Revelation 21:1-6; 22:1-5

This is our final week on the Revelation of John. The Book of Revelation reads as if John had wrapped up all our worst fears - fears of violence, plague, wild animals, unimaginable horrors emerging from the abyss below the earth, lightning, thunder, hail, earthquakes, erupting volcanoes, and the atrocities of torture and war - into one gigantic nightmare. Yet, instead of ending in total destruction, his visions finally open to the new Jerusalem - a glorious city filled with light. John's visions of dragons, monsters, mothers, and whores speak less to our head than to our heart: like nightmares and dreams, they speak to what we fear, and what we hope.

Christian leaders have understood the uses of fear and hope from the time that Justin, "the philosopher", threatened Roman emperors between 160 and 165 with hellfire and courageously defied the judge who ordered him beheaded by declaring that God would raise him back to life. So John's visions speak to what one historian calls "the Christian movement's most powerful catalyst" – the conviction that death is not simply annihilation. For, after Jesus' earliest followers first said they had seen him alive after his death, many proclaimed that everyone, after death, would be raised to new life. But John's visions go further, as he vividly imagines *how* one might live after death - and what this means for how we live now.

John himself faithfully reproduces Jewish tradition that speaks of God judging people "according to their works", but his visions open up a far wider range of interpretations than, for example, Jesus' parable of divine judgment. As Matthew tells it, that parable turns on specific deeds. The Son of Man invites into God’s kingdom those he calls blessed:

> *for I was hungry and you gave me food; I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink; I was a stranger and you welcomed me; I was naked, and you gave me clothing; I was sick and you took care of me; I was in prison and you visited me.*

When his hearers protest that they have never seen him in such straits, he replies, “Whenever you did it to the least of these members of my family, you did it to me.” Shut out from God’s kingdom are those who withhold care and compassion from those in need.

By contrast, John of Patmos, who wrote this Revelation, conjures cosmic war, good fighting evil until Christ crushes the dragon, through visions that can be plugged into almost any conflict. Because John more often defines “evildoers” with degrading epithets - “cowards, the faithless, abominable, filthy ... and all liars - than with specific deeds, nearly anyone might claim to be on God’s side, fighting “evildoers”. Throughout the ages, John of Patmos’ visions have fortified religious anger like his own, the anger of those who suffer oppression and long for retaliation against those who torture and kill their people. Yet those who torture and kill in God’s name often cast themselves into the same drama, seeing themselves not as the “murderers” John denounces, but as God’s servants delivering divine judgment.

From the end of the second century to the fourth, as the movement known as “the way”, increasingly developed institutional structures, some Christian leaders began to divide “the saved” from “the damned” less in terms of how they act than whether they accept a certain set of doctrines and participate - or don’t - in specific religious communities. Those who followed Athanasius’ ingenious reinterpretation of “whore” and “beast” as *Christian* enemies often came to identify “orthodox” believers alone as the saved, while consigning everyone who stood outside the catholic communion - pagans, Jews, “infidels”, along with any Christians they called heretics - to outer darkness, both in this world and the next.

Now Athanasius was Bishop of Alexandria and all of Egypt, chosen by the people and supported by Emperor Constantine himself. Athanasius spent forty-six years welding assorted believers and groups throughout Egypt into a single, catholic, that is, universal, communion.

Although the Emperor wrote all the orders, the enforcement was left to the bishops. The big challenge for Athanasius was to induce all Christians in Egypt to conform to the complex formulas expressed in the Nicene Creed (written and passed by a gathering of Bishops in Nicea in 325 C.E.) and herd these various believers from all over Egypt into a single “flock” headed by himself, as bishop of Alexandria.

