

Faith Mennonite Church  
12 Scriptures Project  
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## Doing Laundry in the Holy City *Revelation 21 & 22*

We began this series based on favorite scriptures with the creation stories from Genesis. Although we will return to more of our 36 favorite scriptures later in the fall, today we bookend this portion of our series with the “new creation” envisioned in the final two chapters of Revelation, the final book in the Bible.

Genesis is a book of stories about our earliest spiritual ancestors: Adam and Eve, Cain and Abel, Noah and the ark, Abraham and Sarah; Ishmael, Isaac and Rebecca; Jacob, Leah and Rachel and their 12 sons; and Joseph's slavery in Egypt. It is a book that asks the primal questions: How did the earth begin? What is our relationship to God? What is the cause of sin? What is the nature of family and human relationship? Much of this book reads as a novel and many of us heard these stories often as children.

Revelation is a much different read. One of the people participating in our worship workshop yesterday expressed her surprise that anyone would have listed something from Revelation as a favorite passage. Because of its literary genre—apocalyptic—filled with symbols and sometimes violent images, Revelation can be a difficult book to appreciate and understand. Thus, it suffers from neglect by those who find it difficult to comprehend and don't want to have anything to do with it, *or* from misuse by those who *think* they comprehend, but in fact use it in ways that do not accord with the overall biblical message.

Our son Jacob came home this weekend. Yesterday afternoon, as he was heading out with some friends, he asked whether I'd like him to come to church this morning (so he'd know how late to plan to come home later in the evening.) I said I was working on a difficult sermon, so he needn't come for the sermon, but people are always happy to see him. “If I had known I was coming earlier,” he said, “I would have worked on a sermon so you didn't have to preach on Mother's Day.” “Well, you would have had to preach on Revelation 21 and 22.” To this he immediately burst into song (to the tune of *Frere Jacques*):

Revelation, Revelation, Twenty-one: eight, twenty-one: eight.  
Liars go to hell, liars go to hell,  
Burn, burn, burn! Burn, burn, burn!

“Where did you learn that?” I gasped. He didn't have time to give me a full explanation, but mentioned his Explore! experience at the Mennonite Seminary in Indiana one summer when he was in High School. They had sat in on a seminary class on Revelation, taught by Nelson Kraybill, author of a book that one of our adult classes studied in the past few years. To be clear this was not the theology being taught in that class, but rather an example of how the book is misused.

As Alisa said in her opening remarks, and as Kraybill writes in his book *Apocalypse and Allegiance: Worship, Politics, and Devotion in the Book of Revelation*, Revelation is a book about worship, about how we express our deepest commitments and allegiance. The book actually combines two forms of literature. We have already mentioned apocalyptic, similar to what we find in the Old Testament books of Ezekiel and Daniel. Apocalyptic literature often emerges in times of political upheaval or social oppression and makes a clear distinction between the upright and the wicked. It anticipates a time when the “righteous will be rewarded and the wicked definitively punished.”<sup>1</sup>

Those of us who live in peace, believe that peace is at the heart of the Christian story, and teach peace to our children, cringe at the crude cries for justice against enemies that we find in some Psalms and in Revelation. But imagine for a moment, what was going through the head and heart of the Bangladeshi factory worker who lay trapped in the collapsed factory complex for 17 days awaiting

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<sup>1</sup> Wilfrid J. Harrington OP, *Sacra Pagina: Revelation*. Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1993, 7

rescue. And this after having worked there for who knows how long earning some \$37 *a month* for a six- to seven-day work week. It would not be surprising if she lay there praying for the just punishment of those who ran the factory and the companies who profited from her labor, and perhaps those who wear the garments she made unaware of their connection to her.

The other form of literature in Revelation is prophetic. Here, “the distinction between righteous and wicked is nuanced.” For, in prophetic literature—think Jonah—the “wicked may repent and change their ways.” And it may well be the righteous who “stand in need of admonition and of exhortation to faithfulness, and may be threatened with ultimate rejection”<sup>2</sup>—think Amos and Hosea, even John the Baptist and Jesus.

