

Revelation 6:1-8 (NIV)

I watched as the Lamb opened the first of the seven seals. Then I heard one of the four living creatures say in a voice like thunder, “Come!”² I looked, and there before me was a white horse! Its rider held a bow, and he was given a crown, and he rode out as a conqueror bent on conquest.

³When the Lamb opened the second seal, I heard the second living creature say, “Come!”

⁴Then another horse came out, a fiery red one. Its rider was given power to take peace from the earth and to make people kill each other. To him was given a large sword.

⁵When the Lamb opened the third seal, I heard the third living creature say, “Come!” I looked, and there before me was a black horse! Its rider was holding a pair of scales in his hand.

⁶Then I heard what sounded like a voice among the four living creatures, saying, “Two pounds of wheat for a day’s wages, and six pounds of barley for a day’s wages, and do not damage the oil and the wine!”

⁷When the Lamb opened the fourth seal, I heard the voice of the fourth living creature say, “Come!”⁸ I looked, and there before me was a pale horse! Its rider was named Death, and Hades was following close behind him. They were given power over a fourth of the earth to kill by sword, famine and plague, and by the wild beasts of the earth.

John 4:43-53 (NIV)

⁴³After the two days he left for Galilee. ⁴⁴(Now Jesus himself had pointed out that a prophet has no honor in his own country.) ⁴⁵When he arrived in Galilee, the Galileans welcomed him. They had seen all that he had done in Jerusalem at the Passover Festival, for they also had been there.

⁴⁶Once more he visited Cana in Galilee, where he had turned the water into wine. And there was a certain royal official whose son lay sick at Capernaum. ⁴⁷When this man heard that Jesus had arrived in Galilee from Judea, he went to him and begged him to come and heal his son, who was close to death.

⁴⁸“Unless you people see signs and wonders,” Jesus told him, “you will never believe.”

⁴⁹The royal official said, “Sir, come down before my child dies.”

⁵⁰“Go,” Jesus replied, “your son will live.”

The man took Jesus at his word and departed. ⁵¹While he was still on the way, his servants met him with the news that his boy was living. ⁵²When he inquired as to the time when his son got better, they said to him, “Yesterday, at one in the afternoon, the fever left him.”

⁵³Then the father realized that this was the exact time at which Jesus had said to him, “Your son will live.” So he and his whole household believed.

Where can we turn for genuine security? The answer does not lie in ourselves.

And so we’ve arrived at the first of the violent and even terrifying images from the book of Revelation. Four horsemen, seven seals, seven trumpets, each carrying forward the ever-increasing and repetitive terror. What do we make of this? What is the point of it all? Is it a movie script of sorts, showing in detail horrors that lie ahead? Will we see a rider on a pale horse arcing across the skies? Will giant locusts come flooding out of a bottomless pit, torturing and killing people across the planet (9:7-11)?

The key is to remember that each scene is an “unveiling,” an *apokalypsis*. In the last two weeks (chapters 4 and 5), the curtain has been pulled back and we’ve been taken within the throne room of God for one scene. Now, the scene will shift to what is happening on earth, where wars and famine and misery plague the globe. Nothing new there. John had experienced that in his own lifetime, as we do still. But John will now see it all through God’s eyes, cosmically, looking behind the earthly events to grasp larger meanings and spiritual challenges.

The seals are opened

In the heavenly throne room, the Lamb steps forward as the one worthy to open the scroll that is held in the hand of the one on the throne¹ (see Revelation 5 and last week's Bible study). After all of creation joins in the worship of the Lamb and the one on the throne, the Lamb opens the first four of the seven seals, with each opened seal bringing forth a rider on a horse.

Persecution of Christians

Contrary to what many Christians believe, there was no empire-wide persecution of Christians until about 250AD. Instead, in the first centuries of the church's life, persecutions were localized and varied in intensity from time and place to place. Even the horrific persecutions of Nero in the mid-60's were limited to Rome.

Still, most Christians, at one time or another, were persecuted and ostracized (1) for their unwillingness to worship Caesar, and/or (2) their "anti-family" philosophy, and/or (3) their strange religious practices. Roman governors were focused on keeping the peace and because the Christians tended to stir things up, though it was not always of their own doing, they were often at odds with the authorities. Rumors and legends about the Christians' weird practices, made them easy and tempting targets. For example, stories were told of the Christians' cannibalistic practices, such as gathering to eat the body and blood of a man, a god(?), named Jesus. Think about it!

