

John speaks this morning of those who have been through a great ordeal and who have come out on the other side. John doesn't tell us, at least not here, what the ordeal was. He tells us only that those who have come through it are a great multitude. People from every nation, tribe, and tongue, who are now standing before a throne, bowing down to a lamb. Actually, John doesn't say they are bowing down to a lamb, but to *the* Lamb, because any lamb that can get a multitude to bow down before it would have to be *the* Lamb. And they—the multitude from every nation, tribe, and tongue—are all dressed in white.

It's a scene that is neither fact nor fiction. John isn't an historian or a reporter. Despite what we may have been told, the book of Revelation isn't fact. John isn't actually standing in the midst of a multitude, reporting on their behaviors and dress. He's not able to reach out and touch the Lamb. If someone were to ask John for a polaroid of this magnificent scene, he couldn't provide one. At the same time, John isn't making it all up. By definition, revelation is neither fact nor fiction, but vision. Which, if you think about it, makes a lot of sense. I mean, how else would you explain the site of a great multitude—people from every nation, tribe, and tongue—bowing down to a lamb? Have you ever seen such a thing?

I've seen nations at war with each other. I've seen nations compete with each other for food, for weapons, for economic gains, for global domination. I've seen nations turn other nations away at borders. I've seen the damaging impacts of nationalism and tribalism in the streets and schools of our own nation. I've seen what the tongue can do when those who sit on thrones of power speak to our worst fears and prejudices without also speaking to our deepest hopes. I've seen what happens when we raise the color of country, blood and soil above the color of skin. But never have I seen people from every nation, tribe, and tongue bow down together to a lamb—to the very symbol of gentleness and peace.

The late Eugene Peterson says, “The basic nature of history is warfare. History is a long sequence of battles—the forces of good and evil in pitched conflict. Sensitive persons know this. Artists know this. Students study just to show this. Even when the guns are

silent, people of prayer silently rage on within the soul. The battle is fought out in family circles; on rural hillsides and in noisy city squares; it is contested between nations. War is the human condition. To be human is to be at war.”¹

Read Revelation and sure, we get a glimpse of John’s hopeful vision for a different kind of world; not another world, just this world differently. That vision, however, is about 12 sentences in a book that is 22 chapters long. Most of Revelation serves to remind us of what we already know: the world is shot through with evil. Again, Eugene Peterson: “Everywhere there are persons and groups bent on destroying a good creation: killing and mutilating living beings, exploiting a bountiful earth, crippling and weakening precious bodies.” There is sin against society, sin against the land, sin against God.

And we must be careful, for around every turn sin wants to slip in the backdoor disguised as something good. Like war itself, which at first is perceived as evil—nations go to war and people pray for peace. But then, not long after, war can be quickly glamorized, deemed patriotic, and even rationalized as just.

In the book of Revelation, however, there are 3 horses, each representative of a different killing machine. There is the black horse of famine, the pale horse of death, and the red horse of war. In the end, Jesus himself will ride upon the black horse and the pale horse, but never will he ride upon the red horse of war. He will join ranks with the hungry and the dying, but never with the warring, never with those who seek glory in killing. For with Jesus, the point is not to beat the world into submission. We said it last week, Jesus never staged a rally or stepped to a microphone to make a point, not even a good point. He didn’t come to cure us of our cynicism or to give us an answer to the question of evil in the world. He came to heal us. To touch our broken parts, to anoint them as holy, and in so doing to restore us to wholeness. In the Jesus who reaches out to embrace both the rich and poor, both the sinner and saint, both the doubting and the faithful, we find that whoever we are, we belong, and we belong to one another.

This past Friday evening I went with our Confirmation students and their adult mentors to Congregation Beth Shalom, an Orthodox Jewish community in Providence. One of our purposes in Confirmation is to learn from those whose faith and religious

¹ From *“Reversed Thunder: The Revelation of John and the Praying Imagination,”* p. 74.

experiences are different from our own, and this seemed like the perfect opportunity. The Jewish Shabbat, or Sabbath service, was to begin at 6:30 p.m. on Friday. We arrived at 6:20 p.m. only to discover we were the first ones there. At 6:40 p.m. there were maybe 7 Jewish worshipers there. At 6:45 p.m. the Rabbi showed up. At 7:05 p.m., one more person walked in, at which point someone in our group thought to ask the Rabbi, “When does the actual service begin?” He told us, “We can’t begin until we have at least 10 Jewish men here.”

“10? What’s so special about 10?” I asked. He told us that 10 is what’s called a minyan, or a quorum. They get the number from the Old Testament story about Moses. Moses you will recall was tapped by God to lead the Hebrew slaves out of bondage in Egypt and to take them to a new land, one that God promised would be free for the taking. Of course, it took only 40 years for them to get there. When they finally did arrive, Moses sent 10 spies to go ahead and scout things out. “Come back and tell us what you see.”

The spies found that the land was generally good—spacious with plenty of food and water. There was—in their eyes—just one problem: there were people already living in the land and the people were not Hebrews. They were strangers who looked different from them. They lived differently, spoke differently, worshiped differently, and this difference felt overwhelming to the spies. How are we going to live with those people? So, rather than face their fears, the spies made up a false report. They lie. “If we go into that land, we’ll be killed.”

But it wasn’t true. It was never true. And to this day when the Jewish people gather to worship they require a minimum of 10 people—in Orthodox Judaism 10 men, but in most lines of Judaism, just 10 Jewish worshipers. It’s their way of countering the lie that has been told for centuries: that we must be afraid of the stranger. That the love of God can’t possibly be big enough for everyone. If it took 10 people to tell the lie, let there be at least 10 people to tell the truth.

Go to an Orthodox Jewish service and the whole thing will be in Hebrew. You won’t understand a word of what’s being said. That won’t change the fact, though, that the point of the whole service is to tell a different story than the one we’ve grown used to hearing. It’s a story in which there is welcome for the stranger, courage to face our fears, and bread for the hungry. It’s the story of a God whose love is impossibly big enough for everyone.

After the service was over, we were greeted by a couple members of the synagogue, one of whom said, "You have no idea how much it means to us that you came here tonight. In our world, one can be shot and killed for being a Jew who shows up to worship. It means so much to us that you are not afraid to show up, too."

In John's vision of a new heaven and a new earth, he sees a great multitude of people from every nation, tribe, and tongue coming together before God. They raise their voices in grateful praise and when they do, it has the power to wipe away every tear from every eye. This multitude, says John just a few verses earlier, equals 144,000. That's a big number, a much bigger number than I've ever seen.

But I wonder if 100 would be enough? Could we make a new heaven and earth with just 100? Or how about 10? Or even, or even, just 2. If there were only 2 of us, would it be enough to make of this old world a new one?