

*Holy God, in communities broken and struggling, we yearn for glimpses of Your grace; in a world reeling with conflict, we long for Your peace. Be present with us as we gather around Your Word. Train our eyes, that as we look on the needs of the world, we may see also the stirrings of Your grace. May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be always acceptable in Your sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.*

“Then I saw a new heaven,” says John of Patmos. And we want to believe him. But this is one who has also seen the four horsemen of the apocalypse and a Lamb with seven horns and seven eyes and the cataclysmic descent of a blazing star called Wormwood! The book of Revelation is passing strange, and interpreters have not always known what to do with it.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, our own lectionary framers were not the boldest on this score: there’s not much from Revelation in the Revised Common Lectionary. If you blink (or, you know, skip church) during Easter season in lectionary Year C, you might miss John’s spectacular testimony.<sup>2</sup>

The Church is tentative about this book because Revelation is vivid and disturbing. What does divine punishment look like? Well, to John, it looks like a horde of locusts with human faces and lion’s teeth, swarming out of a bottomless pit to sting sinners without mercy.<sup>3</sup> And it looks like fearsome angels pouring bowls of God’s wrath upon the earth, bathing unbelievers in blood and fire and terrible plagues.<sup>4</sup> To John, idolatry looks like “woman” Babylon enthroned on a beast “full of blasphemous names” and “holding a golden cup full of abominations and

impurities.” Imperial cruelty looks like a beast with a leopard’s body and the feet of a bear, sporting seven heads and ten horns—a beast that will eventually be thrown alive into a lake of fire and sulfur to be tormented.<sup>5</sup> To a modern believer, this stuff might seem irrelevant at best and delusional at worst: hallucinatory predictions of a future that will never come.

But, my friends, this is prophecy.<sup>6</sup> Not simple prediction, mind you, but courageous prophetic witness to the purposes of God in the real life of this violent, confused world. John speaks to us from a time when the Roman Empire did unspeakable things to political dissidents, including Christians.<sup>7</sup> Those who would not bow to Rome faced degradation and shame, torture, execution.<sup>8</sup> John stands in the breach between trauma and hope, between the terrible domination inflicted by Rome and the radical joy that Christians knew in the risen Christ. Through his catalytic images of the Christ reigning in splendor, John teaches us how to *reimagine faith* in a world that is post-Resurrection and yet still desperately needs God’s grace.

So our lesson from Revelation this morning is a gift. Let’s take a look.

“*Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth!*” With John we glimpse a breathtaking view of the new Jerusalem; we hear “*a loud voice from the throne saying, ‘See, the home of God is among mortals.’*” Prophesying from exile, John was on the island of Patmos likely because he had been banished there. Roman emperors often leveled against political dissidents a judicial sentence of banishment to an isolated place

where the offender could no longer build up a community of resistance.<sup>9</sup> Forcibly dislocated to Patmos, John left behind a community grappling with trauma. Fear must have tightened like a vise around their chests every time they saw a friend beaten or heard of a fellow Christian being torn apart by wild animals in one of the amphitheaters at Rome.<sup>10</sup>

Imperial power secures its grip on territory and resources by breaking the imaginations of those enslaved. Empires force subjugated peoples to participate in rituals designed to redirect their loyalties, eroding the trust among resisters and distorting their memories of their sacred traditions. John knew the Christian community needed more than moral exhortation and political strategizing. They needed to *imagine differently*. They needed to envision a world beyond the violence and profound anxiety of daily life under the cruel hand of Rome.

What they needed was to glimpse the transcendent beauty of a world *re-made* through the indomitable grace of God.

So what does grace look like?

Like a cherished sacred place restored and radiant. The elders of John's community had seen their beloved Jerusalem profaned, massive sections of the city wall and the Temple reduced to rubble by the siege engines of Roman occupation. Now the new Jerusalem was coming down out of heaven—the holy place of God would be *here* among the people, rebuilt and resplendent, with the Lamb upon the throne!

Can you imagine?

If you've been to Jerusalem, you know it's a breathtaking golden city, walled about by incredible antiquity, steeped in holiness, vibrant with intermingled cultures and histories. Or, closer to home, perhaps you love the energy of your favorite neighborhood—love how you can see there the creativity and struggles and hopes of generations, friends and strangers all making their way as best they can. Or maybe you cherish the place where you grew up—the Southern bayou town or gritty Midwestern city that *made* you, the New England village that wove the texture of your life among people who knew you better than you knew yourself.

*Home.* Jerusalem is home—

but *home* deeper and more holy than you could possibly say.

No more fear or crying. No more conflict.

Only the joy of a community restored: a people safe, and loved, and free.

Beautiful!

But it's been centuries.

It's 2016, and our world still struggles and laments.

We can't see the new Jerusalem so easily from here.

Cities are still reduced to piles of stone. You've seen photos of the rubble in Ecuador after last week's earthquake—over 600 precious lives gone.<sup>11</sup> An airstrike on the Syrian city of Aleppo on Friday left heaps of concrete and twisted metal

behind—yesterday’s *New York Times* front page had a photo of a father and his young son running past the ruins of decimated buildings.

Rubble is everywhere.

