

Apocalypse Now

Acts 16:9-15

Revelation 21:10, 22-22:5

Many of you may know that David and I largely follow the Revised Common Lectionary when deciding what to preach. Every Sunday, all over the world, preachers following the lectionary will be inspired by the same collection of scripture: an Old Testament reading, a psalm, a New Testament reading, and a Gospel reading. I like preaching the lectionary—it keeps me honest by forcing me to wrestle with the Word presented to me, whether I particularly like those passages or not. We do have the freedom of choosing which scripture to focus on for the day, but I have already discovered that rather than I choosing which verses to preach from, the scripture seems to choose me. So imagine my dismay, when, against all my better judgment, this week I found myself seized by the Apocalypse of John, otherwise known as Revelation... the final story of the scriptures, the Last Word...

We most commonly think of this Book as a bizarre collection of frightening visions of doom, galloping horsemen upending bowls of destruction upon the earth. Some of you may have heard me say that I wish this book had never been included in the Canon, because it has been so misused to fuel fear and trembling ... conversion under duress—repent or you too will be left behind! But today, I'm here to share with you the vision of John... the ultimate apocalypse, the final unveiling....

We tend to think of the apocalypse as some far and future event... something out there at the end of time... Or, if you came from the little church I attended in my teens, perhaps you were looking for the apocalypse back in 1984... But ladies and gentlemen, I have news for you. Today I'm here to tell you about Apocalypse Now.

Please pray with me...

Lord of this good day... and of all our days... open our hearts as you opened Lydia's in Philippi so long, long ago. Today, may we see your Reign among us, your Kingdom come. And may the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, my Rock and my Redeemer. Amen.

The Apocalypse of John. Καλυπτο is the Greek word meaning to cover, or to veil, to conceal something. Ἀποκάλυψις is the Greek word that means simply to lift the veil, to uncover, to reveal something which had been previously hidden or unseen. Hence, the common English Title for this book is Revelation, the revealing. This book of John is part of the genre called Apocalyptic literature, which is not primarily about predictions of things yet to come, but rather uses intensely poetic language, the language of dreams - not to frighten us into submission - but to help us to see the veil flutter a bit wider between the profound and the profane. The purpose of apocalypse is to reveal the sacred possibilities which are already resident in the here and now.

This, of course, is not always obvious - which is exactly why we need Apocalypse Now. So come, together let's take a closer look at John's dream. He dreams a dream of a heavenly city - a place built on foundations which bear the names of God's people. This gleaming city knows no darkness, for everything is illuminated by the light of Christ and the glory of God. This is a radically inclusive city where the gates are always open wide to greet everyone—as all humanity streams in from every nation. From every nation—no one is excluded! It's a global community, where the Water of Life flows through the middle of the city, and all are made whole by partaking of the Tree of Life together. There is no falsehood and no enmity, and God himself wipes away every tear. No temple is necessary, because God is present in the midst of the everyday.....God reigns in the hearts of each man, woman and child..... Great dream, hunh?

Now the Apostle Paul also has a dream. He's trying to spread the *Good News* of Jesus Christ into Asia, but he's been stymied at every turn. And now he's camped on the shore of Aegean Sea, and he has a vision. He has a vision of a man from Greece, who is calling out to him "Come over here and help us!" And so he and his companions travel to Philippi. Now I don't think it's any mistake that the first person Paul meets there is not a man at all, but a woman named Lydia. I don't think it's a mistake, or a coincidence, because I keep discovering that most of the time God works to break our preconceived notions of what is acceptable or appropriate... and so it seems to me completely right that Paul meets Lydia... not a man, but a woman—inappropriate under Jewish or Greco-Roman ideas about socially acceptable mores. Paul even consented to stay at Lydia's house—a woman who by all accounts was unmarried, shockingly enough!—and this unmarried tradesperson goes on to become the unlikely host of the first home church in Philippi, a fact which is consistent with stories throughout the New Testament that show us a vision of the first century church as a radically inclusive community where the doors are open wide and all are welcomed: women and men, rich and poor, Greek and Jew, slave and free. This is a vision which reveals the wonderful truth that in Jesus Christ there is no distinction—for we are all one, a global community of God's beloved children.

Yes, John had a vision and Paul had a vision. And as different as these visions seem to be, they share the amazing revelation—apocalypsis—of an alternative way of being: the community of saints, the reality of Christ hunkered down in the middle of the market place, opening the hearts of men and women like Lydia, seller of purple cloth.

More and more lately I find myself captivated by glimpses of this Apocalypse Now—the unveiling of this alternative reality—the kingdom of God among us. For I believe that the apocalyptic vision is not simply on hold until the end of this age, but I believe that the apocalypse is here, now, present with us, if we only have eyes to catch the vision. Lydia saw it. Somehow in the meeting with Paul, Lydia saw the Good News unveiled, for her conversion is described as an opening of the heart, and the heart has the ability to see things we cannot see with our eyes. Conversion of the heart means catching the vision, seeing the possibility of change, discovering a different way of being.

Jesus spent his life calling people to see this way—to engage everyday life at its deepest, most sacred potential. As Christians, we are called to see the apocalyptic truth... experience the newness of life today, embrace Christ in the market place, engage in the transformative action of what is to come...lift the veil and peak at the divine.

This past week I have seen the veil flutter more than once. I saw Christ in the market place when women from this congregation gathered together at our retreat, to laugh and pray and sing together. And in our closing service, when we reaffirmed our baptismal vows, when I saw two women lead each other by the hand to that baptismal font, I saw the face of Christ in them, as I know they did in one another.

This past week, I saw the veil blow wide to reveal the vision of a transformation underway, as a young woman I know was able to take the tremendously courageous step of admitting her addiction to alcohol and checked herself into a rehabilitation facility. She is finding redemption in the community of others who have battled this disease, and she has caught the vision that life today can hold new choices for her tomorrows.

And I caught a glimpse of the heavenly city this week while a family sat vigil with their father as he hesitated on the edge of this life. In the quiet hours of Thursday morning, his son witnessed the holy moment as he lifted the veil and slipped into glory. And yesterday, with a serenity born of confidence in the resurrection promise, we celebrated the revelation, the apocalyptic truth that in Jesus Christ, death is defeated.

I'm learning that we cannot anticipate when or where we will be surprised by the glimpses of city of God in our midst, but I do know that they are there all the time, waiting to be seen, lurking at our feet or flying overhead. Universally gracious, paradigm-shattering invitations to venture into the Kingdom of God are offered to us everyday.

Remember when Lydia recognized Christ in the market place? She and her whole household were baptized. Well, this morning, here in this place, as we baptized Dylann and Kendall, that veil lifted again for a moment, revealing God's claim upon our lives, God's touch upon our heads, unveiling the presence of Christ within our hearts. You see, apocalypse now is not about some otherworldly pre-occupation with the end of time, but is rather a way of paying closer attention to the world around us, of seeing the ordinary through the extraordinary lens of faith. Apocalypse now is about recognizing the truth that the Kingdom of God is among you; the face of Christ is in the market place, where God is opening the hearts of men and women, transforming us through all of our daily experiences into a sacred community which is illuminated by the truth of Christ, washed by the waters of life, and where the gates are open wide enough to receive everyone. It is not some once and future kingdom but it is here, and now, waiting for us all to enter in. Amen.