

## Spirit of Hope

My topic this morning, as suggested by the next to last chapter of Brian McLaren's We Make the Road by Walking, is the Spirit of Hope. We've been looking at the attributes and work of the Holy Spirit in an extended season of Pentecost since May 31, but this topic seems particularly pertinent today. There is not, after all, an awful lot of hope in the news. The world continues to struggle with the pandemic and the resulting economic upheaval. The Palestinians are crying "foul" to the recent treaty between the United Arab Emirates and Israel. Lebanon is in danger of complete collapse in the aftermath of a terrible explosion. There are dictatorial crackdowns in China, Belarus, and Venezuela. Here in the U.S., the east coast and Midwest are recovering from terrible storms. COVID-19 rages uncontrolled. The President of the United States has boasted that he's dismantling the Post Office to suppress voting rights. The Republican-led Senate has adjourned without extending unemployment benefits. The police officers whose bumbling and thoughtless violence led to the death of Brionna Taylor remain unpunished. And in trivial but heartfelt bad news, the Mariners, who we knew were going to be bad, are missing out on the ability to further develop their minor leaguers, while my beloved Cardinals have been able to play only a fraction of the games scheduled and the defending Stanley Cup champion St. Louis Blues look very much like they are going to be eliminated in the first round of this year's playoffs. Bleh.

But despite all the bad news around us, our scriptures for this morning insist that hope is not only necessary but warranted. I hope you heard that as I read those passages this morning, but you may have been surprised by the source. Most Christians think of the Revelation to John as a book of fire and brimstone, destruction and vengeance. The Bible's ultimate book has developed that reputation because a number of dubious schools of interpretation have grown up around it. And, I'm embarrassed to say, sometimes when dubious interpretation gains popularity, it's easier for preachers to simply ignore a passage or book and leave it to the vultures. This morning, I'm going to highlight the central theme of hope in Revelation not only because it's a far more faithful interpretation but also because we just plain need to hear that hope this morning.

The hopeful nature of the Book of Revelation comes most to the fore when we understand that it belongs to the category of Literature of the Oppressed. It was written by a pastor who had been banished and imprisoned to his flock back home, who were in danger of the same treatment or worse. Rev. Dr. Otis Moss, Jr., a colleague and friend of Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., compares it to other great works written in similar circumstances to like audiences. He writes, "I see a mystical and historical connection between the experience and writing of John, the Apostle, (Nelson) Mandela, ... and in Dr. Martin Luther King's Letter from the Birmingham Jail." Of the latter, Moss writes, "This letter was written during the Easter/Resurrection season of 1963. It has outlived the jailers, the police, the police dogs, the commissioners, the Governor and the laws of American apartheid. Most of Nelson Mandela's autobiography was written on Robben Island during Mandela's unjust imprisonment. Dr. King and Mandela were productive in the face of death. Each won a Nobel Peace Prize while under the threat of death. When it appeared that they were crushed by the crisis of the moment they came forth as a vision and voice of an era." As a good Baptist, I would also add John Bunyan's A Pilgrim's Progress. Bunyan wrote that classic while in jail for preaching not authorized by the Church of England as encouragement to his fellow "non-conformists." Like Revelation, it describes the contemporary plight of the Christian metaphorically and refuses, like the works of King and Mandela, to be dismayed by the apparent power of death... or the state.

The Revelator wrote to his flock in Ephesus from his island prison on Patmos. He wrote in a kind of metaphorical code that they would understand – a code in which the powers that were oppressing them were disguised as various monsters with fanciful attributes that his readers could easily decipher as showing the evil nature of their oppressors. He wrote in this way not only to save his own life, which surely would have been forfeit had he openly criticized the Powers of his day, but to save the lives of his flock, who might well have been killed simply for possessing such subversive literature. He, too, was pushing back against the idea that death and the state were the ultimate powers.