And so, if the spectacular vision of John of Patmos is not to be irrelevant, we have to see more. If Revelation is not just some ancient hallucination about a future that will never come, we *have* to ask: what else does grace look like? What does grace look like now, in our real world, where we’re still trying to love the stranger and care for the poor and set the captive free?<sup>12</sup>

So here’s another image of the new Jerusalem. You may have noticed that Harriet Tubman has been in the news lately. The 19<sup>th</sup>-century Christian abolitionist is to be featured on the \$20 bill, if the U.S. Treasury can get it done. Born into slavery on a Chesapeake Bay plantation in Maryland in 1820, Tubman escaped to freedom in 1849. And then she did something remarkable. She went back south to help family members escape. She returned again and again and again. Using the network of the Underground Railroad, Tubman made 19 trips back into slaveholding territory over a ten-year period, risking torture and death to lead over 300 slaves to freedom.<sup>13</sup> Where others saw abuse, coercion, the lash, chains: she *imagined differently*. She saw freedom.

Have you seen Harriet Tubman’s picture? Strong. Stubborn. Unsmiling—as a matter of principle, apparently. She manages to look visionary, fierce, and worn out

all at the same time. Utterly dedicated to emancipation, Tubman gave her life to those who had been enslaved, broken, and forgotten. *That's* what grace looks like in this real world.

The revelation to John of Patmos is vivid, and disturbing. It has to be, to hold its own with a world that is all kinds of wrong. John calls us to *imagine differently*, to know that in Christ, the Alpha and Omega, death already is no more and grief and suffering will pass away.

So look for grace.

Look for the new Jerusalem as we gather around this altar,

and keep looking as you walk out those doors.

I'll bet you glimpse some Jerusalem limestone when you least expect it,

a flash of angels' wings,

a ray of light where only darkness had been.

Look—and see the One whose home is with you always:

the radiant Lamb of God, the beginning and the end of all that we are:

Jesus Christ, to whom be honor, glory, and praise, now and forever. Amen.

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Easter 5C

Psalm 148; Revelation 21:1-6; John 13:31-35

Preached at St. Luke's Parish, Darien, Connecticut

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<sup>1</sup> Richard Bauckham puts it well: “Revelation is a book of profound theology, intense prophetic insight, and dazzling literary accomplishment. But most modern readers find it baffling and impenetrable. They do not know how to read it... Moreover, they are often not sure it is worth attempting to understand, since they most readily associate it with eccentric and even dangerous sects addicted to millenarian fantasy. Yet this is a book that in all centuries has inspired the martyrs, nourished the imagination of visionaries, artists, and hymn-writers, resourced prophetic critiques of oppression and corruption in state and church, sustained hope and resistance in the most hopeless situations” (“Revelation,” pp. 1287–1306 in *The Oxford Bible Commentary* [edited by John Barton and John Muddiman; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001], at 1287. Susan R. Garrett notes of Revelation, “The imagery would have been slightly more understandable to first-century readers, but even the ancients regarded the book as highly ambiguous and difficult. In part because of its obscure character, several branches of the ancient church were slow to accept the work as authoritative scripture” (“Revelation,” pp. 469–474 in *Women's Bible Commentary* (expanded edition; edited by Carol A. Newsom and Sharon H. Ringe; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1998), at 469.

<sup>2</sup> Passages from Revelation come up seven times in Year C of the Revised Common Lectionary. Otherwise, Revelation is read only on the feast of All Saints in Years A and B, the feast of Christ the King in Year B, and New Year's Day in all three lectionary years.

<sup>3</sup> Rev 9:1–6.

<sup>4</sup> Revelation 16.

<sup>5</sup> Rev 19:20, 20:10.

<sup>6</sup> See Rev 1:3, “Blessed is the one who reads aloud the words of the prophecy,” i.e., the book of Revelation itself; and see 22:10, where an angel says to the author of Revelation, “Do not seal up the words of the prophecy of this book, for the time is near.”

<sup>7</sup> Many scholars argue for a date of composition late in the reign of the emperor Domitian (81–96 CE). Some propose that Revelation was written earlier, during the reign of Nero (54–68).

<sup>8</sup> Rev 2:13 identifies as a Christian martyr one Antipas, “my witness, my faithful one, who was killed among you.”

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<sup>9</sup> David A. deSilva, *Seeing Things John's Way: The Rhetoric of the Book of Revelation* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox), pp. 33–34.

<sup>10</sup> The Colosseum is often thought to have been the venue for execution of Christians; some scholars suggest that more Christians would have been killed at the Circus Maximus.

<sup>11</sup> On 16 April 2016, a 7.8-magnitude earthquake struck off the coast of Ecuador. As of this writing, the death toll is 646, with over a hundred persons still missing.

<sup>12</sup> In Luke 4, Jesus stands up in the Temple and reads his prophetic ministry through the words of Isaiah 61. Disciples of Christ may fairly hold their own ministry and mission up to the light of Jesus' proclamation.

<sup>13</sup> Tubman also founded schools for African-American children, opened her home to orphans, and fought for women's right to vote. Harriet Ross Tubman (1820–1913) is commemorated in the Episcopal Church on July 20 along with Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Amelia Bloomer, and Sojourner Truth.