There is a pattern to these four horsemen. The first rider comes out on a white horse, carrying a bow, a weapon of war, and sets about conquering. It isn't hard to imagine the threat posed by this first rider. The second rider is on a bright red horse and carries a mighty sword. This rider goes across the planet setting people against one another (as if we needed help with that one!). The third rider, on a black horse, seems a bit more obscure. This rider carries a set of scales that would be used in commerce. The prices quoted by the rider for the basics of life, like wheat, are astronomically high. This rider brings famine and economic hardship. The final rider is on a pale green horse and bears the name, Death.

Conquest, violence, famine, and death. They are dressed up in dramatic imagery but they are certainly not new to us. Furthermore, though John's visions depict these as being inflicted by the heavens, we know that these are all self-inflicted, when we stop and think of humanity as one.

It is we who make war on one another. It is we who take the peace away and stand by while others starve. Going back to the

Garden of Eden, even death is the result of humanity's choice.² The riders bring nothing that we haven't already brought on ourselves. Still, there is the clear sense in this vision that God is a threat.³

So what's the point? Is there something new here? Craig Koester suggests that this vision sets the stage for what follows, in that the riders are a call to repentance and faith. *Repentance*: Will we turn 180° and walk toward God rather than away from him? *Faith*: Will we trust God in all things and above all else?

¹You may wonder why John doesn't simply refer to God. It was just typical Jewish reluctance to use anthropomorphic language about God, i.e., words that imply God has human form. The Jews understood that though the painting of God and Adam on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel is dramatic and moving, it only feeds our tendency to picture God as an old man with a white beard.

²When Adam and Eve rebel against God, doing the one thing they were told not to do, they must leave the Garden of Eden and, thus, could not eat from the tree of life. Death became their destiny instead. Thus, Paul writes that "the wages of sin is death" (Romans 6:23).

³The Lamb has to open the seals before the riders come out. The second rider is "permitted" to take away the peace. The fourth rider is "given authority" over a fourth of the earth. Restraint is imposed as well, as the fourth rider is not given free rein.

In God We (Ought to) Trust

In the fourth chapter of his gospel, John recounts the story of a visit by Jesus to some villages in Samaria. The people there are not Jewish, yet, when they hear Jesus, many of them became believers because of what they heard (John 4: 39-42). They didn't believe in Jesus because of what they saw – his various signs and wonders – but because of what they heard. They heard and trusted in the Word.

When Jesus returned to Galilee, he was welcomed by the crowds. John tells us that they had seen all that he had done in Jerusalem. In Cana, Jesus meets a royal official whose son is deathly ill back in Capernaum (on the shore of the Sea of Galilee). The man comes to Jesus for help. But Jesus is skeptical, for many come to him only because they see some sort of miracle-doer. But the man persists and Jesus tells him that his son will live. Then, John tells us, “The man took Jesus at his word and departed.” Not surprisingly, the young man was healed.

Is this just another miracle story? N. T. Wright helps us to understand that it is really a story of trust and faith, of hearing the Word and knowing where our trust ought to lie.

Jesus is anxious that the welcome in Galilee, such as it is, is superficial. They are sitting down to read the clues rather than following them to the treasure. They are taking photographs of the road signs rather than driving where the signs tell them to. They are wanting a Messiah who will perform miracles to order, rather than moving on to the real faith which will grasp Jesus' hidden identity, the Word dwelling in the flesh.

John tells us that this is the second ‘sign’ that Jesus did, and from now on he leaves us to do our own counting. But what was the proper response? Why did Jesus do signs if he didn't want people to follow him for the wrong reasons?

