"The Dragon and Its Beasts: Allegiance and Worship Amidst Hegemonic Empires"

Tim Schmucker: Revelation 13 sermon for TUMC. Season of Peacemaking #3: 8 Nov 2026

"I pledge allegiance to the Flag of the United States of America, and to the Republic for which it stands, one Nation under God, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all."

I was the oddball in my primary school in Toledo Ohio. Now my closest TUMC friends are probably thinking "Schmucker, you've always been an oddball" but my idiosyncrasies are not what I'm referring to. Rather I was the oddball in primary school because every Monday morning when all my classmates would stand, face the flag, put their hand over their heart and recite the Pledge of Allegiance, I would stand silently with my hands at my sides.

Our allegiance, said my parents, was to Christ only. Oh, I was so relieved that I didn't have to stay seated. Standing up with my classmates at least allowed me a modicum of compliance; my defiance wasn't so obvious. Maybe I even mouthed the words. Pretending my allegiance.

Allegiance. I suspect that most of us here this morning would agree with my parents that our allegiance—our loyalty, commitment, faithfulness— belongs to God and God's reign as announced by Jesus the Messiah.

And allegiance seems less complicated for us. We're Canadians. "The Canadian Global Empire" said no one, ever. We can be proud of our home on native land even while fully aware of systemic issues of injustice; we can even be patriotic without pledging allegiance. How many of you last year got goosebumps or shed a tear or two watching Nova Scotia actor Jeff Douglas' viral rant as "Joe Canadian" "WE—ARE—CANADIAN and never the 51st state"?[1] I sure did. Empires demand allegiance. And that's not Canada. Right?

But what if allegiance is determined more by our actions than by the ritual words we recite? Could it be that we are more accommodated than we realise with 21st century empires, empires that are more global systems of power as they are imperial borders? Perhaps how we live each day even in Canada reveals our allegiances and loyalties, even when most of our daily lives is simply routine.

Almost 2000 years ago, the emerging Christian communities of the late first century faced a crisis of allegiance.[2] Perhaps we can learn from their experience.

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[1] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_OzbmriDgQc

[2] I want to acknowledge two significant study resources: the first for guiding me in framing "allegiance" as a major issue in Revelation, and the second as a quite insightful commentary for preachers. J. Nelson Kraybill, *Apocalypse and Allegiance: Worship, Politics, and Devotion in the Book of Revelation* (Brazos Press, 2010); Ronald J. Allen, *I Will Tell You the Mystery: A Commentary for Preaching from the Book of Revelation* (Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2019).

These communities were in Asia Minor, north and west of Palestine, in present day Turkey. About 60 years after Jesus was crucified. An unknown Jewish-Christian prophet named John[3] received a vision while in exile on the island of Patmos. And he had a challenge for these emerging gatherings of Jesus followers. Examine your allegiances. Extricate yourselves from the worship of evil. Yes, stop worshipping evil.



John's vision was preserved in our bible. The very last book. The title in English is Revelation. In Greek it's *apokalypsis*, meaning an unveiling, a revealing, a truth-telling. Its literary genre is called apocalyptic. It emerged several centuries before Jesus, when the Israelites and Judeans were suffering under successive empires. As we heard this morning, apocalyptic writings used fantastical beasts and creatures to symbolise the cosmic struggle between good and evil.



John's vision—our book of Revelation—is apocalyptic book, but not apocalyptic in the popular sense, with zombies and all. It is not a prophesy about today's immediate future, as some end time fiction writers masquerading as Biblical interpreters treat it for their own profit. And neither does Revelation describe a dystopian future. Still, we ought to pay attention to its message, as its warnings for those late 1st century Jesus followers may very well have relevance for us also.

The book of Revelation unveils and reveals the truth about the reality that its hearers lived almost 2000 years ago. Let's look at chapter 13 and its nightmare of beasts. Thanks to Maggie, Naomi, Sebastian and Eli for their dramatic readings. The first sight that greets us is fearsome: a seven-headed beast that looks like a leopard, has feet like a bear's, and a mouth like a lion. This beast emerges out of the sea and derives its power from the dragon. Now, who does the dragon represent? The ancient hearers were familiar with the dragon as the symbol for evil; the dragon represented Satan. And they also knew this beast from the sea as a stark symbol of the Roman empire and its Caesars. This fantastical image is actually taken from their scriptures: the book of



[3] This John is not the disciple John or author of 4th Gospel and the epistles. His grammar writing styles are very different. He knew Hebrew and "Old" Testament, so very likely a Jew. Wrote Revelation in Greek, the shared common language of the Roman world. Seems John was not fully 100% fluent in Greek due to abnormalities of grammar and syntax.

Daniel in the First Testament. It combines Daniel's four beasts into one—John's beast of the sea whose ten horns and seven heads represent individual emperors. First-century Jewish followers of Jesus would have immediately recognised this monster from their scriptures.

