

Strange and Dangerous Times: Revelation for Our Time
A Late Summer Sermon Series
Week One: Apocalypse Now
Revelation 1:1-20
Rev. Michael D. Kirby
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Northminster Presbyterian Church

In less than a minute, 9 people dead and 26 wounded before police were able to kill the shooter in Dayton last night, in what Ohio authorities identified as the 250th mass shooting and 32nd mass killing of 2019.

Thirteen hours earlier, in a reign of terror that lasted only a few minutes longer, in a Walmart in El Paso frequented by shoppers from Mexico, a white 21 year old from the Dallas area who drove 11 hours and appears to have posted a ranting manifesto about a “Hispanic invasion of Texas” and his fears that white people are being “replaced” by Latinos in my home state...slaughters at least 20 people and wounds more than 2 dozen more...some of whom may still die....

This week, new policies and proposed rules were announced that seek to remove a half-million children, many children of color, from free-lunch programs...another proposed rule seeks to remove protections in the Affordable Care Act that ensure that transgender Americans cannot be turned away by doctors or other health care providers.

It seems we are overtaken in large and small ways by dehumanizing forces. Some, the big public ones, we condemn....but the many smaller acts that chip away at our humanity remain unchallenged.

“We have been silent witnesses of evil deeds....Experience has rendered us suspicious of human beings, and often we have failed to speak to them a true and open word. Unbearable conflicts have worn us down or even made us cynical. Are we still of any use?” These are the words of a deeply conflicted Dietrich Bonhoeffer, from his “Letters and Papers from Prison,” writing about where he...a pastor, a theologian, a man of God...found himself after being arrested for becoming involved in a plot to kill Adolph Hitler.

From the perspective of 2019 we can look back and say...you were involved in a battle between good and evil, and even though you succumbed in part to evil...you did it for a worthy cause. Good ultimately triumphed....even if it cost Bonhoeffer his life.

Even though it's easy to say to Bonhoeffer, you were on the right side from 70 years in the future...

How do we speak to those who are in the midst of the great conflicts of our day...How do we imagine for the marginalized and those whose have lost loved ones in the hundreds of mass shootings in the last decade...a way out of our apathy, our racism, our injustice and their pain?

One of the ways we have done that throughout history is by using apocalyptic language...

What if I were standing at that point far off in the future...so far off we have no idea when it will be...when these great human wrongs have been conquered and overcome....but looking back across time to today and trying to describe to us what must happen, how would I describe it....particularly when what I'm describing is not something concrete like the death of one ruler...but is instead the conflict between earthly power with all its warring and fighting and buying and selling...and a kind of love that overcomes all of those things...how would I, how could I describe that?

Now, let's add one more piece to the puzzle....let's imagine that I'm not the one standing in the future...because I'm not...I'm right here....so someone else has to be standing in that some future day, looking back...and telling us what is happening...

I'll tell you how we do it right now...all you need to do is look at the movie box office numbers...

What are the top three movies of the last 365 days?

Avengers: Endgame
Captain Marvel
Spiderman: Far From Home

We turn to fantasy to fight our battles of good and evil in contemporary culture...perhaps because we are so exhausted by the failures of our social

and political systems to affect change....to move the needle toward justice in the battles of good and evil....

The apocalyptic writers don't use fantasy, they use visions...and they don't call down superheroes...they receive those "visions" with all of their fantastic and often indecipherable mysteries given by God...

For the apocalyptic writers of the New Testament...the figure that stands in the future and speaks back to us about what is to come...that future being...not just a human...but the messenger of God's own self...for John...it is right there in the beginning of today's text...a revelation of Jesus Christ...this is the apocalypse of Jesus Christ.

That's what Revelation is...that's what Daniel is, that's what large parts of Isaiah and Ezekiel are...mystical, symbolic dispatches from a future that is utterly different from ours trying to look back and describe not so much earthly, but eternal transformation that is coming...

Now, imagine you live in 1st century Ephesus...one of the 7 cities written to in Asia Minor...what we today call Turkey...in the book of Revelation. You have fire and steel, the wheel and the stars to guide you at night, but no modern science or medicine or philosophy or literature. No smart phones, no understanding of the atom, or the solar system....90 percent of the people can't read, and you can die from a wood splinter...or from childbirth....or from the whim of a Roman guard...and you have no say in the matter.

Your understanding of power....is Rome. Your understanding of standing up to power is death...even for this Son of Man Jesus you've been taught about...he stood up...and died...and the only thing that made him different was that he was raised from the dead...admittedly, a pretty big deal...but hard for you to wrap your head around when you didn't see it.

And so one of your teachers writes to you and says....God has a message for us...now, he's not saying he got a fax from God, or a visit like something out of Back to the Future...no....he has experienced a moment of understanding in the middle of a lot of mystery...one that is very murky, that he himself doesn't fully understand...but it's a vision from a time when it is not Rome who is power....but God....when resistance to earthly power isn't death...but when earthly power's resistance to God's power dies...where evil and hatred and sin and fear and even death itself die forever.

But how is he to describe this...how are we going to get from Roman power and death to divine power and love? From bleeding bodies in a Walmart to Dr. King's Beloved Community. Surely, the only way is through some great confrontation...when the reality of God's loving, saving power confronts once and for all death and sin and fear and hate....

