

Apocalypse of Peace - unspeakable truth seeks revelation

Peace Sunday, not 'Remembrance'. Remembrance of war can be two-edged. I can remember about war, and strive to always win wars. Or I can remember, and strive to work for peace. Why would I chose peace? This sermon is an attempt to answer that question.

We name this day for Peace while other churches and broader society name this Sunday for Remembrance. For us, remembrance brings us to Peace. For us, the two are inseparable. To remember IS to work for peace - we have these buttons that testify to this belief (available in the foyer for a donation). We practice a form of remembrance that has a purpose. We remember war so that we do not repeat it. We remember war so we can seek peace.

It is easy to speak about an abstract political state called war. It is easy talking about an abstract ideological concept called evil. We might be comfortable saying that War is Evil. It's an ideological statement, but it can be wholly abstract. The reality of war, the evil of war, is unspeakable. It does not make sense, and it disrupts our sense-making categories. But when we start to see the effects of war, the specific evils that war creates, disguises and justifies, we approach the concrete, lived reality of people today.

The invasion and occupation of other countries is evil.

The clash of armies is evil.

The development, deployment and detonation of weapons of mass destruction is evil.

The burning of cities is evil.

Laying landmines in the fields is evil.

Executing conscientious objectors is evil.

Starving subjugated populations is evil.

Threatening children and denying them an education is evil.

Stealing away children to destroy their culture and keep their parents in submission is evil.

Arming and conscripting children is evil.

Executing children in the street and posing for selfies with their bodies is evil.

When I saw those children killed in Hebron; how they were murdered and their bodies delivered up as social media content. How could I not think of Revelation 11?

"For three and a half days some from the peoples and tribes and languages and nations will gaze at their dead bodies and refuse to let them be placed in a tomb, and those who dwell on the earth will rejoice over them and make merry and exchange presents"

This is evil, this is the reality of life in God's creation at this very moment. To remember is to work for peace.

What is the peace we seek? What is the vision? What is the end purpose? What is God's vision for the world, for the Church, for the kingdom? This is my question. What are we working for?

We Mennonites might often go to the Beatitudes. The prophets. Paul's rhetoric of reconciliation. Today we are called into Revelation. the enigmatic, shocking, provocative and terribly metal text of Revelation.

Speaking of provocative, I have chosen my 'eat the rich' t-shirt because of Revelation 19, the great supper of God as the birds come to feast on the flesh of the powerful, the rich, the kings and generals.

Understanding Revelation is a disturbing and lengthy process. It requires familiarity with many other texts, both within the Bible and excluded from canon. We could do a whole book study. Revelation is known to be an Apocalyptic text, and common knowledge tells us that apocalypse is concerned with the end of the world, judgement day, and the conclusion of history, with the accompaniment of disaster, destruction and collapse.

It's weirdly appropriate that we have come to equate apocalyptic with catastrophic, because in many ways these two things go together, but that is not the meaning of the word. Apocalypse is about unveiling, making known what was hidden. It is about revelation. The secret truth made known to John, who makes it known to us. Apocalypse literature is its own genre, distinct from prophesy, history, wisdom and epistle (although Revelation appears to have all of these). It has its own genre rules and norms and complexities. Without knowing these, it can be hard to make meaning.

But we can take a shortcut by reading Revelation from within our own context. We can hold the Bible in one hand and the newspaper in the other. We can interpret the symbolism - angels, the dragon, the pit, - as contemporary powers and agents, and therefore learn what is really happening in our world at this very minute. And we can choose to look for who and where we are in that story. Listen to the Revelation of John.

Revelation 20 : 1-6

Then I saw an angel coming down from heaven, holding in his hand the key to the bottomless pit and a great chain. And he seized the dragon, that ancient serpent, who is the devil and Satan, and bound him for a thousand years, and threw him into the pit, and shut it and sealed it over him, so that he might not deceive the nations any longer, until the thousand years were ended. After that he must be released for a little while. Then I saw thrones, and seated on them were those to whom the authority to judge was committed. Also I saw the souls of those who had been beheaded for the testimony of Jesus and for the word of God, and those who had not worshiped the beast or its image and had not received its mark on their foreheads or their hands. They came to life and reigned with Christ for a thousand years. The rest of the dead did not come to life until the thousand years were ended. This is the first resurrection. Blessed and holy is the one who shares in the first resurrection! Over such the second death has no power, but they will be priests of God and of Christ, and they will reign with him for a thousand years.