What does this have to do with us? Brian McLaren wrote, rather presciently in 2014, “Our best scholars agree it was composed during the bloody reign of either Nero in the AD 60s or Domitian in the AD 90s... But life was extremely precarious when the man at the helm of the empire was vicious, paranoid, and insane, as both Nero and Domitian were... Even if the emperor is mad, Revelation claimed, it’s not the end of the world... Even if the world as we know it comes to an end, that ending is also a new beginning. Whatever happens, God will be faithful and the way of Christ – a way of love, non-violence, compassion, and sustained fervency – will triumph...” Today, the United States suffers under a leader whose behavior is as vicious and paranoid as Nero and Domitian. Our world as we know it seems to be crumbling as the pandemic and the resultant effect on the economy will likely have lasting impact on our lives. But just as in the time of the Revelator, God is faithful and the Way of Christ will triumph.

Quickly, here are three other points on the repeated themes of Revelation, and then we’ll turn to this morning’s passages for examples. Keeping in mind the metaphorical nature of the book, it’s vital to remember that it was a description of current problems with a resolution of hope, not a road map of the future with a resolution of destruction. As Brian McLaren writes, “If we keep reading Revelation as a road map of a predetermined future, the consequences can be disastrous.” If we take as literal the description of Jesus as a conquering warrior, we can discount his message in the Gospels of peace and non-violence. That gives us leave to solve our own problems with violence, a problem America knows all too-well. If we take literally the statement that 144,000 persons will be saved, then we can divide humankind between who’s in and who’s out, which leads inexorably to tribalism, nationalism, sexism, racism and other hatreds. If we take literally the vision of the world “passing away,” then we are relieved from creation care and can pursue our own pleasures regardless of their impact on God’s good earth. Disaster.

Second, the story of Revelation, as indeed the story of the whole Bible, is about God coming down to God’s people, not us going up to some heavenly abode to meet God. At the end of the Revelation is God dwelling with humankind, as has already been manifest in Jesus, in the Holy Spirit, and in the Spirit-filled Church, the Body of Christ. Our focus needs to be on living into our call as the Body of Christ, making this world into the Kingdom of God, the Beloved Community, not on what happens after we die. God is faithful and merciful. I’ve got no worries at all about the ultimate fate of myself, my family, or my friends. If I love them and wish the best for them, how can that not be true of my Loving Creator, whose love is so much greater than mine? What I do worry about is the hungry and the homeless, the oppressed and the victims of

## Spirit of Hope

violence and greed. I choose, we choose, to act now in the name of Christ and leave the future in the loving hands of God.

Ultimately, the point of the Book of Revelation is the hope and the healing we see so strongly in the final chapters, not the warfare and destruction of the rest of the book. Conflict and struggle are going to happen because evil and “the final enemy, death” are still abroad in the world and because we sin. Don’t worry: God’s love will ultimately prevail. Instead, we are to push back against evil and death by living as fully as we can in the Way of Jesus and the will of God. The same Spirit that whispers to us of hope also empowers us to act out of that hope.

How does this play out in the passages that McLaren and I have chosen for today? Let’s look first at chapter 1. Look at what John says about where he is and why: “I, John, your brother who share with you in Jesus the persecution and the kingdom and the patient endurance, was on the island called Patmos because of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus...” John doesn’t acknowledge the power of the Roman Empire that imprisons him. Instead, he says he is on Patmos because of his adherence to God and to Jesus. The Empire isn’t worth considering, only God, who, John is sure, has a use for him where he is. Surely, this is the same hope-filled attitude that shines through the works of Bunyan, King, and Mandela.

Then John gives us a word from Jesus: “Do not be afraid; I am the first and the last, and the living one. I was dead, and see, I am alive forever and ever; and I have the keys of Death and of Hades.” We need not be afraid because Jesus has already defeated that which Paul called “the last enemy.” In the resurrection of Jesus is the hope for all of us – death cannot win. Even as the pandemic rages, even as jobs are lost, even as the very fabric of our democracy is threatened, we do not need to be afraid. God and God’s anointed one have already won.

