

Speech Reference – Apocalypse

This is sermon on Rev. 7: 9-17 after 9/11 on the time of anxiety and city by Rev. Mark Smutny of Pasadena Pres. Church

Apocalypse in Greek means “revelation”. In the Bible, apocalypse does not refer to a cataclysmic (disastrous) event or the end of the world as modern-day fundamentalists and common parlance would have you believe.

Rather *Apocalypse* simply means “revelation” from God. *Apocalypse* is a form of biblical writing characterized by highly symbolic imagery, cosmic battles between God and evil, and a core belief that God will break into human history in dramatic, life-changing ways.

The Book of Revelation, also known as the *Apocalypse of John*, is the best known form of this biblical writing.

Most certainly the Apocalypse was written in a time of great social upheaval (disturbance) in the last quarter of the First Century. Its vivid imagery and fantastic characters are a treasure trove of symbol and mystery. Besides making several well known fundamentalist a lot of money, the Apocalypse of John has inspired much great Christian art and hymnody.

The Apocalypse of John culminates in chapter 21 and 22 with the image of the heavenly city descending from heaven to earth (not the other way around) and promising a new city where tears are wiped away, where suffering is no more and where the light of God and Christ illumine everything. This earthly city imbued with the qualities of heaven is foreshadowed in today’s reading (7:9-17).

Into such anxiety as this John of Patmos – prophet of God, apostle of Christ, seer of dreams and visions- issued his words of comfort to the rubble of his generation by picturing not a city in collapse, but a city of God descending from heaven, a beautiful city, a city whose very architecture is built on the foundation of the inclusive love of God. It is a city whose vitality is built on the presence of God empowering every human being to full dignity and freedom.

The year was late in First Century of the Christian era. Domitian was emperor. Domitian demanded that his subjects address him as Lord and God. We’ve heard that before. Hitler, Stalin, Pol Pot, and Japanese emperor demanded it. Every time we bow down before racism, homophobia and violence, we bow down before such Caasars.

Persecution of Christians was pervasive.
Choosing Christ was not an academic exercise.
It could cost you your life.
Some abandoned the faith to save their lives, or so they thought.
Even the courageous were afraid for what is courage but the decision to
face your fears.

Cities were unsafe places.
No airliners rained from the skies, but terror reined on the streets and in
human hearts.
It was a time of high anxiety.
John's people asked our questions, "what shall we do?"
What shall we believe? Where is God now?"
Into such anxiety as this John's vision was given to his people and to us.

The Book of Revelation is written for the comfort and courage of
Christians who are marginalized and attempting to spread the faith in
the midst of appalling conditions, the Apocalypse spins a fantasy of a
new world. In this new world we are urged to see a more courageous way
to live.

When Caesar brutalizes with the drumbeat of war,
John sees angles armed with their sword of truth;

When nations are set against nations, John sees Christ who is our peace;

When fear of differences forces people to lock their doors and houses and
hearts, John pictures open city streets, where gates are never shut,
the lights are always on, love is the rule and peace is lasting.

In John's world all nations and languages and tongues gather in one
place, one sacred space in the middle of the city, and all are one in their
unity of praise to the God who gathered them, the Christ who saved them,
the Spirit who sustains them.

The Book of Revelation is a book about the city and finding hope in the
city amid its failings. Churches in the city is a sacred space for the city.

Broad Street United Methodist Church has its slogan "City in our hearts
and our hearts in the city." John is a lover of cities. His streets are wide
and safe. A heavenly, pervasive light takes away all darkness. There are
no churches in his city know roof repair bills because God is everywhere
and there is no need of churches.

John is a lover of cities.

He is also a lover of peoples.
Into his city he places peoples of every language and nation and tribe.
His city is an inclusive city like New York, Los Angeles and Pasadena.

Rev. 21: 1-27:

The focus is now on earth, not heaven, for it is to earth that the heavenly city descends. God's presence, until now was hidden behind the vault.

The throne of God is in the midst of the city, and the healing, sustenance, and relief, only glimpsed in 7:16, are described once more.

The dimensions of the new Jerusalem are set out.

John sees a new heaven and earth replacing the ones that have vanished. John sees the holy city descending out of heaven. Babylon and Jerusalem are thereby implicitly juxtaposed and contrasted, reminiscent of the contrast between Jerusalem above and below in Gal 4:26 (cf. Heb 12:22).

That which descends from heaven is a blessing rather than a curse on humanity (cf. 12:12; 16:21), and

this city is a place to enter rather than depart from (18:4);
it is from God (cf. 3:12).

The image of the city's being prepared in heaven reflects the apocalyptic view that heaven is, in some sense, a repository of what is to come, which can be revealed to the eye of vision before it descends in the last days (cf. 9:15; 12:6). Jerusalem is

There is a voice from the throne (cf. 16:17; 19:5), a "great voice" from heaven (NIV and NRSV, "loud voice"; cf. 11:12; 12:10; 16:1, 17; 19:1).

God's dwelling with people characterizes the life of the holy nation in Lev 26:12 and Joel 2:27, and it is the new Jerusalem of Ezekiel's vision (Ezek 48:35; cf. Ezek 37:27; Zech 2:11).

In the New Testament God's dwelling (tabernacle) is the life of a holy, and so separate, people (2 Cor 6:16).

In the new Jerusalem, mortals are now God's "peoples" (the Greek is 3 There will be no more mourning, crying, or pain (cf. Isa 35:10; 51:11; 65:19), contrasting with what had been (18:7-8; cf. 11:15; 16:10-11).

Rev. 21:22-23.