

Spoiler Alert!

[Text -Revelation 7:9-17]

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Each Sunday in this Easter Season, there's a reading from *Revelation* listed in our lectionary of suggested Scripture texts. Every Sunday thus far, I have passed on those readings, primarily because *Revelation* is one of the most difficult books of the Bible to decipher. The bizarre visions, the cryptic language, the symbolic numbers, animals and objects - makes *Revelation* an extremely tough read. And the subject matter of this book certainly doesn't make it any easier. *Revelation* deals with terrible and troubling times - when Christ's followers are being persecuted and executed by the Roman Emperor, Nero. And it envisions worse times yet to come - when the entire world will be shaken by plagues and pestilence, trials and tribulation.

So you might wonder, "Why take-on a reading from *Revelation* this morning?" The answer is simple: Today's reading puts all the other passages of *Revelation* in their proper perspective - passages that are often misused by modern writers to stir-up fear, divisiveness, and an unhealthy sense of doom-and-gloom. *Revelation* was written to encourage people who suffer severe persecution because of their faith. I'm not talking about the modern-day horror of a Christian baker, discovering that the cake he baked was consumed at a gay wedding. As devastating as that might be, it's not quite comparable to a Christian martyr being consumed a lion in the Roman Coliseum. I find it unconscionable when comfortable, contemporary Christians reference Biblical writings, such as *Revelation*, to portray themselves as being persecuted victims, who must stand strong against the billions of people in this world who don't share their particular beliefs [or more accurately, don't share their particular biases and bigotry]. So, when people start digging into *Revelation* to determine who are the select few [other than themselves] that deserve to be saved, and who deserves plagues, pestilence, and eternal damnation, then perhaps it's time to revisit this ancient text.

Revelation was written to provide comfort and hope to people who are suffering. And as the vision recorded in this morning's passage reveals, this is not a limited, elite group. This vision completely contradicts anyone who would cite *Revelation* as a Biblical source that sets a limit on the expansive nature of Divine Love and Grace. John writes: "After this I looked, and there was a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb...." It seems that even John, who in earlier passages alludes to the faithful *few* who will be saved, is overwhelmed by the unlimited number of people who come through "the great tribulation." And the overwhelming Divine Compassion which John goes on to describe, makes one wonder how he could envision this same Holy One inflicting millions of people with unspeakable trials and tribulations.

John writes, "The One who is seated on the throne will shelter them. They will hunger no more, and thirst no more...for the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their Shepherd, and will guide them to springs of the Water of Life, and the Holy One will wipe away every tear from their eyes." That certainly doesn't sound like the atrocious, vengeful deity depicted in John's earlier visions! The core message of *Revelation*, when seen in its historical context - and in light of the entire message of Jesus Christ - is that when all is said and done, Divine Love will ultimately triumph! And Christ's Reign of Peace and Justice, Life and Love will overcome the tyranny of fear and hatred, violence and death.

Spoiler Alert! That's what the book of *Revelation* is really all about, once you get past the cryptic language, the archaic imagery, and the psychedelic visions. It's a *clear vision* of the Holy One's overflowing love for people of all times and places - particularly people who are facing pain and loss, difficulties and dangers. And whether those difficulties are inflicted by an ancient emperor, or present-day legislators, it is crucial that people of faith faithfully speak-up and stand-up for the weak and vulnerable, the oppressed, the outcast and the outsider.

Reading *Revelation* can definitely raise a person's awareness of the continuum of Life's struggles, suffering and injustice. *Fixating* on *Revelation*, however, doesn't motivate people to take positive action; particularly when it convinces them that they are God's persecuted, faithful few; or when it feeds into their fears about cataclysmic events and diabolic figures looming on the horizon. Christians aren't called to speculate about who the anti-Christ might be; we are called to contemplate who Christ was, what Christ did, and what Christ calls us to do in response to the people around us who are touched by trouble and tragedy, problems and pain.

Every Sunday, you and I pray together that the Divine Realm will come and God's Will be done, "on earth as it is in heaven." Every day, you and I have tremendous opportunities to help create that heaven on earth - by helping those who are hurting or hungering, lonely or lost; by sharing with them the *Good News* of Divine love and grace, hope and peace. The book of *Revelation*, like the proclamation Christ's Resurrection, declares that even when the powers of empire, false religion, fear, hatred and death have done their worst, the greater power of Divine Life and Love will rise-up and prevail. When you and I truly trust this, it can set us free to live boldly, graciously, compassionately, and joyfully - just like Jesus!