

The glimpse of the heavenly adoration of God and the Lamb on the throne, transitions to a new sight: the breaking of the seals and the sealing of the people. Now comes the destruction, darkness and division over interpretation. It's essential for us to remember that John is writing to the churches undergoing hardship and deepening persecution in Asia Minor. They need encouragement to persevere, to resist. They need to know that they're not alone, that their church(es) is part of the larger Church. They are not alone. John writes them this pastoral letter of encouragement to spell out an ethic of resistance, a theology of perseverance. It's not a secret code to decipher, but a word to strengthen, embolden, to invite to renewed hope in the new thing that God is doing even in the wake of the death of Christ. As John opened our vision of creation to include a glimpse of the heavenly court of worship, here he reminds us that the destroying power of evil in the world is not limited to particular people or humanity in general. We're called to sign the new song of 5:9, not only in the future heavenly realm, but here and now in the thick and thin of life, when it's hard to live for Jesus. The Lamb hopes for the conversion of the nations. It's not about resentment, but a theology of justice. (Fiorenza)

the four living creatures: These are the same creatures from chapters 4 and 5, whom the ancients believed reigned over the four cardinal directions, the winds of the cosmos.

The Horses & Riders: Scholars see this pictorial-language stemming from the vision related in Zachariah 1:8-15 & 6:1-8. The first rider reassembles the Parthian soldiers (the only ones to ride horseback and fight with bows) who were among the few to resist and defeat the Roman Armies (53 BCE, 35 BCE, & 62 CE). The second rider also is related to war, victory through violence, and possibly civil war. The third rider is related to hyper-inflation and famine (which adversely impact the poor). Wheat and barley (basic foodstuffs) are sold for 8 & 16 times the normal price. The final rider is death (θάνατος) [Thanatos] in Greek (like Thanos in the Avengers!) was the usual Greek word to translate the Hebrew word for pestilence or plague. The pale horse seems to personify the hordes of the Underworld (Hades). No sovereign power can stop the malefic forces of war, violence, famine, plague and death. This quartet of forces is often cited together in Biblical literature: Jeremiah 14:12; 15:2; 21:7; 24:10; 29:17-18; 42:17; 43:11 & Ezekiel 14:21.

Come! :: We see the repetition of this imperative. The word ἐρχομαι [erchomai]: to move, to come; is used throughout Revelation, most often referring to the Coming of Christ. Some examples include: "Grace to you and peace from *him who is and who was and who is to come*, and from the seven spirits who are before his throne.." Rev 1:4. "Look! *He is coming with the clouds*; every eye will see him, even those who pierced him; and on his account all the tribes of the earth will wail. So it is to be. Amen. "I am the Alpha and the Omega," says the Lord God, *who is and who was and who is to come*, the Almighty." Revelation 1:7-8 "I am coming soon; hold fast to what you have, so that no one may seize your crown." 3:11 "Listen! I am standing at the door, knocking; if you hear my

SCRIPTURES FOR

SUNDAY 5.6.2018

Revelation 6:1-8 & 7:9-17

New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)

¹ **Then** I saw the Lamb open one of the seven seals, and I heard one of the four living creatures call out, as with a voice of thunder, "**Come!**" ² I looked, and there was a white horse! Its *rider had a bow*; a crown was given to him, and he came out conquering and to conquer.

³ When he opened the second seal, I heard the second living creature call out, "**Come!**" ⁴ And out came another horse, bright red; its rider was permitted to take peace from the earth, so that people would slaughter one another; and he was given a great sword.

⁵ When he opened the third seal, I heard the third living creature call out, "**Come!**" I looked, and there was a black horse! Its rider held a pair of scales in his hand, ⁶ and I heard what seemed to be a voice in the midst of the four living creatures saying, "A quart of wheat for a day's pay, and three quarts of barley for a day's pay, but do not damage the olive oil and the wine!"

⁷ When he opened the fourth seal, I heard the voice of the fourth living creature call out, "**Come!**" ⁸ I looked and there was a pale green horse! Its rider's name was *Death*, and Hades followed with him; they were given authority over a fourth of the earth, to kill with sword, famine, and pestilence, and by the wild animals of the earth.

⁹ When he opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slaughtered for the word of God and for the testimony they had given; ¹⁰ they cried out with a loud voice, “Sovereign Lord, holy and true, how long will it be before you judge and avenge our blood on the inhabitants of the earth?” ¹¹ They were each given **a white robe** and told to rest a little longer, until the number would be complete both of their fellow servants and of their brothers and sisters, who were soon to be killed as they themselves had been killed.

