

"Hope & Evil"

Scripture Passages: 1) **Psalm 74:9-11**
2) **Revelation 6**
3) **Revelation 7:1-8:1**

Hope: What erodes hope? What builds up hope? We don't want to lose sight of that focal point as we continue our journey through John's Revelation.

Review: Last week our focus was on Worship, and the fact that worship is not about us. Worship is placing God at the center and joining in with all of heaven and on earth in singing our praises. Will we join in?

The picture of worship presented in chapters 4 and 5 is powerful. The picture begins with God seated on a central throne with all of creation gathered around in worship. Then God holds up the scroll representing God's Word. But the scroll is sealed and it appears that no one can open it. But then the lion, the Son of God arrives, but in the form of a slaughtered lamb. This slaughtered lamb joins God on the throne, they become as one. It is that slaughtered lamb that is able to unseal the scroll revealing God's Word and revealing our reality.

The Centrality of Evil: So where do you think this act of revealing might begin? God begins by informing us about evil. That shouldn't surprise us really, since that is exactly how Genesis began. After God declared creation good, we hear about the "Fall", the entrance of evil.

As humans we regularly ask the question, "If God is good, then why is there evil? We ask where is our God?" These were the very questions the Psalmist asked in the passage with which we began our service. These questions haunt us everyday as wars rage, as sickness takes those we love, as famine rules.

Scripture, however, never answers that question. Scripture simply states that evil is a fact. I know that doesn't sound hopeful, but I believe it matches our experience. So if we don't get an answer to our question of why there is evil, when there is a good God, then what do we learn about evil as God's Word comes to us?

In John's vision we are introduced to the famous four apocalyptic horses and their four riders. Interestingly, the identity of the first horse and rider is the most controversial. I believe the rider on the white horse is Christ, who has already gone out into the world victorious and is in our midst conquering, right now. Then come the three great plagues. The first represented by the red horse is the plague of war. The second represented by the black horse is the plague of famine. And the third represented by the pale horse is the plague of sickness. These three plagues of war, famine, and sickness are the evil that is rampant on earth. We all know about these three plagues, because our lives are immersed in them. Our lives are lived out in the midst of war, famine and sickness.

Next the conquered Christ reveals the fifth and sixth seals. The fifth seal reveals that those who choose to be followers of Jesus will also live immersed in the evil of their time. Discipleship is not an exemption card from the trials of this world. Then the sixth seal reveals that our world will be plagued by natural disaster. We know this all too well. As the passage points out, we cannot hide from them, they will simply happen. Disaster will impact all of creation.

The Interlude: Then just when we are ready for the opening of the seventh and final seal there is an interlude. Listen to chapter 7. **Read Revelation 7:1-8:1**

Sealing the Faithful: In the midst of all this overwhelming evil there is a pause, a pause to seal the faithful, in other words, to assure the faithful of their salvation. This takes us back to the meaning and power of our baptism. We are assured here that all who faithfully journey with Christ will be dressed in white joining with the great cloud of witnesses worshipping and praising God.

Not until all the faithful are sealed is the seventh seal opened. With the opening of the final seal all know calm, silence, prayer as they have not known them before. The clamor of evil is no longer heard.

What we learn here is not the answer to our burning question of why is there evil? Instead we learn that evil is surrounded. It is surrounded on one side by the victorious, conquering Christ and the other side by the silent calm of confident prayer, knowing that God has triumphed. We can be assured that evil is not running wild and out of control. We can live in confidence, hopeful, that evil is not going to win, even though evil is a constant part of our lives.

Defining War, Famine, Sickness: We all recognize the reality of evil. That is not earth shattering news. Hopefully we can also embrace the reality that God has evil surrounded. What may be earth shattering news, however, is our role in evil. Can we allow the light of God's Word to enlighten the truth that we participate in the evil?

We don't like to face that reality. We prefer to define evil as something other worldly, something separate from our daily experience, or something so horrendous we could never participate in it. Unfortunately as we know, there are always people willing to carry out the genocide, the rapes, the moving of indigenous people off their land, the pollution of God's creation, the unjust consumption of resources, the proliferation of class structure. Much of what we define as evil begins and ends with the selfish actions of humans, people like you and me.

John's Revelation reveals three great plagues that erode hope. Hope grows as we begin to realize our involvement in these great plagues, and choose to work against them.

Let's look at some definitions for the three great plagues: war, famine, and sickness. "War dressed up in its Sunday best is simply competition. Famine is the condition in which we have most of what we don't need and almost nothing of what we do need. Sickness is the condition in which our bodies are weakened or impaired so that they no longer are effective as temples of holiness shaping rituals of love and witness." So what does any of this have to do with us?

