

Easter 4C
Revelation 7

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¹After this I saw four angels standing at the four corners of the earth, holding back the four winds of the earth so that no wind could blow on earth or sea or against any tree. ²I saw another angel ascending from the rising of the sun, having the seal of the living God, and he called with a loud voice to the four angels who had been given power to damage earth and sea, ³saying, "Do not damage the earth or the sea or the trees, until we have marked the servants of our God with a seal on their foreheads."

⁴And I heard the number of those who were sealed, one hundred forty-four thousand, sealed out of every tribe of the people of Israel:

- ⁵ From the tribe of Judah twelve thousand sealed,
from the tribe of Reuben twelve thousand,
from the tribe of Gad twelve thousand,
- ⁶ from the tribe of Asher twelve thousand,
from the tribe of Naphtali twelve thousand,
from the tribe of Manasseh twelve thousand,
- ⁷ from the tribe of Simeon twelve thousand,
from the tribe of Levi twelve thousand,
from the tribe of Issachar twelve thousand,
- ⁸ from the tribe of Zebulun twelve thousand,
from the tribe of Joseph twelve thousand,
from the tribe of Benjamin twelve thousand sealed.

⁹After this I looked, and there was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, robed in white, with palm branches in their hands. ¹⁰They cried out in a loud voice, saying,

"Salvation belongs to our God who is seated on the throne, and to the Lamb!"

¹¹And all the angels stood around the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures, and they fell on their faces before the throne and worshiped God, ¹²singing, "Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our God forever and ever! Amen."

¹³Then one of the elders addressed me, saying, "Who are these, robed in white, and where have they come from?" ¹⁴I said to him, "Sir, you are the one that knows." Then he said to me, "These are they who have come out of the great ordeal; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb."

- ¹⁵ *For this reason they are before the throne of God,
and worship him day and night within his temple,
and the one who is seated on the throne will shelter them.*
- ¹⁶ *They will hunger no more, and thirst no more;
the sun will not strike them,
nor any scorching heat;*
- ¹⁷ *for the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd,
and he will guide them to springs of the water of life,
and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.”*

This is part 3 of a 6-part sermon series we are doing on the book of Revelation, so I am going to begin with a two minute summary of what we've covered so far.

Revelation is a letter written by John, a leader in the early church, to seven Christian communities in western Asia Minor (present-day Turkey). He writes around the year 95, near the end of the reign of the Roman emperor Domitian. The reason for John's writing is to encourage and challenge his fellow Christians on three issues they are facing – persecution, assimilation, and complacency. John's writing is a prophecy—not in the sense that it predicts the distant future, but in the sense that it speaks God's word to the situation of the recipients of the letter. To those being persecuted because of their Christian faith, John writes to encourage them to remain faithful, assuring them that their faith will be vindicated. To those who compromise their faith in order to be accepted by the culture around them, he challenges them to remain faithful, reminding them that it is the Lord God who has ultimate authority, not the government and society. To those who have become complacent in their faith, he challenges them to return to being faithful, proclaiming that the Lord God deserves their obedience and worship seven days a week, not just once in awhile. John's letter speaks about *his* time, not predicting events in our time. But John's letter does speak *to* our time, encouraging and challenging us whenever we find ourselves facing these same issues of persecution, assimilation, and complacency.

Last Sunday's reading had John seeing a vision of God enthroned in heaven. A scroll with seven seals was in God's hand, presumably containing a decree from God, and John hears an angel ask, "Who is worthy (has the authority) to open the scroll and break its seals?" The answer he is given is that it is the Lamb who was slain, Jesus Christ, who has that authority.

When the seals are broken and the contents of the scroll are revealed, they give a disturbing picture. It is said that a picture is worth a thousand words, so I've reproduced a famous woodcut by Albrecht Dürer to give you Dürer's interpretation of what John saw. (Dürer was a great German artist who lived around 1500, the same era as Martin Luther.)



¹Then I saw the Lamb open one of the seven seals, and I heard one of the four living creatures call out, as with a voice of thunder, “Come!” ²I looked, and there was a white horse! Its rider had a bow; a crown was given to him, and he came out conquering and to conquer.