The combination of these two types of literature in Revelation leads to some apparent internal inconsistencies within the book. As theologian Wilfrid Harrington explains: “While the apocalyptic imagery and language suggest the severity of God’s judgment of the wicked, the dominant image of the slain Lamb shows that God’s word of judgment was spoken in the Cross. John has recognized that God’s activity will ever seem paradoxical to human assessment.”<sup>3</sup>

The book of Revelation was likely written near the end of the first century, between the years 90 and 95, during the rule of Domitian. While Domitian is sometimes described as a megalomaniac and tyrant, other sources are less critical of his rule. At any rate, historical data suggest that this book was not addressing a persecuted church per se, but the writer understood the church to be in direct contrast to and in conflict with the imperial order of Rome. And if it truly lived into this conflict, it might bring a violent reaction from the state.

Six of the seven churches that are addressed in the opening chapters of Revelation were located in cities that had Imperial temples and thus a well-developed cult of Emperor worship. In contrast, the message of Revelation is that we worship God alone, a God whose power is made known through Jesus’ death on a cross, not through military force and imperial control.

The apocalyptic language of Revelation is filled with imagery—angels and lamp stands and horses and scrolls and dragons and stars and blood and a beast. Joan Kreider likens it to a lively dream sequence. But always, at the center, is the Lamb—the representation of Jesus. The message of Revelation is that Christians worship only the Lamb.

Now this dualistic worldview in Revelation with regard to Rome did not necessarily predominate throughout the entire first century church. If we think of the writings of Paul, of 1 Peter, of the pastoral epistles, we’ll note a sense of recognition, of due respect for Rome. “In short,” says Harrington, “the Pastorals present a Church coming to terms with the world: an eminently sensible Church, concentrating on structure, orthodoxy, and respectability. It is the sort of Church with which we are familiar because, historically, the Christian Church has followed the Pastoral model.”<sup>4</sup>

Many Anabaptist Christians, and today those who call themselves Anarchist Christians, such as our Mennonite Worker friends, continue to raise the primary concern of Revelation, even if they do not use apocalyptic, symbolic language. They ask: As citizens of the United States, which more than any other country, functions today as an empire—with military bases and financial interests around the world—can we, as Christians, faithfully accept the label “good citizen”? Is our “passive acceptance of institutions and structures that are, in fact, sinful” too high a price to pay?<sup>5</sup> The collapse of the garment factory in Bangladesh brings this question into glaring focus and is a stark reminder of the slave labor conditions that are behind much of retail clothing market here in the US.

While we will continue to struggle to answer that question, those of us (and I was one) who listed Revelation 21 and 22 as a favorite, no doubt did so because we find comfort in the images of grace that abound in these final two chapters. Here we find a picture of “new creation,” consistent with the original creation, but made wholly new by God. Unlike the first creation, where God appeared intermittently to the original humans, God is fully resident in this new, Holy City. In fact there is no

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid. 7.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid. 7.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid. 12.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid. 12.

temple for God's presence removes the need for a temple. Unlike the original creation, from which the humans were quickly expelled, this new city is marked by its open gates and utter safety. It is a place of refuge for people from every part of the earth. Its river, clear as crystal, and the tree of life (another echo of the original Eden) offer healing to all.

Some Christian individuals and groups have tried to use the book of Revelation to predict a specific date for Christ's return and to create thriller scenarios of end-times battles in which the good folks are whisked away to safety while the bad ones remain to suffer. It's a strange interpretation given the central image of the Lamb, the one who has suffered and died for all. Rather than seeking an escape hatch from the sin that surrounds us—and certainly there is much sin, much brokenness in our world—we are invited to wash our robes (22:14)—to do the laundry! While it is God who brings about this new creation, we are invited into the healing process, just as the first humans were invited into the original action of creation.

Anyone who does laundry knows that we *all* create dirty laundry—the neat and the messy alike. This past week I stopped in to visit David and Kristin and their babies. As I held little Esme, laundry was certainly not the first thing that came to mind! But then I noticed a laundry basket filled with neatly folded pieces of very small clothing. It's amazing how innocent, sweet little babies can generate so much dirty laundry! And it's amazing how sleep-deprived parents will wash and fold that laundry, week after week, with such love.

We await the fullness of the New Creation, doing the laundry, doing our small part to wash away the little hurts and the deep pain that is around us, both in the human community and in creation. It is in these actions (even when we're tired and wonder if we're making any difference) together with our time of gathered worship here, that we confess and proclaim that Jesus, the Lamb, is Lord. We follow him; we long for his coming. Come, Lord Jesus!