

**SLD04.29.07 4<sup>th</sup> Easter**  
**Emory Presbyterian Church**  
**Revelation 7:9-17**  
**Jill Oglesby Evans**

### **“Blessed Assurance”**

This morning I am tackling for the first time the Book of Revelation. If you've ever perused this last book of the Bible, you'll appreciate why this is such an intimidating prospect. In the beginning, John says whoever reads it aloud will be blessed. I say, whoever reads it aloud will be confused. I mean, who understands Revelation, either the book or the personal experience? Is it a head thing, a heart thing, a faith thing, an eccentric thing, or really just an aberrant firing of the nervous system? God breaking into our ordinary consciousness or a mild psychotic episode?

A while back I read a poignant novel called *Lying Awake*<sup>1</sup> about a cloistered nun, who, after years of spiritual barrenness, receives a miraculous gift: the ability to connect with God directly through rapturous visions. These visions move the nun to write luminous poetry with which she shares with others the inspiration and beauty of God's revelations to her. Come to find out, though, her revelations may be linked to a brain disorder resolvable by surgery. Now she is faced with a rather dreadful choice: to undergo the surgery and lose the revelations that have fired her faith and the faith of so many, or to leave her disability alone and continue to share the gift that God has made of it.

Most of us would go for the surgery, of course. But listen how author Mark Salzman describes the gift of the nun's revelations:

*Pure awareness stripped her of everything. She became an ember carried upward by the heat of an invisible flame. Higher and higher she rose, away from all she knew. Powerless to save*

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<sup>1</sup> *Lying Awake*, Mark Salzman, Albert A. Knopf, NY, NY, 2000.

*herself, she drifted up toward infinity until the vacuum sucked the feeble light out of her... More luminous than any sun, transcending visibility, the flare consumed everything, it lit up all of existence. In this radiance she could see forever, and everywhere she looked, she saw God's love.*<sup>2</sup>

Who would want to lose such intimacy with God? Who would want to let go of such pervasive bone-resting, mind-settling, heart-filling assurance as that?

The question of the source of the nun's revelations is never finally resolved in the novel. But in the Christian faith tradition, though usually tested in the community for authenticity, direct, divine revelations have been honored from the first disciples. Over the millennia, two basic models for what revelation discloses have evolved - either truths *about* God, or a glimpse of the essence of God, God's Self. It appears the nun experienced something close to the latter, a personal experience of the essence of God.

Protestant reformers Luther and Calvin, on the other hand, regarded revelation less in terms of an existential connection with God's Self than as a disclosure of propositions *about* God, a kind of gut grasping of divine characteristics not otherwise attainable by reason, such as God's righteousness, God's trustworthiness, God's mercy and forgiveness. Either way, clearly an experience of authentic revelation extends a profound impact on the faith of a believer.

Indeed, the Methodists so highly and explicitly value the relevance of revelation to the life of a believer that it holds equal footing on what's called the Wesleyan Quadrilateral of Faith, the corners of which are anchored by Scripture, Tradition, Experience and...Revelation.

The structure and the content of John Calvin's theology likewise emphasize the centrality of revelation, particularly as delivered through scripture. (Institutes I.I.1n1) Creation abounds with revelation about God, says Calvin, but since too often we don't

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

“get it” through nature, our persistent God adds “another and better help to direct us aright to the very Creator of the Universe.” (I.VI.1)

As central as Scripture is the Protestant Reformation, likewise is it central to the Protestant revelation. But Calvin isn’t referring to the words on the printed page of scripture so much as what he calls “the life energy in God’s words that quickens the souls of all to whom God grants participation in it.” (II.X.7)

It’s that *life energy and quickening of the soul* that accompanies, results, or perhaps even causes, the nun’s experience of revelation, and which she is so loathe to lose. The same life energy and quickening of the soul, presumably, that animates the disciple John to wander off to the island of Patmos and hole himself up in a cave to set down the whole psychedelic book of Revelation.

And even though the imagery and allegory of John’s book is a bit mind-boggling, he warns against messing with any of its content. Add or take away a single word of it and God’ll flat send plagues on you. (Rev. 22:18) Problem is, to us 21<sup>st</sup> century Protestants, especially those of us raised in the 60’s and 70’s, the text of Revelation sounds forever like the beloved disciple might be ...well...tripping. If you don’t know what I’m talking about, good. Don’t find out. Just say “no.” But if you do, and you’ve read the Book of Revelation, tell me it doesn’t strike you as though John has just dropped some first century Hellenic equivalent of acid.

Now I don’t say that to discount in any way John’s insight or reputation. I happen to have a healthy respect for altered states of consciousness, especially those anchored in faith and achieved through prayer and meditation. Better yet are those insights, visions or dreams that aren’t “achieved” at all, but simply given by God, who knows why

or how, and which have the effect of leading, grounding or assuring one's faith. Still, I can't help but confess that John's visions sound forever to me like they're more than one token over the line.

'Course, maybe that's because any experience of divine revelation is from the "outside in," therefore categorically defying our language for describing it. The word "revelation" translates from the Greek term "apokalypsis" which literally means "an uncovering, a laying bare, a making naked."<sup>3</sup> The assumption being that a) something or someone is hidden, and b) that something or someone isn't discovered, but *disclosed*. By its very nature, divine revelation is from the "outside in." So perhaps it makes sense that the language used to describe it, stretched as it is beyond ordinary use, would necessarily strike one as eccentric and weird.