War: Let us begin with war. Eugene Peterson writes, "The basic nature of history is warfare. Persons who live by faith live in conflict. History is a long sequence of battles – the forces of good and evil in pitched conflict. Sensitive persons know this. Artists know this. Students of history lay bare the documenting sources. People of prayer are in the midst of it even when the guns are silent. The battle rages within the soul; it is fought out in family circles; it is contested between nations. War is the human condition. To be human is to be at war."

Often when we think about evil in relationship to war we think about world threatening events like Libya, Iraq, Afghanistan. There is definitely the presence of evil in all of those situations, but to limit our scope of war to a global scale is to deny the presence of evil much closer to where we live. For example, often our families are at war. Or often we find ourselves in conflict with another person. And if we are open to recognizing it our own souls are at war all the time. To be human is to be at war.

Deb and I have dear friends who were divorced 12 years ago. They have been at war ever since. Their two boys 17 and 15 have been suicidal throughout this year. Painful! There are

relationships in our congregation that are strained. People talk about other people behind their back. People seek to get people on their side. Those are all forms of war. Painful!

Peterson writes: "We are trained from an early age to get what we want not in cooperation with others but in competition against them. The means are essentially violent, whether physical or psychological, weapons or propaganda. I want what my brother has, I covet what my sister owns, I envy who my neighbor is, I fear what I don't know, I want it my way." (Peterson p. 77)

Hope erodes as we war on. But the more we follow the way of Jesus, keeping God at the center, the less time we spend warring. Christ calls us to become conquerors with him, but will we choose to recognize and leave behind our warring ways? Will we open our eyes to our own participation in the evil of war?

Famine: In relationship to famine, Peterson writes: "Famine insinuates itself among us under all forms of achieving a higher standard of living. Famine is nature out of balance." (Peterson p. 78) The picture described of famine is that of a scarcity of necessities but an abundance of luxuries. The imbalance of wealth is perhaps at its greatest level in history. The gap between rich and poor is extreme. Famine is widespread among us. As Americans we participate in a lifestyle that uses a huge percentage of the world's resources. We vote for laws and practices that further the imbalance of wealth. As Americans we keep wanting more, which only increases the famine.

Someone has figured out that if the people who belong to churches in America actually tithed that world hunger could be wiped out. Of course it means that as churches we would choose to spend our money on feeding the world rather than building bigger buildings and bigger programs. How we spend our money matters

Christ calls us to become conquerors with him, but will we choose to recognize and leave behind our famine producing ways. We pray every week for God to provide our daily bread, but how often do we wish for much more. Will we open our eyes to our own participation in the evil of famine?

Sickness: Peterson writes, "Sickness is disguised by technology. This evil insinuates itself into our lives in the widespread glorification of technology with its corollary depreciation of human health. The machine is more important than the body." This may be particularly true in Michigan. As a nation we take terrible care of our bodies. Healthcare is a national crisis and our fastest growing industry. Why, because of our sickness, because of how we treat God's holy temple, our body, the home of God's Holy Spirit.

At Christmas we drove to Colorado. On the way we stopped at a gas station in Nebraska. Signs were everywhere, "Don't drink the water, high concentration of nitrates and phosphates." On the way home we stopped at a restaurant in eastern Colorado. On the wall in every booth was a sign saying, "If you are pregnant or have health issues please let us know. We will cook your food with bottled water. Our water is not safe to drink."

We have poisoned ourselves. We have poisoned our food sources, our water sources, and our air sources. North Platte, Nebraska, seems to be in the middle of nowhere. But it has the highest rate of large lymphoma cancer in the country because of the concentration of toxins in the water and soil that come together there at the confluence of the North Platte and the South Platte rivers. An oncologist once told me that every man in this country who lives to 80 will experience prostate cancer. Sickness abounds because of the choices we make about exercise, diet, food production, and the care of the environment. We are sick because we take a short term view rather than a long-term view. We are sick because we take the easy route instead of the healthy route.

Christ calls us to become conquerors with him, but will we choose to recognize and leave behind our ways of living that increase sickness. Will we open our eyes to our own participation in the evil of sickness?

Conclusion: Much of the world's evil is because of the choices we make. We all participate in war, famine, and sickness. The question is will we join Christ in conquering this evil? As we wake up to our reality, our lives will change, hope will grow, and our light will shine brighter and brighter. Let us wake-up to our reality. Amen.