During his struggle to accomplish this, Athanasius found an unlikely ally in John of Patmos, especially as Iraneous had read or interpreted him. Iraneous was a local Bishop in Gaul around 160 C.E. He interpreted God’s enemies, whom John had pictured as the “beast” and the “whore”, to refer not only to Rome’s rulers but also to

Christians deceived, by the false teacher he called Antichrist, into false doctrine and into committing evil. Athanasius emphasized Iranaeus' view that those who follow "the beast" (whom he, too, identified with Antichrist) are actually those Christians whom he called heretics.

Those adopting these lines of interpretation could appreciate how John's apocalyptic visions helped create coherence among all who identified as catholic Christians and to establish a common bulwark against all whom they saw as outsiders. Ever since, Christians have adapted Athanasius' visions to changing times, reading their own social, political, and religious conflict into the cosmic war he so powerfully evokes. Perhaps most startling is how Constantine invoked John's vision of Christ's victory over Rome to endorse his own imperial rule. More than a thousand years later, Lutherans published Lucas Cranach's pictures of the pope as the whore of Babylon in one of the first Lutheran Bibles, while an early Catholic biographer retaliated by depicting Luther, on the frontispiece as the seven-headed beast. During the catastrophic times of the American Civil War, Confederate loyalists portrayed Lincoln being strangled by the great dragon that is the Union, while those on the Union side took as their war anthem "Battle Hymn of the Republic", which weaves Jeremiah's and John's prophecies into that war, now seen as the Great Tribulation that precedes God's final judgment:

Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord;
He is trampling out the vintage where the grapes of wrath are stored:
He hath loosed the fateful lightning of his terrible, swift sword;

Our God is marching on.

The history of religious violence seems endless - from crusaders fighting "infidels" and inquisitors torturing and killing Jews to save their immortal souls, to Catholics and Protestants fighting religious wars from the sixteenth century on, or Christian groups engaged in vigilante violence to the present time, or the wartime rhetoric of world leaders. Those who wield power and see themselves standing on God's side against Satan have often sought to force "God's enemies" to submit or be killed. Such apocalyptic fervour, whether engaged in by Christians or Muslims, allows no neutral ground between God's kingdom and the lake of fire, and no room for compromise, much less for human - or humane - interaction.

During the years in which Christians debated whether to place the Book of Revelation into the church's definitive canon, other writers inspired by John of Patmos revised and amplified his warnings of the coming judgment. The scholar David Frankfurter has shown how the anonymous author of the Revelation of Elijah, writing in Egypt circa 250, updated "the signs of the time" to warn his contemporaries of God's coming judgment. The Revelation of Paul, too, sharply separated the saved from the damned, taking special care to show how the divine judge would tailor hell's tortures to fit each sinner's crime, as its author contributed to a stream that eventually would include Dante's *Inferno* and Milton's *Paradise Lost,* and paintings by artists as diverse as Michelangelo and Bosch, William Blake and Picasso, as well as countless films and video games being produced to this day.

Yet John's Book of Revelation appeals not only to fear but also to hope. As John tells how the chaotic events of the world are finally set right by divine judgment, those who engage his visions often see them offering meaning - moral meaning - in times of suffering or apparently random catastrophe. Many poets, artists and preachers who engage these prophecies claim to have found in them the promise, famously repeated by Martin Luther King Jr., that "the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice".

Finally, too, this worst of all nightmares ends not in terror but in a glorious new world, radiant with the light of God's presence, flowing with the water of life, abounding in joy and delight. Whether one sees in John's visions the destruction of the whole world or the dark tunnel that propels each of us toward our own death, his final vision suggests that even after the worst we can imagine has happened, we may find the astonishing gift of new life. Whether one shares the conviction, few readers miss seeing how these visions offer consolation and the most necessary of divine gifts - hope.

But we have seen that the story of this book moves beyond its own pages to include the church leaders who made it the final book in the New Testament canon, which they then declared closed, and scriptural revelation complete. After Athanasius sought to censor all other "revelations" and to silence all whose views differed from the orthodox consensus, his successors worked hard to make sure that Christians could not read "any books except the common catholic books".