Despite the bizarre imagery of John's Revelation, the 4<sup>th</sup> century church fathers who called the shots on which books made it into the Bible still apparently agreed that, however colorful and cryptic, John's visions belonged in the canon. I like to imagine that, come the very end of the very last day of all that candle-lit, canonical decision-making, when John's submission surfaces to the top of the stack, those bleary-eyed church fathers grab a page or two and maybe sit up a little straighter.

Perhaps disturbed by its content, maybe one of them glances over his scratchy half-glasses to peruse the others' reactions. Perhaps he notices a slight smile cracking one colleague's craggy face. Feeling the glance, the other looks up. Eyes lock. Both grin. "Dare you," says the one. The other chuckles. Another joins, and then another, until the whole covey of hunched and hoary scholars is shaking with muted toothless laughter.

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<sup>3</sup> *A Handbook of Theological Terms*, Van A. Harvey, Macmillan Co., Ny, Ny. 1964, pp. 207-209.

What the heck, they all decide. It's been a long four centuries and maybe the church could use a little intense vision-speak, if for no other reason than to keep future believers humble and a little off-balance. And so the whole of John's wild language, pulsing as it does with beauty and terror and odd, odd images, gets tossed over to the biblical "in-box."

Whatever really happened, to this day, you dip into the Book of Revelation and there's just no telling what you'll find, or what'll find you. Here's where we're dipping in today – at Revelation 7:9-17, where John writes:

After this I looked, (and the "this" John is talking about is a seriously bizarre scenario in which the Lamb opens seven seals, and four living creatures call out like thunder, and four different colored horses trot out, a white one and a red one and a black one and a green one, each of them ridden by symbolic eccentric who say and do weird things, followed by a weeping wail of slaughtered souls, which comes on the heels of a black sun, a bloody moon, and a disappearing sky, all of which arch menacingly over a highly but understandably spooked legion of formerly powerful, privileged folk who are now running scared and hiding behind whatever rocks they can find. [Can you say LSD?])

Then, after this, says John, I looked, and there was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, robed in white, with palm branches in their hands. They cried out in a loud voice, saying,

"Salvation belongs to our God who is seated on the throne, and to the Lamb!"

And all the angels stood around the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures, and they fell on their faces before the throne and worshipped God, singing,

"Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom  
and thanksgiving and honour  
and power and might  
be to our God for ever and ever! Amen."

Then one of the elders addressed me, saying, "Who are these, robed in white, and where have they come from?" I said to him, "Sir, you

are the one that knows.” Then he said to me, “These are they who have come out of the great ordeal; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.

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.”

In today’s particular (relatively calm) vision of John’s, diverse people from all over the globe are standing before the throne of God. The Lamb, who is Jesus, hovers nearby, maybe on the throne, dressed in white, the color of purity. In John’s vision Jesus is all resurrected and whole and holy and at home, the way he promises we’ll *all* be one day. And before him a multitude is waving palm branches, just like that pre-passion crowd in Jerusalem, only *these* folks have finally gotten what Jesus’ death was all about, and what it means for them.

“Salvation belongs to our God!” they holler. And nearby angels and elders become transported with the truth and ecstasy of the people’s revelation. Everyone starts singing and waving their hands and falling out like a heavenly Holiness camp meeting, a metaphysical love fest, a sacred and holy homage to the wholeness and salvation available through Christ Jesus.

Until the focus of John’s entranced mind’s eye narrows from the panoramic to the particular when one of the ecstatic elders asks him: “Who *are* these folks, robed in white, and where have they come from?”

Replies John, “If anybody knows, *you* do.”

And indeed, the elder does know, and testifies to John right then and there just who it is that comprises the ecstatic multitude - not the powerful or the wealthy or the competent, the ones before whom all the world's a pearl, but the ones who have suffered and grieved and been brought to their knees. The ones who have suffered mightily but who have also been lifted up and washed by the blood of the Lamb. It's the hungry and the thirsty and the lost and the sad whose tears God has wiped away. The ones who have endured great ordeals stand before the throne now, safe, healed and sheltered by the Shepherd.

These are words we faithful of today recognize, if not the Bosch-esque scenario that surrounds them. This friend of the downtrodden is a Jesus with whom we are familiar. But don't let's limit ourselves to just the familiar in John's graphic visions. For despite his defense of every jot and tittle, it's not John's words or images themselves that transform; *it's the life energy behind them that quickens souls and directs them aright to the Creator of the Universe.* The gift of divine revelation lies not in what we grasp about God, but in how God grasps us, how God breaks in and breaks through our familiar reality, "carrying us away" with the love of God.

You let that life energy, that *Spirit* behind divine revelation quicken your soul, advises Calvin, and you'll come to "know" God's righteousness, and God's trustworthiness, and God's mercy and forgiveness, and best of all, that bone-settling, heart-filling assurance, that *blessed* assurance, of God's great love for you through Christ Jesus.

And who would ever want to give *that* up?

To the glory of God. Amen.