So John's Revelation vision condemns Rome, saying that its power is from Satan. This condemnation however is not based John being opposed to empire power, although he likely was. Rather, John denounces Rome because it both promoted and imposed idolatry. In verses 5 and 6, John uses the word "blasphemy" three times. These blasphemies came from the Caesars who claimed attributes and authority belonging only to God. For example, many emperors were deified—that is, were declared gods—after their deaths. Even during his life, Augustus Caesar was called "son of God" and "Saviour," and his birth was declared the beginning of the gospel or "good news." Ummm, sounds Jesus-y. Then Domitian [duh-mi-shn], who was the Caesar during John's time, ordered people to address him as "Lord and God." A living deity. Guess he couldn't wait until the after-life.

Before Domitian was Nero Caesar who became Emperor shortly after Jesus' crucifixion. Nero's short reign was a chaotic theater of cruelty, marked by the execution of his own family and reckless, self-indulgent tyranny that left Rome burning. He tried to blame Jesus followers for burning down Rome, with only short-term partial success. Now, at the end of chapter 13 we read this challenge to identify the person represented by the beast by calculating its number: "let the one who understands, calculate." This is called **gematria** [geh MAY tria]— a common ancient practice where letters of the alphabet are assigned numerical values. Nero's name in Hebrew totals 666. Note that the font size of "gematria" on the slide is 66.6. Just for fun.



Nero Caesar

נ = 50
ר = 200
ו = 6
נ = 50
ק = 100
ס = 60
ר = 200
666



The second beast in chapter 13 emerges up out of the land with horns like a lamb, talks to the dragon (Satan) and has all the authority of first beast. It exists to support the first beast.

What a mind-bending image, this beast with lamb horns. Ferociously meek, I guess. This second beast represents the overarching system that induced Jesus followers—everyone, actually—to give loyalty to the empire and its emperors. It was a web of emperor-worship institutions that orchestrated allegiance to Rome during John's time. Historians call it the "imperial cult."



The Imperial cult took many forms:

- It was public services of worship where the gods ordained and blessed the emperor
- It was places of worship, temples where worshippers offered sacrifices to the emperor's image
- And there were many parades and birthday celebrations with hymns and songs composed for the emperor



Participants in the imperial cult spoke of Caesar and his household in terms traditionally associated with gods and goddesses. Frequent terms included Son of God and Lord. — Ah, now we can understand why the Gospel writers used those terms for Jesus. How creatively subversive!

Participating in the imperial cult—even attending parades and birthday celebrations and singing the songs—meant giving allegiance to Rome, Caesar, and the empire's values. People could worship traditional deities privately, but there were strong social expectations, even obligations, to participate in the imperial cult. The 1st century hearers were keenly aware of this heavy pressure to participate in this worship cult and would have heard John's vision with that reality clearly in mind.

Throughout Revelation, John contrasts the nature and rule of the Caesars and their Roman empire with that of God, Jesus, and the realm of God. And so Revelation's hearers were confronted with a tremendous dilemma: how were they — as followers of Jesus who gave their highest loyalty to Christ, to God's reign—to live in their world where all social, political and economic structures assumed everyone would worship the emperor and give their allegiance to Rome.

Revelation then calls for non-compliance with, and resistance to, the empire worship cult. It insists that allegiance belongs only to God and Christ and so calls followers of Jesus to an alternative allegiance. As John says so poignantly after describing the first beast: "Whoever has ears, must listen. This calls for the endurance and faithfulness of the saints."

Today, many millions of people, including Christians, give unquestioned allegiance to political, military, and economic powers—our world's global structures that largely benefit the wealthy. Do we fail to recognise our allegiances because they are so embedded in our daily lives?

In Revelation 13, John lampoons the Roman empire for forcing everyone to put a mark on their right hand or forehead in order to participate in Roman society. This mark of the beast was the

emperor's name or number. Weird for us, but Jewish followers of Jesus would have been intimately familiar with this format of self-identifying, as they would have often recited their beloved Shema from Deuteronomy chapter 6: "Israel, listen! Yahweh is our God, the Lord alone. Love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your being, and all your strength." Deuteronomy also included instructions to help them remember; they were to wear God's words on their hands and forehead. Verse 8: "Tie them on your hand as a sign. They should be on your forehead as a symbol."

What marks do you wear? What signs do we embody? How do we show our allegiance? Perhaps today our allegiance is determined not by obligatory attendance at the emperor's temple, but rather by examining where our time, energy and resources are spent.

