

## The Revelation of Our World

A sermon by the Rev. Dr. Robert D. Flanagan for  
The Fourth Sunday of Easter, Year C, Revelation 7:9-17

“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.”

In the years since World War II, our world has become increasingly complex, making life more and more confusing and anxiety provoking. In the Second World War, America fought the destructive and oppressive powers that were systematically killing millions whom they were deemed inferior. Many Americans could rationalize going to war against the Nazi and Fascists because they were evil. For many, the war’s purpose was clear.

Since then, the use of military force by the United States has become more problematic. The Korean War has not officially ended. The Cold War ended, but America’s relationship with Russia has become strained again. The war in Afghanistan is now in its eighteenth year. (I had a hard time calculating that number because I couldn’t believe it had been that long.) What about the undeclared war against ISIS? When compared to World War II, the purpose of these military conflicts seems less clear.

Our military has intervened in other areas as well. It has gone into countries for humanitarian reasons, but then the mission changed. For instance, we entered Somalia in 1993 to feed its starving people, but then our military started to chase down its warlords. Our soldiers quickly went from being welcomed to the enemy. The book and movie *Black Hawk Down* describe the battle of Mogadishu, which ended with the bodies of several U.S. soldiers being dragged through the streets.

What about the emerging crisis in Venezuela? The leaders of that country seem to be oppressing, persecuting, and killing its people. In World War II, those were justifications for fighting against the Axis powers. In Afghanistan, we have been fighting the Taliban partly to help the Afghani people live free from oppression. In Somalia, its starving citizens were reason enough to send in our military. Couldn’t we point to these examples and others to justify taking military action in Venezuela?

We can’t ignore such a question. We must consider this question because we are citizens of a democracy. We live in a country that values free speech as well. We, therefore, have a responsibility to think about such issues. Our elected officials represent us, and we owe it to them to share our thoughts. So, as American citizens, we can’t help but wrestle with such thorny topics. As Christians and people of faith, we also have a responsibility to consider such situations.

Christianity has long been tied to helping those in need. Drawing on Jesus’s teachings, such as the Parable of the Good Samaritan and others, groups of Christians have led lives of service to those in need. One such group was the Beguines, which was an order of laywomen that started in Northern Europe in the thirteenth century. The group centered its life around prayer and service to the poor. Their most famous member was Mechthild of Magdeburg, a town located in central Germany. Mechthild not only served the poor but also was a mystic and writer.

She has left us writings that “show the creativity of the medieval imagination” (132). Some of her writings from *The Flowing Light of the Godhead* can help us understand our response when considering today’s challenges.

Another source of help is the *Revelation to John*. Written, in the late first-century, by a follower of the apostle John, the work is a revelatory vision about the future. *Revelation* is written in the ancient literary genre called apocalypse and describes the world in a cataclysmic conflict between good and evil. Its resolution only happens when God intervenes. The text illustrates not just our world at war but a war extending to heaven, as well (Revelation 12:7). The battle does end, and light and love win out over darkness and evil because of God’s actions. In the twenty-first chapter, John writes, “I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth passed away” (Revelation 21:1a).

What does this mean for us? As Christians, the situation in Venezuela, among others, is particularly challenging. How do we support people who are clearly starving at the hands of its leaders? Considering the suffering of the Venezuelan people, our Eastertide celebration of Christ’s victory over death is problematic. Can we faithfully sing “Alleluia, the strife is over,” when people are needlessly starving? The battle is not done.

What do we do? I’m not going to be Pollyannaish and give you a few simple suggestions. You know what you can do. I instead want to point to the bigger picture and the overarching understanding of our lives. Even though Easter has come, the great ordeal is not over, but it will be one day. The battle between good and evil still goes on—in heaven and on earth—but one day good will defeat evil once and for all. One day, a multitude of humanity will stand before the throne of God, “wearing robes made white in the blood of the Lamb.” And “they will hunger no more, and thirst no more” because the Lamb has guided the people “to springs of the water of life” (Revelation 7:14, 17).

Mechthild describes it more personally. When the soul reaches heaven, “God greets the soul and is clothed with such heavenly garments and surrounded with such strength that it may ask whatever it wishes and be sure that the wishes shall be granted...God and the soul soar to a bliss that cannot be described” (Madigan, 135).

We cannot stop all the wrongs of our world. The world is a complex, perplexing, and confounding place. Just when we think we’ve gotten it all in order, chaos breaks out again. Evil raises its ugly head, and we grow anxious.

Despite the world’s difficulties and challenges, the Spirit urges us to keep at it, to serve the poor as Mechthild and the other Beguines did. Thus, we are not to ignore the plight of people of Venezuela nor others that suffer. We are to help them and do our best not to make the problem worse. We are also to pray. We pray, beseeching God to help. We pray to God to give us strength and courage to do the right thing in the right way, at the right time.

We must also never forget that our troubles will end one day, and we will hunger and thirst no more and receive the solace that comforts us and relieves our suffering.

Sources:

Aune, David E. “Revelation: Introduction” in *The HarperCollins Study Bible*. Wayne A. Meeks, Gen. Ed. (New York: Harper Collins, 1993) 2307-2309.

Madigan, Shawn. *Mystics, Visionaries, and Prophets: A Historical Anthology of Women's Spiritual Writings*. (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress Press, 1998).