¹² When he opened the sixth seal, I looked, and there came a great earthquake; the sun became black as sackcloth, the full moon became like blood, ¹³ and the stars of the sky fell to the earth as the fig tree drops its winter fruit when shaken by a gale. ¹⁴ The sky vanished like a scroll rolling itself up, and every mountain and island was removed from its place. ¹⁵ Then the kings of the earth and the magnates and the generals and the rich and the powerful, and everyone, slave and free, hid in the caves and among the rocks of the mountains, ¹⁶ calling to the mountains and rocks, “Fall on us and hide us from the face of the one seated on the throne and from the wrath of the Lamb; ¹⁷ for **THE GREAT DAY** of their wrath has come, and **who is able to stand?**”

Revelation 7

¹After this I saw four angels standing at the four corners of the earth, holding back the four winds of the earth so that no wind could blow on earth or sea or against any tree. ² I saw another angel ascending from the rising of the sun, having the seal of the living God, and he called with a loud voice to the four angels who had been given power to damage earth and sea, ³ saying, “Do not damage the earth or the sea or the trees, until we have marked the servants of our God with a seal on their foreheads.”

voice and open the door, I will come in to you and eat with you, and you with me.” Revelation 3:20

the seventh seal:: We expect this to be opened in chapter 7, as it's the logical progression. But John changes things up. Instead of opening seals, God seals those who have stood with the Divine Truth.

THE GREAT DAY:: or “The Day of the Lord” which is often used in the First Testament to name the day in which God intervenes to finish creation, creating something new beyond the creation of the seven days of sabbath. Mystics see that as breaking out of the sabbath seven-day cycle to the eighth day: the sabbath of sabbaths.

It's a time of judgement, God's justice as we see in **Amos 5:18-24**

¹⁸ Alas for you who desire the day of the Lord!

Why do you want the day of the Lord?

It is darkness, not light; ¹⁹ as if someone fled from a lion, and was met by a bear; or went into the house and rested a hand against the wall, and was bitten by a snake. ²⁰ Is not the day of the Lord darkness, not light, and gloom with no brightness in it? ²¹ I hate, I despise your festivals, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies. ²² Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them; and the offerings of well-being of your fatted animals I will not look upon. ²³ Take away from me the noise of your songs; I will not listen to the melody of your harps. ²⁴ But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream. See also Ezekiel 9:1-11.

It points to the apocalypse of Jesus recounted in Mark 13 and its parallels in Matthew 24; Luke 21.

Mark 13:24-27

²⁴ “But **IN THOSE DAYS**, after that suffering, the sun will be darkened,

and the moon will not give its light,

²⁵ and the stars will be falling from heaven, and the powers in the heavens will be shaken.

²⁶ Then they will see ‘the Son of Man coming in clouds’ with great power and glory. ²⁷ Then he will send out the angels, and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven.

who is able to stand? :: This question is answered in the end of chapter 7. Those who are able to stand are those who take shelter under the tent (or in the Tabernacle booth) or Jehovah. It's God alone in the end who is sovereign. No other power can save, protect, redeem or protect in the face of the violent, divisive depths of reality.

one hundred forty-four thousand:: 144,000 is a symbolically rich number. It's 12 x 12 x 100,000. 12 is the number of Israelite tribes, representing all of Israel. There were 12 disciples, the community of Jesus, the "new Israel". 100,000 is a huge number, the largest imaginable (like googleplex for us today). It's represents fulfillment, completion. Does 144,000 represent Israel?; the new Israel (the church)?; both together? Is it the number of Martyrs? The number of Christians who remain faithful? Is it representative of all of the people of creation? In all of those cases, it seems to represent the "Whole People of God."

palm branches:: The image of palm branches is one of military victory. It appears throughout the Bible as well as in extra-Biblical-texts. Some examples of the intersection between this image, past victories (the celebration of Tabernacles "or the Festival of Booths"), the Triumphal Entry of Jesus in Jerusalem and chants of God's glory include:

John 12:13

¹³ So they took branches of palm trees and went out to meet [Jesus], shouting, "Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord— the King of Israel!"

1 Maccabees 13:51

⁵¹ On the twenty-third day of the second month, in the one hundred seventy-first year, the Jews entered [Jerusalem] with praise and palm branches, and with harps and cymbals and stringed instruments, and with hymns and songs, because a great enemy had been crushed and removed from Israel.

Leviticus 23:40-43

⁴⁰ On the first day [of the Festival of Booths (or Tabernacles)] you shall take the fruit of majestic trees, branches of palm trees, boughs of leafy trees, and willows of the brook; and you shall rejoice before the Lord your God for seven days. ⁴¹ You shall keep it as a festival to the Lord seven days in the year; you shall keep it in the seventh month as a statute forever throughout your generations. ⁴² You shall live in booths for seven days; all that are citizens in Israel shall live in booths, ⁴³ so that your generations may know that I made the people of Israel live in booths when I brought them out of the land of Egypt: I am the Lord your God.