That's what's going on in Revelation....it is one man's imagining, aided by the Holy Spirit and lots of symbolism we to this day struggle to understand....

It's not the words of a seer describing things exactly how they are going to happen...things like numbers and time periods and beasts and beings...they are mystical, imagined ways of describing something that mere words can't describe....as Scholar and seminary President Brian Blount puts it....it seeks to describe an ultimate truth, "but that truth is so powerful, so overwhelming, that John's words cannot properly convey it. He therefore appeals to symbols and codes that must bear the weight his language cannot."

And because of who he is writing to...and the great chasm between the world of today and the world he imagines...he doesn't speak in shades of gray...he speaks in black and white ways....in ways of life and death, good and evil, in the language of either/or....

And that is why, perhaps, what we need...is an apocalypse now....a vision that sees beyond the sometimes brutal reality of today to what could be. Perhaps we need to create for ourselves little hopeful visions of what could be...

Maybe that's why we turn to fictional heroes like Captain America, Captain Marvel and Spiderman....all regular people to whom something incredible happens...all people who become defined by their willingness to sacrifice for others...

Maybe that's even why we turn to more troubled heroes like Batman....a man with much who has suffered much...who has no superpower...only wealth...but who seeks to do good...but who, like the apocalyptic writers, sees the world as black and white...

We have a black and white relationship to the suffering of children, don't we? Anything that makes them suffer is evil...and tears at our hearts...even something as benignly evil as cancer....there is not a heart that beats that is not broken by the site of a hairless child battling leukemia or any one of the dozens of childhood cancers...I was a chaplain in a children's hospital for

only three months...but those images, those families are seeded on my brain forever...And there is something you learn very quickly in the world of childhood cancer....the world is NOT grey...the world is very black and white....there is that which gives life and that which takes it....there is that which is a source of hope and that which kills hope...

It's not surprising that many of the kids dealing with cancer become huge fans of comic book heroes...or the heroes from them that end up in movies...given that they live in the black and white world of life and death...good vs. evil...every day...

Six years ago, Miles Scott was one of those children...and he was perhaps the greatest fan of Batman ever. Six years ago...Miles was a very sick young man. He had battled lymphoblastic leukemia almost his entire life—undergoing various chemotherapy treatments from the age of 18 months to the age of 7. Most kids with lymphoblastic leukemia ultimately lose their battle... though that is changing...and a lot of the kids who end up getting their wishes fulfilled by the Make A Wish foundation are kids with lymphoblastic leukemia.

We know what they do, right? Six years ago, Miles completed a long round of chemotherapy and was declared in remission.

It was then that his mother wrote to Make A Wish...about her son's dream to be his hero...the avenging angel of life...Batman...

Maybe you remember seeing the videos...or the over 500,000 posts each on Facebook and Twitter....Maybe you've seen the Warner Brothers documentary, *Batkid Begins*, which was the audience favorite at the Slam Dance film festival a few years ago....All of them talking about what is still to this day, the biggest Make A Wish event ever...Batkid Day...

On November 13, 2013, Miles, just 7 years old, was told that his wish was being granted to get a Batman costume and to see the real Batmobile...that was it...But in reality, the entire city of San Francisco was being transformed into Gotham City...Villains like the Riddler and potential victims rehearsed scenarios for weeks...the mayor, the police chief and 12,000 volunteers created an entire day for Miles where Batman and the police chief came to him, begging for help to save Gotham City...and then he did...defeating villain after villain, rescuing a woman tied to the cable car tracks....defusing a bomb...saving one person after another...and ultimately getting the key to

the city surrounded by thousands of cheering San Franciscans...EVERY national news program covered it.

San Francisco experienced a mini apocalypse...and I defy you to watch the videos on Youtube with a dry eye...Good triumphs over evil...and this little boy gets to be on the side of good...

Yes, some of it is silly to adults...but not to a little boy...But every report, every interview with one of those volunteers, from actors to city officials to those who just cheered him on, say THEY were transformed...that light came into their lives by bringing light to his...there were no shades of grey that day....only light overcome darkness...

That's what John wants our participation in this vision to be...

For the next month, we will see John's vision of the day...when the light overcomes every shadow...when the forces of hate and prejudice and fear and want and shame are ultimately defeated...

John's telling of the story just might make us uncomfortable...in fact, I guarantee that it will... we who live in a grey world, to live inside his black and white vision...but it is John's hope that we can find ourselves in his vision...can live on the side of light...on the winning side of hope and love and grace...for he says that's the ultimate outcome...life wins....not because we make it happen, but because God's love and power simply cannot lose ultimately...and so in hope we journey on...

Sure....Batman is make-believe....and a lot of what San Francisco did for Batkid could be called the same thing....but it wasn't for him...he was living inside a vision of what could be a way to see beyond the harsh reality he had lived in his entire life...

Thankfully, Miles has been cancer free for all six years since that day...He is living a new reality the doctors tell him....

Can we?

We pray that we will one day live in the new reality that is the outcome of John's vision...indeed, Jesus' life, death and resurrection promise we will...but for now...we can, we must, imagine how it might come about... And live toward that new reality...

In the meantime...may we keep our eyes open for the little apocalypses...the places where hope is breaking in, where love is triumphing and be willing to join in when we can.

Thanks be to God...