

A Sermon for DaySpring

by Eric Howell

Ascension in Apocalypse

Acts 1.1-11

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Almost every person at some point, even those who sing Alleluia to Jesus with a whole heart---almost everyone at some point asks the unanswerable question: how can a good God allow *this*? It's not just a question weaponized by skeptics or cynics or atheists to undermine the faith of believers. Almost everyone has a "this". How can an all-good, all-loving, all-powerful God allow this evil to happen?

As far as I have read, the Bible does not give a satisfying, final answer to this problem. The Bible says God is good and powerful and loving and also recognizes in clear terms that sometimes really bad things will happen; evil will rampage through the lives of people and destroy communities and nations.

It doesn't take scripture's writers, pastors, poets, and theologians long to recognize that not all of life works according to a simple math of cause and effect. Job was a good man and evil still befell him. The author of Ecclesiastes, an old man, came to believe that good and evil happened to everyone no matter what: *the rain falls on the fields of the just and unjust*. And then there's Jesus, a good man—THE good man who suffered egregiously at the hands of supposedly good people. Jesus is the total reversal of the old, simplistic theology that says good happens to good, bad happens to bad. Not with Jesus. With Jesus, terrible evil happens to one who is incomparably good just because of the way he is incomparably good.

Christians especially in the first couple of centuries took consolation in this because they also experienced similar suffering. As you know, the apostles were each martyred as were many other early Christians whose faithfulness to their faith made them enemies of Rome. The faith of those Christians was not rewarded with success in life; it was met with resentment and oppression by the Roman empire. And when they baptized their children, they knew what might be at stake for them.

This is the canvas on which the book of Revelation, the last book in the Bible, is painted. Good people suffering, in despair, about to give up hope and faith. All they can see is the Beast of an Empire everywhere they look. God is nowhere to be found. He's gone; we're alone. That's what it felt like. Should we just give up?

I think the keyword never used in Revelation but the key interpretive word is *despair*. The book of Revelation is for people who despair for the world, who don't see that it will get any better, who cannot control what's happening all around them or even to them, and who are teetering on the brink of just giving up hope. There are tears, there is mourning, there is darkness, and somewhere in the night is the question: how can a good, powerful, loving God allow this to happen?

I didn't really intend this Easter season to preach a sermon series on Revelation but I kept being drawn back to it each week and ended up spending more time there than I have in years, perhaps ever. By last week, the last Sunday I'd planned to preach from Revelation, I'd come to a new appreciation for the book: its glories, its vision of God, hope for new heavens and new earth, and the vision of the lamb standing as though slain by the throne of God, the vision of the crucified, ascendent, and resurrected Christ around whom all the saints and elders and creatures join in everlasting worship, the new heavens and new earth come to renew all things. And God is wiping away every tear from every eye.

Until now, until this week, they hadn't been my tears. Until *this*.

Over the last weeks, we've played the greatest hits of Revelation, but in doing so we've skipped many chapters, many, many chapters. They are the dark ones full of images of destruction and death as God unleashes wrath against the forces that cause terrible suffering on earth. Much of Revelation is the story of God's righteous vengeance and ultimate victory over Babylon, the Dragon, and the Beast, in Revelation, an unholy alliance of violence and oppression against God's beloved children. Yeah, we skipped most of that. For good reason. People who spend a lot of time there furiously pound out blogs or best-selling book series interpreting all those symbols as if they were dispensational predictions of the future. They are usually on a wild adventure in missing the point.

I'd like to think that I'm not a crazy Revelation person, but I think I'd also missed the point, at least one of the points. John, the writer, is angry. Angry with a righteous anger, a grieving soul, a holy fire burning in him, and I'd read all the way through many times without really getting it. Revelation burns with this fire: The world is not the way it should be, and yet, even then, we cannot despair because the world is not now what it will be. *The world is not the way it should be, but we cannot despair because the world is not now what it will be.* John does not blink in saying this is evil, and there will be suffering, and yet still has the courage and the fortitude to say but God is good, and more powerful than you know, and God is not finished yet.

For a few moments, consider Chapter 13 with me, which I assure you is never in the assigned lectionary readings. But it is in our nightmares. Hear some of this chapter. Remember this is symbolic telling of an all too real story of empire and evil and earthly power and spiritual principalities. Chapter 13:

I saw a beast rising out of the sea, with ten horns and seven heads with ten diadems on its horns and blasphemous names on its heads. The beast I saw was like a leopard, its feet were like a bear's; its mouth was like a lion's mouth. And to the dragon gave his power and his throne and great authority. One of its heads seemed to have a mortal wound, but its mortal wound was healed, and the whole earth marveled as they followed the beast. And they worshipped the dragon, for he had given authority to the beast."

This goes on and on. In the same chapter, later, a second beast rises out of the earth, with horns like a lamb, and it spoke like a dragon. The whole earth it seems has gone to follow the way of the Beast and the way of the dragon, and I get it now. Until now, I'd wrinkled my forehead reading those images, but this last week, I nodded my head. They don't look so far-fetched anymore, do they? As forces of evil that unchecked bring pain and destruction on the earth. Call it a beast; call it a dragon. Yeah. What else are you going to call it?