I want to share with you recent examples of public declarations of allegiance to Jesus' non-violent way that have moved me. Six weeks ago, Jacqui and I attended the 50th anniversary gala of **Project Ploughshares**.[4] Trisha Ashworth also attended. Ploughshares is an ecumenical and independent research institute and advocacy organisation committed to peace. It was initiated by Ernie Regehr based on his work with Mennonite Central Committee in Southern Africa in the early 1970s.

At the gala, Lloyd Axworthy, former Canadian Minister of Foreign Affairs, delivered the keynote address entitled "Investing in Peace." He heavily critiqued Canada's current shift toward rapid re-armament and positioning itself as an arms exporter, challenging us with a core question: "If Canada takes re-armament seriously, why don't we take peacemaking just as seriously?" He suggested that if Canada is prepared to heavily fund armaments, a proportional commitment should be made to funding peace. His address was then adapted and published as the lead editorial in the Toronto Star this week.[5]

Or as Ontario Mennonite historian and theologian Arnold Neufeldt-Fast framed it a week ago: "as Canada invests unprecedented resources in preparing for conflict, how much attention are we giving to preventing conflict?"[6]

Mennonite Central Committee is another voice. Last month, MCC Canada penned a letter to Prime Minister Carney imploring his government to shift military spending towards

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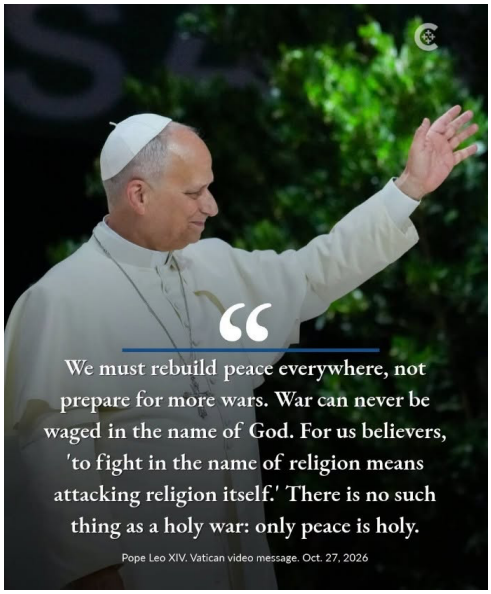
[4] https://ploughshares.ca/

[5] https://www.thestar.com/opinion/contributors/lloyd-axworthy-carney-has-flipped-the-plan-on-how-to-protect-canada-and-here-is-why-i-m-concerned/article_c6ee3283-c078-4b3c-87cd-feebd53ed554.html. Also here: https://lloydaxworthy.substack.com/p/canadian-foreign-policy-a-jigsaw

[6] https://www.facebook.com/neufast/posts/pfbid0cPp7jNRKqbxbw6ErCXByUf64JqDR8QZQZY8wdPxR3YWRnafeDWhy4VBUJrQ5Qyhal

peacebuilding. MCC invited other Christian organisations and denominations to sign on, and 28 did. The ecumenical letter urged our government to see human and national security as much larger than a military issue, as something that can be achieved through peacebuilding, development, conflict prevention, and addressing climate change.[7]

So I ask this morning: with defence spending rising precipitously and Canadian weapons production promoted as both a source of security and of economic growth, what is our "Peace Witness in a Time of Rearmament," to use Arnold's title? What is your witness? Ours as a congregation? What marks do we wear, and how are we showing our allegiance? Project Ploughshares and MCC need our increased engagement. We can wear their signs.



Ten days ago, **Pope Leo**, concerned about the resurgence of militarisation and the revival of war as an instrument of international politics, challenged the assumption that greater accumulation of weapons can secure peace. He declared that "we must rebuild peace everywhere, not prepare for more wars," that "war can never be waged in the name of God" and that "there is no such thing as a holy war: only peace is holy," Pope Leo called for renewed commitment to dialogue, mediation, prayer, and becoming "unarmed instruments of peace."[8]

Unarmed instruments of peace. Witnesses of peace. You have an opportunity in 30 minutes to show your allegiance. The **Anabaptists for Non-violent Defense** coalition, initiated by Isaiah Ritzmann who is part of TUMC, is holding four "Lunch and Learn" sessions to explore ways that we can use to non-violently resist US imperialism and Canadian militarism, and to help us consider ways to work non-violently in an age of threats. Today is session #2. Upstairs in room 200.

May God give us the courage to extricate ourselves from empire domination and violence, and to strengthen our allegiance to God's non-violent peace-filled kin-dom. Let's wear the marks and signs of Jesus only. Let's ensure that we are not inadvertently worshipping the dragon's beasts.

"Whoever has ears, must listen."

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[7] https://mcc.org/our-stories/canadians-call-peacebuilding https://mcc.org/our-stories/mcc-canada-pens-open-letter-prime-minister-carney

[8] https://www.vatican.va/content/leo-xiv/en/messages/pont-messages/2026/documents/20261027-videomessaggio-assisi.html