

A Home for All Nations

When reviewing our appointed texts from Scripture, I was sorely tempted to focus today's message exclusively on the Gospel of John. The story of Jesus's encounter with the invalid at the Pool of Bethesda is remarkably rich, offering plenty of sermon fodder despite its brevity. We'll come back to the Gospel in a few minutes, but the state of our world at the moment seems to call for a different focus. So, and not without trepidation, I invite you to join me in a conversation about our passage from the Revelation to John.

The Book of Revelation, traditionally attributed to the beloved disciple along with the Gospel of John, is a complicated text that is not without its detractors. Although we can't ignore the spiritual arrogance of a man who literally took a scissors to his Bible, Thomas Jefferson once described Revelation as "the ravings of a Maniac, no more worthy, nor capable of explanation than the incoherences of our own nightly dreams ... I do not consider them as revelations of the supreme being, whom I would not so far blaspheme as to impute to him a pretension of revelation, couched at the same time in terms which, he would know, were never to be understood by those to whom they were addressed." (Okay, Tom.) Martin Luther agreed. In the first Preface to his 1522 translation of Revelation, Luther confessed that he "consider[ed] it to be neither apostolic nor prophetic...My spirit cannot accommodate itself to this book. For me this is reason enough not to think highly of it: Christ is neither taught nor known in it." Many Christians disagree, finding much value in this final book of the Bible. We must remember, however, that Revelation describes a series of complex symbolic visions experienced by its author, and is neither a literal history nor what Luther would have called "clear prophecy." That distinction matters because, in my opinion, too many Christians either misunderstand or misuse Revelation to promote what seems to me to be a profoundly unchristian point of view.

When popular culture and celebrity preachers deal with Revelation, the focus is usually on the Final Battle, that grand moment when, after life on earth has become utterly unbearable, the Son of God comes charging down on a white horse, surrounded by clouds of glory and battalions of heavily armed angels. They handily defeat Lucifer and his minions, casting their vanquished foe into eternal torment, and then Jesus goes about the business of judging every soul that ever lived. It's a stirring war story that mixes the best of *Lord of the Rings* with *Saving Private Ryan*, and some of our Christian cousins use it to argue that our place is in the thick of the fight, heavily clad in the armor of God and cutting down demons for Jesus. Respectfully, that's where I think they get it wrong. If there really is a war going on in heaven, and several theologians whom I deeply respect think there is, it's not our fight. The idea that flawed, fragile human beings are needed or even able to defend our all-powerful, all-knowing, and immortal God is certainly prideful and maybe even a little silly. Jesus and the angels have things well in hand. Besides, if we believe that Revelation gets it right, the outcome of the battle has already been determined. Romantic as it might seem, I don't believe Jesus wants us to fancy ourselves as sword-swinging soldiers of God. I think he'd prefer that we be the Red Cross, faithfully serving him by tending to his people with soup, blankets, and bandages until the battle is won and the dust finally settles.

This matters because the same people who focus on the Final Battle too often also decide that they're entitled to pass judgment on others, a task that's reserved to Jesus alone. Bible scholar M. Eugene Boring is correct that Revelation warns us "to responsibly resist evil," but he's also correct that "'deliver us from evil' is a prayer that finally must be answered from God's side." We cannot know, much less evaluate, what is going on with another person's soul. Each of us has enough to do managing our own sinful impulses without judging the sins of others. God's

requirement that we do justice calls us to stand up and speak up when we see people with too much power hurting those who can't protect themselves, but God also requires us to love mercy and walk humbly with him. We can't do that if we're busy hurling threats of hellfire and damnation at people whom we imagine Jesus will one day condemn, and we have no business making life miserable for them while we wait for him to come riding to the rescue.

The better approach to Revelation is to focus not on the last battle, but on its peaceful aftermath. John gives us a beautiful vision of the new Jerusalem, the glorious city of God built of gold, crystal, and precious gems. It's the magnificent community where God will finally dwell forever among the people, being their eternal light and healing the nations. We need to resist the temptation, as Boring puts it, to picture the new Jerusalem as "some great reversal in which only the faithful few are saved while the overt enemy and nominal friends receive the just reward for their unfaithfulness." John describes the redeemed as uncountable and the new Jerusalem as an enormous and radically inclusive city. It will be a home for all nations and peoples, not just a supercilious few. It's not our place to tell Jesus whom he should invite to live in his eternal home.

That leads back to this morning's Gospel passage. The invalid at Bethsaida had been sick for thirty-eight years but had never gotten into the healing pool because someone else always pushed ahead of him. We might wonder if the invalid was serious about being healed. When Jesus asks if he wants to be made well, the invalid responds with an explanation that some in our hypercritical culture might condemn as a transparent excuse to keep living off the charity of others. Let's not point fingers only at those who treasure self-reliance, though. Those of us, myself included, who believe that we have a God-given duty to take care of those in need might be just as quick to condemn everyone who saw the invalid struggling alone for thirty-eight years but never bothered to help him into the water. Jesus could scold the invalid for his lack of

initiative or the crowd for its indifference to the invalid's struggles, but he doesn't. He heals the man without condemning anyone. We can take a lesson from that.

In her sermon, "For the Healing of All Nations," the Reverend Katerina Katsarka Whitley writes, "God is for every one of us, no matter our nationality, our origin, our color, our beliefs, our prejudices, our status, our needs." That may disappoint those who like to imagine that God favors their country over the rest of the world or that their own virtue gives them a leg up on getting into the new Jerusalem. Heaven may not be exclusive enough for those folks, but then, Jesus was never an exclusive kind of guy. Still, we desperately need his healing light. As the Reverend Charles Hoffacker writes in his 2013 sermon, "A Home to Long For," heaven is the home we crave, and John's exquisite description of heaven "can elevate and enliven the desires of our hearts for God and the consummation of God's purposes." It can also help us recognize the little glimpses of heaven we are blessed to receive in our own lives, especially when we're outside immersed in God's Creation. When we care for and seek God's blessing on the natural world, it brings us a little closer to the healing power of heaven. And the natural world could definitely do with more of our loving attention right now, as could our fellow children of God who, like the invalid at Bethsaida, are struggling to survive in an increasingly unforgiving society. As Jesus's Red Cross, we have plenty to do right here and now – we needn't waste our energy daydreaming about a battle that isn't ours to fight. But if we need to be inspired, let's focus on John's vision of the new Jerusalem, the vast, glorious city where God is our light and eternal companion, the place where the waters of life flow from the corners of the divine throne and the tree of life offers twelve kinds of fruit and leaves to heal the nations, the home for all people where we will finally meet Christ face to face and walk forever in his light. We will get there, and we will be healed. Amen.