This is what despair looks like: it looks like a beast has taken over the world, and the world has lost its mind to go along to worship it. Or maybe they just give up, saying, as they do in chapter 13, "Who is like the Beast, and who can fight against it?" It's a theology of despair.

In the face of it all, in the middle of chapter 13 is one solitary line, just there by itself--that sums up the whole point of Revelation. One line, one verse, "Here is a call for the endurance and faith of the saints." Right between these towering, imposing figures of these beasts, *here is a call for the endurance and faith of the saints*. A call not to give up even though it looks like you're hopeless and helpless in the face of apocalypse.

We need to talk about Uvalde and the apocalyptic thing that happened in an elementary school there this week. It may only be because we have a book like Revelation that we can have the courage to look this evil in the eye and not look away too quickly.

There will be discussion and argument for days to come about who or what was the cause of this. Blame will be put on the school for not having security protocols in place, and there's an appropriate place for evaluating the safety of all of our institutions. A word here of thanksgiving to all of you who teach our children; so much is asked of you, and you keep on educating and loving and protecting our kids. Two teachers were murdered this week. They were murdered defending those babies. And if I know teachers, they consider that classroom theirs like a mama bear protecting her den.

There will be blame put on the lack of mental health resources in our state, and there's an appropriate examination of how we can do better to identify and support those who need it in the way they need it when they need it. A word here of appreciation to those who have dedicated their lives to helping heal our minds and our hearts. Counselors, psychiatrists, psychologists, chaplains . . . thank you. You are a lifeline to the people under your care, and we need you.

There will be blame on violent video games and a culture of violence that for young people can blur the line between fantasy and reality. A word here of appreciation to you parents who are using wise discernment for your teens' consumption of these images. A word of appreciation to teens and children who go outside and play and put your devices down. You are better for it, and you will help your classmates be better for it, too.

A word of appreciation for our students who look out for one another, who give a little extra attention to someone bullied or left out who looks lonely. School gyms and cafeterias can be

crushing lonely places. Bring a little light there. The most important thing you do may be the simplest thing you could ever do: a kind word, a little wider circle of friends. A word to a teacher, “I’m a little worried about so-and-so. Would you check on him or her?”

There will be an assessment of the police and security personnel and whether they did what they were trained to do. Apparently, they did not with tragic consequences. I feel for those men and women. They may be trained, but few of us are really ready when the moment comes to actually do it. Honor those who do, who run to trouble so everyone else can run away. A word of appreciation to those who serve as policemen and women. You are under intense scrutiny, and the best of you know you should be. No one has the power you do. Use it well. No one bears the burden you do every day. We all should remember that, too.

School protocols, video games, bullying, mental health, the police, perhaps a dysfunctional family . . . why did *this* happen? There will be lots of answers by lots of people for the lives of 19 children and two teachers. If we stop there, we still miss the point.

I wonder if we collectively will have the courage and conviction to accept the responsibility we all bear as a people who created the conditions for this to happen and happen and happen and happen. I’m going to read a sentence that should never be written, “An 18-year-old for his birthday bought himself legally two AR15s and 375 rounds of ammunition.” Hear that sentence again slowly, “An 18-year-old for his birthday bought himself legally two AR15s and 375 rounds of ammunition.” It was the first thing he did when he turned 18 last week. It makes no sense at all. None. Those words don’t make sense put together. I could go much further about things that don’t make sense to me beyond that sentence, but here’s a modest proposal for our nation: make that sentence never possible again.

This was not a natural disaster about which grief and existential theological questions haunt survivors who endure what’s dubbed An Act of God. This was not an act of God; this spasm of violence was an act of a man. This was not an unforeseen, natural disaster. This is an ongoing national catastrophe. And until we say enough is enough is enough is enough 21 times for those children and teachers, 27 times for the number of school shootings this year, 214 times for the number of mass shootings already this year.

Enough. Enough. Enough. Enough. Enough.

For Sandy Hook, for Parkland, for El Paso, for Orlando, for Southerland Springs, for Charleston, for Buffalo, for Uvalde. For our children. That’s it. That’s enough.

But is it? When will it be enough? Will we ever find the point of change? Until we do, we are not the saints in chapter 13 of Revelation, practicing endurance and keeping faith. We are the Beast.

It’s the thing to say now that thoughts and prayers are empty and useless, but that’s not true. I believe in thoughts, and I believe in prayers. We just need to think better thoughts than those that are masquerading as public policy. We need better ideas, and the courage to think them.

And if those in power to think them don't have the courage or the ability to think them, we need to find those who do.

We need deeper prayers and a spirituality of compassion in our prayer. When we pray to Christ, risen and ascendant, we pray to one who still bears his wounds, and so bears the suffering of all humanity. If we pray for those who suffer, we need to pray with the true compassion that leads in faith and endurance to change.

I believe in thoughts and prayers, and I believe enough is enough. I also believe the key interpretive word for Revelation isn't really "despair" in the end. It looks like despair. It sounds like despair. It feels like it. By all rights, it should be despair. But it's not despair. It's hope. The keyword is hope; hope, not despair. Hope in the face of despair. Hope, because when it seems there is no one who can break the seal of our despair, we look again and see a lamb standing as though he had been slain; we see Jesus and know we are not alone. This is none other than Jesus, crucified, risen, and ascended to God the Father, even now Lord of heaven and earth. Good, powerful, loving, even for and in this present darkness.

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