³When he opened the second seal, I heard the second living creature call out, “Come!” ⁴And out came another horse, bright red; its rider was permitted to take peace from the earth, so that people would slaughter one another; and he was given a great sword.

⁵When he opened the third seal, I heard the third living creature call out, “Come!” I looked, and there was a black horse! Its rider held a pair of scales in his hand, ⁶and I heard what seemed to be a voice in the midst of the four living creatures saying, “A quart of wheat for a day’s pay, and three quarts of barley for a day’s pay, but do not damage the olive oil and the wine!”

⁷When he opened the fourth seal, I heard the voice of the fourth living creature call out, “Come!” ⁸I looked and there was a pale green horse! Its rider’s name was Death, and Hades followed with him; they were given authority over a fourth of the earth, to kill with sword, famine, and pestilence, and by the wild animals of the earth.

Revelation 6:1-8

As the Lamb opens each seal on the scroll, one of the four creatures beside God’s throne shouts, “Come!” In response, a series of four horsemen gallop before John’s eyes. You have perhaps heard of “the four horsemen of the apocalypse.” Here they are. The first, furthest away in the picture and holding a drawn bow, represents conquest. This placement in the picture is suggestive, for fear of conquest by a foreign power is often furthest away from people’s minds. The most famous mounted bowmen of John’s time came from Parthia – present-day Iraq and Iran. Three times in the previous 150 years, the Romans had unsuccessfully tried to conquer the Parthians. For John’s readers, the Parthians were a nagging reminder about the limits of the security that Rome could provide. Roman power had its limits. John’s message is that the Christians who participate in sacrifices offered to Roman emperors and trust these self-proclaimed gods for their security are compromising their faith to a power that is not supreme and can not guarantee protection.

The second horseman wields a big sword and represents the threat of violence that comes not from outside forces, but from within one’s own society. One of the Roman Empire’s greatest public relations messages was the *Pax Romana*, the Roman Peace. They wanted people to be grateful that their heavy-handed, often violent armies kept the peace by force. The second rider warns against being lulled into complacency by comfortable conditions that pass for peace, for such peace is a façade that can be removed by the violence we do to each other.

The third horseman holds a pair of scales, like those used to measure weights when buying and selling goods. He represents the threat of economic hardship and is a reminder about the limits of any economic system to guarantee prosperity.

Conquest (war), violence (crime), and economic hardship. It's the first three horsemen of the apocalypse. As it is now, so it has always been. You can go to any point in history, in any culture, and one of those three will be at the top of people's list of concerns and the other two won't be far behind. John is not so much predicting the future as he is describing the continuing present. You and I have the same issues as John's readers.

That's especially true with the fourth horseman, the one closest to us in the picture because it is the one closest to us every day – death. Death doesn't make the list of concerns in polls because that is one thing politicians truly can do nothing about. We are all going to die. So the four horsemen depict threats to human life and society that are present in every time and place.

The fifth and sixth seals are not depicted in Dürer's woodcut. When the fifth seal is opened, John sees the martyrs at rest in heaven. When the sixth seal is opened, he sees the remainder of humanity cowering from the judgment of divine wrath. These scenes challenge ordinary perceptions of peace and security. From an earthly point of view, those who are martyred for their faith would seem to lose everything, while those who give up their faith appear to gain greater security on earth. But the vision shows that it's just the opposite -- the faithful who have suffered on earth ultimately find rest and reward in heaven while the rest of humanity, who appear secure on earth, will ultimately be disturbed by the judgment that falls from heaven.

Chapter 6 ends with the rich and powerful wailing "the great day of God's wrath has come, and who is able to stand?" One would expect that the next thing to happen would be the opening of the seventh and final seal, with God dropping the final curtain on the history of humankind. But the end does not come yet. Instead, John hears an angel command that the winds of destruction be restrained until the servants of God have been marked with a seal on their foreheads.