Zachariah 14:16

¹⁶ Then [, after the eschatological still-to-come day of great panic from the LORD on all the peoples that wage war against Jerusalem] all who survive of the nations that have come against Jerusalem shall go up year after year to worship the King, the Lord of hosts, and to keep the festival of booths.

Psalms 118:25-29

²⁵ Save us, we beseech you, O Lord! O Lord, we beseech you, give us success! ²⁶ Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord. We bless you from the house of the Lord. ²⁷ The Lord is God, and he has given us light. Bind the festal procession with branches, up to the horns of the altar. ²⁸ You are my God, and I will give thanks to you; you are my God, I will extol you. ²⁹ O give thanks to the Lord, for he is good, for his steadfast love endures forever.

⁴ And I heard the number of those who were sealed, **one hundred forty-four thousand**, sealed out of every tribe of the people of Israel:

⁵ From the tribe of Judah twelve thousand sealed, from the tribe of Reuben twelve thousand, from the tribe of Gad twelve thousand,

⁶ from the tribe of Asher twelve thousand, from the tribe of Naphtali twelve thousand, from the tribe of Manasseh twelve thousand,

⁷ from the tribe of Simeon twelve thousand, from the tribe of Levi twelve thousand,

from the tribe of Issachar twelve thousand,

⁸ from the tribe of Zebulun twelve thousand, from the tribe of Joseph twelve thousand, from the tribe of Benjamin twelve thousand sealed.

⁹ After this I looked, and there was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, **standing before the throne** and before the Lamb, **robed in white**, with palm branches in their hands. ¹⁰ They cried out in a loud voice, saying,

"*Salvation* belongs to our God who is seated on the throne, and to the Lamb!"

¹¹ And all the angels stood around the throne and around *the elders* and the four living creatures, and they fell on their faces before the throne and worshiped God, ¹² singing,

"Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom
and thanksgiving and honor
and power and might
be to our God forever and ever! Amen."

¹³ Then one of the elders addressed me, saying, "Who are these, robed in white, and where have they come from?"

¹⁴ I said to him, "Sir, you are the one that knows." Then he said to me, "These are they who have **come out** of the great ordeal; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.

¹⁵ For this reason they are **before the throne of God**, and worship him day and night within his temple, and the one who is seated on the throne will *shelter them*.

¹⁶ They will hunger no more, and thirst no more;
the sun will not strike them,
nor any scorching heat;

¹⁷ 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."

Questions for the practice of Examen & Contemplation

- What shimmers for you in this reading?
- What's the point of this vision? How does it relate to the vision of heavenly worship in chapters 4 & 5?
- John lifts God as the only true sovereign worthy of trust and worship, who tabernacles among us. How do you struggle with that (us) today?

standing before the throne:: Until now only the four living creatures and elders were able to stand before the throne. The "faithful" are allowed and welcomed into the sacred space where the Living God is seated. They are a new people, able to do something new. It seems to anticipate the new Jerusalem of Revelation 21-22.

robed in white:: This seems to be an image of baptism, a preparation to be in God's presence. This image of changed robes is in Exodus 19:9-15 "10 the Lord said to Moses: "Go to the people and consecrate them today and tomorrow. Have them wash their clothes 11 and prepare for the third day, because on the third day the Lord will come down upon Mount Sinai in the sight of all the people. ...14 So Moses went down from the mountain to the people. He consecrated the people, and they washed their clothes." The text implies that those robed in white are the new priesthood to serve God.

the one..on the throne will shelter them::

The literal wording σκηνώσει [skēnōsei] is to set up a tent for them, or tabernacle with them, to dwell with them. The same word is found in **Isaiah 4:2-6** "5 Then the Lord will create over the whole site of Mount Zion and over its places of assembly a cloud by day and smoke and the shining of a flaming fire by night. Indeed over all the glory there will be a canopy. 6 It will serve as a pavilion, a shade by day from the heat, and a refuge and a shelter from the storm and rain. And **John 1:14** " 14 And the Word became flesh and lived [tabernacled] among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth."

Verse 16 recalls the promise of God's salvation in **Isaiah 49:8-10**

"8Thus says the Lord: In a time of favor I have answered you,... 9 saying to the prisoners, "Come out," to those who are in darkness, "Show yourselves." They shall feed along the ways, on all the bare heights shall be their pasture; 10 they shall not hunger or thirst, neither scorching wind nor sun shall strike them down, for he who has pity on them will lead them, and by springs of water will guide them.