This is also the theme I plucked from a couple of verses in chapter 19: “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... On his robe and on his thigh he has a name inscribed, ‘King of kings and Lord of lords.’” This is another vision of Jesus which we must remember to interpret metaphorically. The white horse is a symbol of purity, reflecting the identity of its rider, who is called Faithful and True. These are more attributes of Jesus, which we are to follow. Jesus is also identified as “King of kings and Lord of lords.” This is not only a reminder to Christians that the One we follow is above all but also a direct contradiction of the Romans or of any other empire who would attempt to claim our ultimate allegiance. At some point, I should go back and work through the very martial description of Jesus in this vision and explain why it is not in conflict with Jesus as a figure of peace and non-violence. For now, two minor points: the sword carried by Jesus in this vision is not in his hand but in his mouth. It is, as it was for Paul, the word of God, which convicts rather than kills. And while some take the blood-dipped robe Jesus wears as proof that God is OK with violence, I’d point out that Jesus arrives before the metaphorical battle with the robe already bloody. The blood, of course, is his own, shed for us.

The passage from chapter 21 is full of images of God’s love for humankind. The new Jerusalem, the locus of God’s dwelling with us, comes down from heaven “prepared as a bride adorned for her husband.” I’m not sure that I can adequately explain this to anyone who hasn’t had the experience. Because of my lack of sleep on the night prior to my wedding to Connie, thanks to

## Spirit of Hope

my grandmother's health crisis, I have very fuzzy memories of our wedding and reception. But I will never forget watching Connie walk down the aisle with her dad toward me and our wedding party. I am absolutely prepared to say, without any hesitation, that there was never a more beautiful woman in the world. Sorry, friends. But I bet all of the married men listening to this would say the same about their bride. And, married ladies, how did you feel about that man who was waiting for you next to the preacher? Well, that's how God sees each and every one of us! Isn't that amazing?

And God promises that God's ultimate home is with us. "See, the home of God is among mortals. (God) will dwell with them as their God; they will be (God's) peoples, and God Godself will be with them..." Just below, it says, "I will be their God and they will be my children." Remember, the Good News isn't about us working hard to earn God's love so that we can go somewhere to be with God. God loves us already, like a groom loves his bride, like a bride loves her groom, and God is with us. God loves us because we are God's own children, and God is with us. Not just in the future, after we draw our last breath, but right now and always, God is with us. We are to live our lives wisely and kindly because that's the richest, most Godly way to live but we need not fear anything because God is with us.

Listen to the rest of the promise: "(God) will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more." That's a promise of love. We are freed from sorrow and death and pain. God also promises renewal: "And the one who was seated on the throne said, 'See, I am making all things new.'" Be sure you hear this! In his commentary on Revelation, Eugene Boring writes, "God does not make 'all new things,' but 'all things new.'" (By the way, bless Eugene Boring's heart... can you imagine what a burden he must bear as a professor and author? "I've got a class with Professor Boring this semester... I've got to read three chapters in that Boring commentary tonight..." But I digress...) Back to the subject, God is not replacing us or our planet, God is renewing all things. Pastor Janet Hunt writes, "Indeed, God does not simply replace all that has been broken, defiled, betrayed, polluted, adulterated, or even in our understanding or experience, destroyed. Rather, somehow God gathers it all up and makes the old new again. God redeems what we thought was beyond the human capacity for hope. Again and again. And again." Wow. Doesn't that help you to feel the hope?

Finally, as is nearly always the case, there is a calling that is both challenge and promise. In 22:17, we read, "The Spirit and the bride say, 'Come.' And let everyone who hears say, 'Come.' And let everyone who is thirsty come. Let anyone who wishes take the water of life as a gift." The Holy Spirit and God's Bride, the Church are calling to all people, "Come." Come and be loved. Come and drink the water of life. It is free for all who are thirsty. That is the promise. It is also the call upon our lives for we are God's Bride, the Church. We are not only to take God's hope and love for ourselves, but we are to call out to others to come and share it with us. God's love is not like pie. We don't get less if we share it with others, we actually get more because then we will experience loving relationship with them, too. Is it challenging for you to think of calling others to God's love? I hope not but I understand that it may seem to be. But if we need not fear for the future, why should we be afraid to share our love and our hope? As the Body of Christ, it falls to us to lovingly bring the reality of Jesus to everyone, to bring to

## Spirit of Hope

pass his promise, “‘Surely I am coming soon.’ Amen. Come, Lord Jesus!” May the grace of the Lord Jesus be with all the saints. Amen.