹ “THIS CALLS FOR A MIND THAT HAS WISDOM: the seven heads are **seven mountains** on which the woman is seated; also, they are **seven kings**,¹⁰ of whom five have fallen, one is living, and the other has not yet come; and when he comes, he must remain only a little while.¹¹ As for the beast that was and is not, it is an eighth but it belongs to the seven, and it goes to destruction.¹² And the ten horns that you saw are ten kings who have not yet received a kingdom, but they are to receive authority as kings for one hour, together with the beast.¹³ These are united in yielding their power and authority to the beast;¹⁴ they will make war on the Lamb, and the Lamb will conquer them, for he is Lord of lords and King of kings, and those with him are called and chosen and faithful.”

Revelation 19:1-[11-16]-21

New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)

¹ After this I heard what seemed to be the loud voice of a *great multitude in heaven*, saying,

“Hallelujah!

Salvation and glory and power to our God,

² for his judgments are true and just;

he has judged **the great whore**

who corrupted the earth with her fornication, and he has avenged on her the blood of his servants.”

³ Once more they said,

“Hallelujah!

The smoke goes up from her forever and ever.”

⁴ And the twenty-four elders and the four living creatures fell down and worshiped God who is seated on the throne, saying,

“Amen. Hallelujah!”

on her forehead:: We’ve seen this repeatedly...first God marks or “seals” those who are faithful on their foreheads in 7:3-4; later the beast does a perverted parody of the same sign of community and belonging with the sign of the beast in 13:16-17.

a scarlet **BEAST**:: the beast is the Leviathan risen from the sea first encountered in 13:1 “And I saw a beast rising out of the sea, having ten horns and seven heads; and on its horns were ten diadems, and on its heads were blasphemous names.” It evokes several layers of meaning: the power of chaos held in check at creation; the beastly empires compared to the good kingdom of the Son of Man in Daniel 7:1-14 as well as the persecuting imperial power related to emperor worship in the time in which John writes.

it was and is not and is to come:: This again is a perversion of parody of the pure and true name and nature of God revealed in 1:8 “I am the Alpha and the Omega,” says the Lord God, who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty.” God is also praised without end using this same formula by the four heavenly creatures in 4:8 ““Holy, holy, holy, the Lord God the Almighty, who was and is and is to come.”

THIS CALLS FOR A MIND THAT HAS WISDOM:: At the end of this vision we’re (along with John) invited to seek wisdom, in order to see what truly is, to discern, decide and choose wisely; to recognize who is knowing at the door, inviting us to relationship, collaboration and commitment: And Jesus said, “²⁰ Listen! I am standing at the door, knocking; if you hear my voice and open the door, I will come in to you and eat with you, and you with me.²¹ To the one who conquers I will give a place with me on my throne, just as I myself conquered and sat down with my Father on his throne.²² Let anyone who has an ear listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches.” Rev 3:20-22

seven mountains ... seven kings:: This language most likely evokes the 7 legendary hills upon which the city of Rome was built, and refers to the first seven emperors of Rome, the last of whom reigned for very short periods in the wake of the suicide of Nero.

a great multitude in heaven:: this language evokes the same sort of massive worship scene in heaven described in Revelation 4 and 5. H John has three vision of the heavenly realm, a common way to divide up the letter: 1:9-20; 4:1-5:14; 19:1-11. In the vision there is a repetition of the 24 elders, 4 living creatures worshiping God in the throne room, casting down their crowns, and burning incense.

The smoke goes up:: Here we might expect the smoke to be that of burning Babylon, but instead it's of incense in worship. Just as in 5:8 "When he had taken the scroll, the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders fell before the Lamb, each holding a harp and golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints." And 8:3-4 "Another angel with a golden censer came and stood at the altar; he was given a great quantity of incense to offer with the prayers of all the saints on the golden altar that is before the throne. And the smoke of the incense, with the prayers of the saints, rose before God from the hand of the angel."

like the sound of many waters:: This same language evokes the power of God in Ezekiel 43:2 "And there, the glory of the God of Israel was coming from the east; the sound was *like the sound of mighty waters*; and the earth shone with his glory." and Revelation 1:15 "his feet were like burnished bronze, refined as in a furnace, and his voice was *like the sound of many waters*."

the marriage of the Lamb :: the image of union with God's will and the establishment of God's kingdom/reign is repeatedly described as a wedding between God and Humanity, with Jesus as the bridegroom and the Church as the bride. See Hosea 2:14-20; Isaiah 62:5 "For as a young man marries a young woman, so shall your builder marry you, and as the bridegroom rejoices over the bride, so shall your God rejoice over you."; Jeremiah 2:2 "Go and proclaim in the hearing of Jerusalem, Thus says the Lord: I remember the devotion of your youth, your love as a bride, how you followed me in the wilderness, in a land not sown."; Mark 2:19; John 3:29 Jesus said "He who has the bride is the bridegroom. The friend of the bridegroom, who stands and hears him, rejoices greatly at the bridegroom's voice. For this reason my joy has been fulfilled."; 2 Corinthians 11:2 "I [Paul] feel a divine jealousy for you, for I promised you in marriage to one husband, to present you as a chaste virgin to Christ."; Ephesians 5:25-32.