What is this seal? Some understand it to be the seal of baptism, the sign of the cross marked on our foreheads. Others understand it to be a sign of protection, that though believers are not spared all suffering, they are shielded from the wrath and judgment of God.

Then John experiences something similar to what he described in chapter 5 – first, he hears something, then he sees something that is different than what he expected. In chapter 5, an angel had asked the question, "Who is worthy to open the scroll and break its seals?" John begins to despair when he realizes that no one present is worthy. But he hears a voice say, "Do not weep. See, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has conquered, so that he can open the scroll and its seven seals." So John turns to look, expecting to see the promised messiah as a Lion, and what he sees instead is a Lamb that has been slaughtered. The promised messiah has indeed come in the person of Jesus, but he has come not as a powerful ruler as expected, but rather as a servant who offered himself up for all.

This disconnect between hearing and seeing now happens again in chapter 7. John “hears” the number of those who are to be sealed – 144,000, or 12,000 from each of the twelve tribes of Israel. Like most of John’s numbers, this is symbolic theology, not literal mathematics. To our ears, 144,000 seems like a very small, select number out of the earth’s current population of over 6 billion. But imagine what this number sounded like to the people of John’s churches, which counted themselves in tens and hundreds. “Thousand” was the biggest number word used at that time, so to say 12 thousand from all twelve tribes means that the entire people of Israel, all the descendants of Abraham, were included.

This is the number that John “hears”, but then he “looks” and what does he see? Not just 144,000, but a great multitude that no one can count, and not just the descendants of Abraham as he expected, but people from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages. Just like John expected to see a messiah like a Lion, but instead discovered a Lamb, he here expects to see the people of God be all the descendants of Abraham, but instead discovers a multinational community that is beyond counting. What he sees is the new Israel, the body of Christ, the church, the whole people of God.

John has another nice touch here. Chapter 6 ended with the lament, “Who can stand before God’s judgment?” But when John sees this countless multitude, what are they doing? They are “standing” before the throne and before the Lamb, robed in white. What a wonderful picture of grace – the gospel news that no one can stand before God on his or her own merits, but all for whom the Lamb has died can stand before the throne for all eternity. At this wondrous revelation, the whole multitude joins with all the voices of heaven in singing, “Salvation belongs to our God who is seated on the throne, and to the Lamb!”

Then one of the elders gives John a test, asking him, “Who is this host arrayed in white and where have they come from?” John is not really sure, so he replies, “I don’t know, you tell me.” And the elder replies, “These are they who have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.” In other words, these are the ones Jesus died for, those whose sins have been forgiven and have been reconciled to God. This is a passage that we cherish at the time of death, and these verses of hope are often read at funerals. The last phrases of the chapter all come from the Old Testament prophets Isaiah and Ezekiel:

- The one who is seated on the throne will shelter them (Ezekiel 37:27)
- They will hunger no more, and thirst no more, the sun will not strike them, nor any scorching heat; for the Lamb will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of the water of life (Isaiah 49:10)
- And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes. (Isaiah 25:8)

John is telling his readers that God is faithful to his promises. The words spoken through the prophets are given renewed meaning in the blood of the Lamb. If the threats of the four horsemen in chapter 6 take away the readers' confidence in the security provided by nation, community, economic prosperity and health; and if the fifth and sixth seals warn that positions of wealth and influence ultimately fail to shield people from the wrath of God, the vision of chapter 7 calls readers to be confident that God will be faithful. John invites his listeners to seek the shelter that God and the Lamb provide. For if God brought Christ, the Lamb, through death to a place on the heavenly throne, readers can persevere in faith, confident that God will bring all of his people through tribulation to a place in his heavenly court. (Koester, *Revelation and the End of All Things*, p. 91)

After all this, the seventh seal is finally opened. And what happens? John writes, "When the Lamb opened the seventh seal, there was silence in heaven for about half an hour." (8:1) All of heaven is filled with awe at the realization of the amazing grace they have experienced that has brought them to stand before God and before the Lamb.

What happens next starts to really get bizarre, but you'll have to come back next week for the next exciting episode.