

On the Other Side of Tribulation
Caldwell Presbyterian Church
April 21, 2013
Rev. John Cleghorn

Psalm 23
Revelation 7:9-17

It's not every Sunday that a preacher is inclined to go to the Revelation to John, that mysterious last book of the Bible. But given the week we as a nation have just had, you may understand why I'm in the mood to do just that.

In some Bibles, the subtitle for this prophetic vision is "the apocalypse." After this last week, I doubt I am the only one wondering whether the end of the world may in fact be near. There is no other way to say it – it's been a 'hell' of a week, one in which wave after wave of loss and pain has crashed over us.

- On Monday, evil presented itself at the finish line of the Boston Marathon, cloaking the celebration of patriotism and athletic achievement in a blood-soaked drape of tragedy. This drape hung over us all week as we mourned the lost and maimed and followed the manhunt for the bombers.
- Then, just as we began to catch our breath from Monday's horror, we learned that someone was mailing toxic-tainted envelopes to elected leaders in Washington, a cowardly form of protest.
- Then, also in Washington, a majority in the Senate demonstrated their own kind of cowardice in rejecting a mild, common-sense gun control bill whose measures a majority of Americans support.
- In Texas, an earthquake-caliber industrial explosion in Texas leveled half a town, leaving dead and wounded but also showing once again how courageous average Americans are when it counts.
- And, in the last 24 hours, an avalanche in Colorado killed five and an earthquake in China 160.

Given all of this, I found myself drawn to a phrase in this morning's reading from The Revelation to John. Verse 14 refers to a group of believers who have come out of a "great ordeal." As a country, it seems as if we've had to face one "ordeal" after another in recent years. We are at risk of getting "good" at enduring such events, if such a statement could be made. But last week's torrent or tragedy may indeed qualify it as our own modern-day "great ordeal."

I don't mind saying that part of me envies the 25 of our Caldwell women who retreated to the mountains this weekend. We all could have used that kind of change of pace and scenery.

But the rest of us have come here this morning, seeking solace in the company of God and each other. And here we receive a vision that reassured those early believers 2,000 years ago and can do the same for us.

* * *

Use whatever word you want to – tribulation, suffering, affliction, persecution, ordeal. All fit the meaning of the Greek word the author of Revelation uses in Chapter 7. This one word for trouble appears 45 times in the New Testament, a clear reminder of how those first believers had to lean on their faith in the face of evil, just as we do.

These believers were among the first Christians to take the Gospel out from Rome and Jerusalem into the further reaches of Asia Minor in the first and second centuries. For them, evil was persecution by non-believers for their faith in Christ Jesus. Pagans and hostile Jews attacked them for proclaiming the Gospel. Occasionally these critics of the Gospel succeeded in luring the Romans into the fray, which only intensified the persecution. So those were difficult days to follow the way of Christ.

We, too, face our own kinds of ordeals and tribulations, on the national scale as we have seen this week but also closer to home. Today and every Sunday these pews are filled with brothers and sisters in mourning, those facing major health problems, those struggling to live paycheck to paycheck, if there is any paycheck at all.

Here with us every Sunday are anxious, concerned parents and grandparents who spend hours worrying and praying for relatives whose lives are in one way or another at risk. Among us are those who are lost and disoriented in their careers or their marriages and other relationships or in their faith. Yes, we have our own ordeals to face on any number of levels.

So we need the image given to us today by the author of the Revelation. In it a great multitude is gathered from all tribes and peoples and languages, showing us again that the Kingdom of God is not a segregated one. They stand before a throne that is occupied by a great ruler and leader.

But here is where find – as we do throughout scripture - how God's vision and our expectations so often differ. You see, as John sees it, that powerful ruler is ... a lamb. It

is, of course, not just any lamb but The Lamb, the Christ, whose blood was shed for our broken world.

As John describes his vision:

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.
They will hunger no more, and thirst no more;
the sun will not strike them,
nor any scorching heat;
for the Lamb at the centre 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.¹

In this vision, we are reminded of an all-important truth of our faith, that our shepherd knows what it is to be a lamb. To be vulnerable. To be frightened. To suffer tribulation and ordeal.

In this all-too-often violent world of ours, the image of a Lamb as our leader may seem anathema. It may be the last symbol some would want in these militaristic and macho times. It's hard to imagine a National Football League team changing its name from the Giants or Jaguars ... to the Lambs. I also doubt the U.S. Army's next new model of tank will be called "the Lamb." No, it just doesn't sound right, at least in the eyes and ears of the world.

We love our football, after all. Some may find comfort in tanks and other tools of war. But there is no getting around the fact that these are not things of the God we know in Christ Jesus, who said in the Gospel of John:

"Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid." (John 14:27)

Weeks like this last one may cause us to question that line of thought and belief. To be sure, those behind the Boston Bombings are due justice to the full extent of our laws. Let me be clear about that. But as the Apostle Paul reminded believers in the first

¹ Revelation 7:15-17

century, we belong to a God who abides over all history, even when creation weeps. As Paul wrote in Romans:

“We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies. For in hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.” (Romans 8)

* * *

As I listened last week to the worship service in Boston commemorating those lives lost and forever changed, two of the speakers' statements stuck with me.

One said, “We cannot meet challenges as a group of individuals but as a community and a family, to demonstrate that love is more powerful than death.”

And a second speaker said, “The nature of faith is returning to its lessons even when they don't make sense.”

So in this season when we celebrate Christ's victory over death and darkness, we come together again, seeking understanding. And, we come back to the unlikely, truly unworldly, perhaps nonsensical image of a lamb as our shepherd. Yes, it is an image that those that love power, might and vengeance will easily dismiss. But it also shows us that in Christ, our God incarnate, God shared all of our emotions and experiences, pains and losses. Now this same Lamb reigns as our Shepherd, who in the reassuring words of the 23rd Psalm, watches over us, delivers us through the valley of the shadow and leads us beside still waters.

Yes, I admit that I am not usually prone to turn to the book of the Apocalypse in times of hurt and sorrow. But, there, of all places, we find this Eastertide image to help us understand times like these last few days, a divine reassurance that this broken world, all too full of ordeals, afflictions, persecutions and tribulations, does not get its way in the end.

In the meantime, friends, we are given faith precisely to resist evil and endure its counterattack. As one commentator writes:

“Dying and rising in Christ is how we become victors. We are conquerors not because we escape persecution – Christ did not escape it – but because we are God's children.

Joining the great multitude in John's vision, we too recognize our shepherd in 'the lamb at the center of the throne' (v. 17), who will guide us to springs of living waters, where 'God will wipe away every tear' from our eyes.²"

Thanks be to God, Amen.

² Feasting on the Word, Year C, Volume 2, p. 440. Commentary by Dana Ferguson.