Its rider :: throughout the section John takes the traditional vision of the victory of God as a horrific battle of destruction, slaughter and desecration and subverts it, twisting it, infusing it with new content: the triumphant king is the One who was sacrificed and slaughtered on the cross, not the one who slaughters with a sword. Isaiah 63:1-6 presents the image of God who comes to avenge the wrongs suffered by his people, coming as a bloodthirsty, violent warrior-king

⁵ And from the throne came a voice saying,
"Praise our God,
all you his servants,
and all who fear him,
small and great."

⁶ *Then I heard* what seemed to be the voice of a great multitude, *like the sound of many waters* and like the sound of mighty thunderpeals, crying out,

"Hallelujah!
For the Lord our God
the Almighty reigns.

⁷ Let us rejoice and exult
and give him the glory,
for *the marriage of the Lamb* has come,
and his bride has made herself ready;

⁸ to her it has been granted to be clothed
with fine linen, bright and pure" —

[for the fine linen is the righteous deeds of the saints.]

⁹ And the angel said to me, "Write this: Blessed are those who are invited to *the marriage supper of the Lamb*." And he said to me, "These are true words of God." ¹⁰ Then I fell down at his feet to worship him, but he said to me, "You must not do that! I am a fellow servant with you and your comrades who hold the testimony of Jesus. Worship God! For the testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy."

¹¹ *Then I saw* heaven opened, and there was a white horse! **Its rider** is called Faithful and True, and in righteousness he judges and makes war. ¹² His eyes are like a flame of fire, and on his head are *many diadems*; and he has a NAME INSCRIBED that no one knows but himself. ¹³ He is clothed in a robe dipped in blood, and his name is called **The Word of God**. ¹⁴ And the armies of heaven, wearing fine linen, white and pure, were following him

on white horses. ¹⁵ From his mouth comes a sharp sword with which to strike down the nations, and he will rule them with a *rod of iron*; he will *tread the wine press of the fury of the wrath of God* the Almighty. ¹⁶ On his robe and on his thigh he has a NAME INSCRIBED, “KING OF KINGS AND LORD OF LORDS.”

¹⁷ Then I saw an angel standing in the sun, and with a loud voice he called to all the birds that fly in midheaven, “Come, gather for the great supper of God, ¹⁸ to eat the flesh of kings, the flesh of captains, the flesh of the mighty, the flesh of horses and their riders—flesh of all, both free and slave, both small and great.” ¹⁹ Then I saw the beast and the kings of the earth with their armies gathered to make war against the rider on the horse and against his army. ²⁰ And the beast was captured, and with it the false prophet who had performed in its presence the signs by which he deceived those who had received the mark of the beast and those who worshiped its image. These two were thrown alive into the lake of fire that burns with sulfur. ²¹ And the rest were killed by the sword of the rider on the horse, the sword that came from his mouth; and all the birds were gorged with their flesh.

Questions for the practice of Examen & Contemplation

- What jumps out at you in this reading? Why?
- John is writing this pastoral letter to encourage, challenge and edifying Christians in Asia Minor facing the pressure to participate in Emperor Worship. What message is here for those facing such a dilemma that might entail religious, political or economic persecution? How do you apply it to you/us, today?
- Revelation treats the question of the presence of evil in a good world as an epic, cosmic battle between the forces of God and those of chaos and death. The war ends as the anti-God forces destroy themselves. How and what wisdom do you need to discern & resist such bankrupt forces in your life?

- “1 Who is this that comes from Edom, from Bozrah in garments stained crimson? Who is this so splendidly robed, marching in his great might?”
 “It is I [God] announcing vindication, mighty to save.”
² “Why are your robes red, and your garments like theirs who tread the wine press?”
³ “I have trodden the wine press alone, and from the peoples no one was with me; I trod them in my anger and trampled them in my wrath; their juice spattered on my garments, and stained all my robes.
⁴ For the day of vengeance was in my heart, and the year for my redeeming work had come.
⁵ I looked, but there was no helper; I stared, but there was no one to sustain me; so my own arm brought me victory, and my wrath sustained me.
⁶ I trampled down peoples in my anger, I crushed them in my wrath, and I poured out their lifeblood on the earth.”

Here instead the warrior-Messiah-King is bathed in his own blood, from his self-sacrifice on the cross. He has accomplished the promise of Psalm 2:9 to overcome and “break the [nations & forces opposing God] with a rod of iron” without violence.

The Word of God:: John begins his gospel with identifying Jesus with this same expression as the Living Word (LOGOS) of God. Hebrews 4:12-13 portrays the word of God as “living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing until it divides soul from spirit, joints from marrow; it is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart. And before him no creature is hidden, but all are naked and laid bare to the eyes of the one to whom we must render an account.”

NAME INSCRIBED:: In the ancient world knowing the name of someone was associated with having power over that person. Here a name is written on the thigh: a place of power (it’s the strongest muscle or associated with the procreative power of the genitals. In the First Testament oaths are often taken by putting one’s hand on the thigh of the one to whom the promise is made. See Genesis 24:2; 47:29) and also in v. 12 Christ – the white rider – has a name that no one knows, that no person can overpower and name.