A couple of weeks ago you were introduced to the 1945 discovery at Nag Hammadi, where many so-called secret writings or revelations were uncovered: the Revelation of Zostrianos, the Revelation of Peter, writings like *Thunder, Perfect Mind,* and the *Discourse on the Eight and Ninth*, which draw upon sacred traditions of Egypt and Greece and the Hebrew Bible. Some of these writings combine Jewish esoteric teachings and Greek philosophic concepts with practices similar to Buddhist meditation techniques. Also were found the Revelation of Salathiel, not a follower of Jesus, the Revelations of Ezra, Paul, and Elijah. Among these secret writings they discovered the Gospel of Truth, the Gospel of Thomas, the Treatise on the Resurrection, the Secret Revelation of James, the Gospel to the Hebrews.

In 367, Athanasius wrote a famous Easter letter telling Christians what they could hear, teach, and discuss and what to censor. First he denounced “spiritual teachers”, especially those respected for their education. Then, declaring original human thinking to be evil, he ordered Christians to reject all “illegitimate secret books” as “inventions of heretics”, full of “evil teachings they have clearly created”. What made this letter most famous is Athanasius’ list of sacred books that, he declared, Christians could keep, a list that turned out to be the *earliest know record we have of what would become - and remains to this day - the church’s New Testament canon.* Other Christian leaders of the time - had their own lists, many of which actually left out John’s Book of Revelation.

Orthodox Christians acknowledge that some revelation may occur even now, but since most accept as genuine only what agrees with the traditional consensus, those who speak for minority - or original - views are often excluded.

Left out are the visions that lift their hearers beyond apocalyptic polarities to *see* the human race as a whole - and, for that matter, to see each one of us as a whole, having the capacity for both cruelty and compassion. Those who championed John's Revelation finally succeeded in obliterating visions associated with Origen, the "father of the church" posthumously condemned as a heretic some three hundred years after his death, who envisioned animals, stars, and stones, as well as humans, demons, and angels, sharing a common origin and destiny. Origen was an Egyptian Christian teacher. Writings not directly connected with Origen, like the Secret Revelation of John, the Gospel of Truth, Thunder, and Perfect Mind, also speak of the kinship of all beings with one another and with God. Living in an increasingly interconnected world, we need such universal visions more than ever. Recovering such lost and silenced voices, even when we don't accept everything they say, reminds us that even our clearest insights are more like glimpses "seen through a glass darkly" than maps of complete and indelible truth.

Many of these secret writings picture "the living Jesus" inviting questions, inquiry, and discussions about meaning - unlike Tertullian when he complains that "questions make people heretics" and demands that his hearers stop asking questions and simply accept the "rules of faith". Tertullian was an African convert who had seen Christians tortured and killed in a public stadium in Carthage about a hundred years after John wrote his Revelation. And unlike those who insist that they already have all the answers they'll ever need, these secret writings and sources invite us to recognize our own truths, to find our own voice, and to seek revelation not only past, but ongoing.

As we began the Book of Revelation, God was introduced as the Creator, and at the end of the book, we see God's final great act consisting of a new creation. The defeat of the forces of evil does not bring about the annihilation of the earth. Rather, it leads to God saying "I make all things new." God's future includes the resurrection of the dead but does not stop there. When death is vanquished creation itself is made new.

God's future is pictured as a city with a garden at its centre. The human world and natural world are reconciled here. The tree of life stands within the city with its gates of pearl. These pearly gates are not guarded by Saint Peter as in the popular imagination. Rather the gates stand open all the time in order to invite people into the presence of God. Here the rivers that give life flow, the tree of life has leaves to heal the nations, and the radiant presence of God illumines the city. This is the future that beckons people everywhere. Those who are gripped by such a vision in turn ask how such scenes of life might shape a way of life now. To live in anticipation of New Jerusalem is to embrace its way of life and to bear witness to the purpose of God, whose work as the author of creation and new creation is ultimately life.

Amen.