The saints arise from the grave, killed because they witnessed to Jesus and raised by the same power! "Oh how I want to be in that number". Don't we all? Wouldn't we want to be those who do not worship the beast or its image, who refuse the mark of the beast, and who remain faithful until death?

But are any of us these saints? Are any of us taking such steps to resist the works of the devil that we are going to endure martyrdom? Beheading? Beheading is not a symbol. People get beheaded. It is one of those all-too-real evils, an evil that is incarnate, enfleshed, alive. However symbolic we might want to make the angel and the dragon, we can't pretend that beheading is anything less. We all endure trials, but we are not those saints who will be beheaded for the testimony of Jesus and for the word of God.

The more you read Revelation, the more difficult it is to approach it from a solely symbolic place, as if it were a coded history or foretelling for the future. Revelation is Apocalypse. It is a genre

of its own, and is largely absent from the Bible aside from some statements of Jesus and the Prophet Daniel. It's hard for us to read because we no longer have a common grasp of Apocalypse literature. Usually the apocalyptic gets medicated or locked away in art galleries, or dismissed as merely a contemporary political fable.

Apocalypse is political but it is not a political manifesto. It is spiritual but it is not a meditation upon spirit. The Revelation to Saint John of Patmos is an apocalyptic text, and its meaning does not come from translating or decoding. We don't need to work out which monster means which empire and which particular global ecological catastrophes are actually allegories of Christ's love for the world. What we need to do is recognize the patterns within it.

John's Revelation Continues.

Revelation 20 : 7-10

And when the thousand years are ended, Satan will be released from his prison and will come out to deceive the nations that are at the four corners of the earth, Gog and Magog, to gather them for battle; their number is like the sand of the sea. And they marched up over the broad plain of the earth and surrounded the camp of the saints and the beloved city, but fire came down from heaven and consumed them, and the devil who had deceived them was thrown into the lake of fire and sulphur where the beast and the false prophet were, and they will be tormented day and night forever and ever.

Apocalypse is circular and referential. It is tightly wound, highly evocative, and influenced by all around and within it, like a fever dream. It is violent but it is not about violence. It is about bringing the deeply symbolic, the mythical and the historical into contact with the utterly real and urgent and tragic.

Don't worry too much what the secret code is. What specific things 'mean'. Look instead for the patterns, the repetitions, and the abrupt changes in direction. Revelation tells the same story many times, from different angles, with different characters and symbols. In this series of short excerpts from John's Revelation, we are told repeatedly of victory, of threat that is defeated and thrown down into the pit or the lake of fire... yet the story rolls on. Let us hear more of the Revelation.

Revelation 20 : 11-15

Then I saw a great white throne and him who was seated on it. From his presence earth and sky fled away, and no place was found for them. And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Then another book was opened, which is the book of life. And the dead were judged by what was written in the books, according to what they had done. And the sea gave up the dead who were in it, Death and Hades gave up the dead who were in them, and they were judged, each one of them, according to what they had done. Then Death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. This is the second death, the lake of fire. And if anyone's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire.

How can there be a lake of fire? How can earth and sky flee and be without a place? These are not symbols but signposts. They are an attempt to put into words something that cannot be fully expressed. Imagine trying to describe the changing seasons in the Don Valley if all you had was a single blurry snapshot taken from the subway viaduct. Imagine trying to describe a Henry

Moore sculpture if you could only clap your hands. Like all scripture, Revelation points us towards truth, but we can only see as if through a mirror, dimly (1 Corinthians 13:12). Apocalypse gives us images and ideas and conversations that point us towards a reality that cannot be held in human words, that is profoundly unspeakable.

