

GOOD NEWS FOR A WEARY WORLD

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The vision John offers in the book of Revelation was aimed at Christians in the late first century who were being persecuted by the Roman emperor, Domitian, for their refusal to pay him their supreme allegiance. The book, or rather a letter that is addressed to churches he treats as his parishioners, has a tendency either to frighten modern readers because of its strange imagery or to be misinterpreted by modern readers as some kind of blueprint of how our world will end. In fact, the message of the writer is quite simple: it is to offer hope and encouragement to a people under extreme duress and even imminent death for their allegiance to Jesus Christ.

Brian Blount, president of Union Presbyterian Seminary in Richmond, notes that this is an angry and a violent letter. He even says that the author is mean -- not mean-spirited, but mean. He is angry at the way his people are being treated and persecuted -- according to the letter to the Hebrews, being stoned to death, sawn in two, gored with a sword (11:37) were only some of the ways persons were tortured and killed. Who would blame the writer for being angry?

And yet, in the midst of this violence and injustice and death his focus remains on the goodness and faithfulness of God. What we read this morning is the beginning of the conclusion of the letter. Earlier, John has declared how in the end the God will be victorious over all enemies, even the ones faced now by Christians -- how the lamb that was slain is worthy "to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honor and

glory and blessing” (5:12), how “the kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he will reign forever and ever” (11:15), and how Babylon -- or Rome -- will ultimately fall (chapter 18).

The promise is that, in the end, God will win -- or, as Rob Bell put it in the title of one of his books, love wins. The promise is that evil and suffering do not have the last word. In what we read this morning John hears these words: “See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them; he will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away” (21:3-4).

Those are comforting and uplifting words, and must have been particularly comforting to those first century Christians whose lives were, literally, on the line. Most of us do not, thankfully, face such extreme circumstances. And yet, we must confess that such circumstances have been part of this country’s story. In his book ***The Cross and the Lynching Tree*** James Cone describes the horrors African Americans faced in this country that went beyond the 400 years of slavery. He describes the spectacle that lynchings became, mostly in the American South, but elsewhere as well. And not only did the perpetrators go unpunished, but such actions were condoned, if not encouraged. In the midst of such blanket suffering by one race of people, they turned to their faith for comfort. And yet, Cone writes, “Whether one was lynched on a tree or in court, the results were the same. ‘Lord, how come me here,’ they sang, ‘I wish I never was born!’” (p. 27).

Whether it was the Jews in Nazi Germany or the blacks in South Africa when apartheid was the official policy, or in today’s world of the brutality of ISIS terrorists or

the savagery of the Boko Haram in Nigeria, or the various other expressions of inhumanity inflicted on human beings, the world is weary of what we do to each other.

And, like John, we become angry -- not out of self-righteousness because we have been complicit, even if unwittingly, in such acts. We become angry at a system and at a world that not only turns a blind eye to such acts, but ignores the goodness and grace of the God who created each one of us. This is the same God of whom John writes, "See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them...." In the Gospel according to John, we also heard these words this morning. "Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me.... As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love.... I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete" (15:4, 9, 11).

But even if one is not a victim of persecution or terrorism or apartheid, one can suffer from the weariness of the world. There are plenty of problems to go around. The good news of the gospel is, as John says in Revelation, only God has the last word, and that word is always a good one. This God never deserts the world. God never gives up on us or this world. This God's home is among us. It is the promise of Christmas -- Emmanuel. It is the promise of Easter -- Christ is risen. He is risen indeed. It is the promise given to ancient Israel as well as to Jesus' contemporaries. The word "abide" can also be translated "tabernacle", both as a noun and as a verb. I will abide with you. I will tabernacle with you. I will travel with you. I will make my home with you. I will dwell with you. God did that from the very beginning with Abraham and Sarah as he led them

to Canaan. God did that with Moses and the Israelites as they made their way through the wilderness. God has tabernacled with and been faithful to God's people throughout history.

Mel Bringle, who chaired the committee that produced our new hymnal and who spoke here several years ago, has written a hymn that captures this notion of God's faithfulness to a weary people, and we will sing it in a few moments. The words go like this:

Light dawns on a weary world when eyes begin to see all people's dignity.
Light dawns on a weary world: the promised day of justice comes.

And then the refrain:

The trees shall clap their hands; the dry lands, gush with springs;
the hills and mountains shall break forth with singing!
We shall go out in joy, and be led forth in peace,
as all the world in wonder echoes *shalom*.

Love grows in a weary world when hungry hearts find bread and children's
dreams are fed.
Love grows in a weary world: the promised feast of plenty comes.

Hope blooms in a weary world when creatures, once forlorn, find wilderness
reborn.
Hope blooms in a weary world: the promised green of Eden comes.

Refrain: The trees shall clap their hands; the dry lands, gush with springs:
the hills and mountains shall break forth with singing!
We shall go out in joy, and be led forth in peace,
as all the world in wonder echoes *shalom*.

John's vision as expressed in Revelation is one that is offered to all of us. God dwells with us. God tabernacles with us. God makes his home with us. God is faithful and never gives up on us. And so, as weary as we may feel at times, we need to remember that God's light, God's love, and God's hope sustain us day by day. God

always has the final word, and that word is Jesus Christ, the Lamb who was slain for our
sakes, but who has overcome all things.

Thanks be to God!