John's Revelation is one attempt at expressing an aspect of God's kingdom. If it appears bizarre and obsessive, it is because God's kingdom cannot be fully explained with rational, human frames of reference, and this is also true of the specific revelation that John brings to us. Perhaps John was only capable of perceiving this revelation and translating it for us using the language of apocalypse. I suspect that he felt would have felt no frustration or failure in doing so, as strange as the apocalypse genre is to us.

This idea that the Apocalypse genre is one way of recording truths that don't fit neatly within human understanding finds a twin when we look to Jesus's parables. Jesus also did his best to describe the Kingdom. The visuals of God's Kingdom as revealed through Christ were as distinct and bizarre as to include a mustard-seed tree, a widow seeking a lost coin, and the humiliated king of a conquered people crucified among thieves. No wonder his disciples had a hard time understanding, and still do today. This Kingdom, revealed through miraculous but unreliable provision and outlandish promises wasn't very satisfying for anyone... it was unspeakable.

If we are looking for our goal, for the end goal of peace, for the cessation of war and hostility and the defeat of evil, the Kingdom of God does not seem like a good option. Yet, let us continue in the Revelation of John.

Revelation 21 : 1-4

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away."

The former things have passed away. God descends to join humanity

God combines the movements and patterns we have sketched out throughout Revelation and indeed throughout scripture. After evil in various forms is cast down into the pit, or into the lake of fire, again and again without an end to strife, God mirrors this downward movement by descending to be with people. God casts himself down. God abides with humankind. Somehow, we are not destroyed. God takes on the burden of appearing in a form that brings us life, not death.

If that, too, seems like a familiar idea, you have recognised the motion of God in the Incarnation, pitching a tent among us in the body and blood of Jesus. This has already happened, and this is happening now, and this is yet to happen. This is what God looks like in human terms. This is what happens when the infinite choses to become finite

This is the apocalypse of peace, the revelation of the truth of where we are. In truth, this is a time and place of shadow, uncertainty and irresolution. But we have work to do.

Revelation 12 : 7-12

Now war arose in heaven, Michael and his angels fighting against the dragon. And the dragon and his angels fought back, but he was defeated, and there was no longer any place for them in heaven. And the great dragon was thrown down, that ancient serpent, who is called the devil and Satan, the deceiver of the whole world—he was thrown down to the earth, and his angels were thrown down with him.

And I heard a loud voice in heaven, saying, “Now the salvation and the power and the kingdom of our God and the authority of his Christ have come, for the accuser of our brothers has been thrown down, who accuses them day and night before our God. And they have conquered him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony, for they loved not their lives even unto death. Therefore, rejoice, O heavens and you who dwell in them! But woe to you, O earth and sea, for the devil has come down to you in great wrath, because he knows that his time is short!”

His time is short. There is evil all around, here on earth, raging and destroying, because its time is short. Evil it has been defeated by the blood of the Lamb and the testimony of the saints, and now its time is short.

I wish to end this difficult and complex sermon with some concluding statements.

The Apocalypse of Peace is hard to explain, understand, or share. Why would anyone follow the path of Christ and expect success? Working for peace is hard. It is harder than relying on the force of arms, and military power. It always requires sacrifice. Why trust in peace?

The art of answering that question is known in some places as evangelism. Sharing the good news. Letting people living in a world of violence be confident that they can remember war, and work for peace. Evangelism is what we do to witness to the truth. John did his best to reveal the good news to us through the form of Apocalypse, but if we spend all our time focusing on the genre of the Apocalypse, we make it into a symbol.

What are the ways we reveal the good news? How does our activity witness to the victory, and how can we remember the full significance and reality of that good news when we get busy running programmes that symbolise the gospel, and forget the vital, embodied implications of what we witness to?

The Revelation was written to urge us to remain steadfast, to have patient endurance. But we are not just waiting patiently. We are active participants. If we are in the shadows, it is because our message has meaning in the shadows. If we go into places of conflict, it is because we are people of peace. If we hear sounds of despair, we have songs of hope. If there is hunger for jubilee, we have recipes for justice. It is in the shadows that Christ first came to seek us out and show us the way.

We remember.