The proper response was the one he got from the official in verses 50 and 53. The man *believed the word* which Jesus spoke to him. The fact that he set off home, without insisting that Jesus come with him from Cana, up in the hills, to Capernaum, down by the lake, is a clear indication that his faith didn't happen because he saw miracles, but because he heard Jesus' word. When the word was confirmed by the actual healing, taking place at the same moment but at a distance, he and his whole family believed. The word Jesus had spoken had become flesh.⁴

In light of this brief story of one man's faith, let's take another look at those four riders. Can we build armies powerful enough to keep away all foreign conquerors? September 11 shattered that illusion for any who still held it. Can we build a large enough police force to stop all violence and return the peace? The proliferation of both prisons and crime answers that one for us. Can we have bank accounts large enough to shield us from any economic hardship? Even our resilient economy would have a hard time withstanding nuclear attacks on several cities. How about death? Do any of us know a doctor who can make us immortal. My doctor has gotten me this far in life, but he is only going to take me so far.

Stark images, such as the four horsemen, are meant to be that proverbial wake-up call, the piece of “2 x 4” upside the head. It's a bit like an “intervention,” where loved ones gather to confront someone with the truth, to shock them into seeing that their life is a wreck and they need help.

For the royal official that 2x4 was the serious illness of his own child. He was helpless in the face of the impending death. But he came to the one in whom all things are possible, in whom our full faith and trust can be placed with unshakeable confidence. He came, he heard, and he believed.

⁴ Wright, T. (2004). *John for Everyone, Part 1: Chapters 1-10* (53). London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge.

For the rest of us, as John's visions continue through the remaining seals and then seven trumpets, the 2x4 becomes a railroad tie. There is nowhere to hide from the troubles of life (6:15-17) and no one other than God to trust. As the reader, you'll find yourself screaming at the page, "What's it going to take for people to hear and to understand and to believe?! Is there no one who repents, no one who trusts God?"

Yet, in chapter 7, John hears and sees a faithful remnant. They have overcome the lukewarm complacency of Sardis and Laodicea. But more on those faithful witnesses next week.

A Tapestry

John's visions are literary tapestries. Each vision weaves together quotations from or allusions to the Old Testament with first-century images and references that would be understood by the first-century readers. John's visions are more than simply his attempt to put into words what he experiences. His visions are carefully crafted descriptions designed to convey meaning to the reader – but to see it, we need to learn our Old Testaments.

The throne room visions from last week are a good example of John's dependence on Old Testament imagery and language. In conveying his own throne room experience, John follows closely the throne room vision from Ezekiel 1-3. In both, there are four living creatures (the cherubim), as well as rumbles of thunder and flashes of lightning. In both, the throne has the appearance of precious jewels and a rainbow. In both, there is a scroll and angels who carry them. It isn't that the visions are identical, but that John uses standard biblical imagery his readers would understand.

Here's an example of a contemporary (90AD) allusion in today's Scripture. The rider of the first horse comes out carrying a bow. Later, a murderous horde from beyond the Euphrates river to the east, in alliance with the beast from the bottomless pit, rides in to conquer the inhabitants of the empire (9:13-19) in a slaughter of millions. All this plays on the common first-century fear of the Parthians to the east, whose mounted archers were never defeated by the Romans. A popular legend of the day was that the hated Nero would return from the dead, lead the Parthians, and conquer the Roman empire.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. We Christians talk about a lot about trusting Jesus, about placing our trust in God. What do you mean when you use such words? What do you think others mean? Surely, we can't mean that we trust Jesus to keep us from illness or to save us if we drive our car over a cliff? Yet, surely it must be more than trusting that Jesus loves me? How real is the security that God offers? You might take a peek at the answer in Revelation – look ahead to the last two chapters of the book.
2. There's no question that we are living through tough times. Certainly, some of us have been hit harder than others, some much harder. Still, it can be hard for us all to remain optimistic under the endless onslaught of scary headlines. How has all this turmoil affected your own faith? What changes have you made in your life? Have you attended worship more regularly? Have you gotten more involved in the life of St. Andrew? Have you turned to family and friends? You might try making a list of some concrete steps that you think would help you become more hopeful in tough times.
3. The word "repent" occurs twelve times in Revelation, more often than any other NT book. How would you define "repent?" Is it only a church word for you? In Jesus' day it was a word that meant giving up your agenda for someone else's. For example, a first-century Jewish rebel leader appealed to a rival group to "repent" and follow him. What do you think the book of Revelation means by "repent?" What is so hard about genuine repentance?

Daily Bible Readings

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

<p>Monday, Zechariah 1:7-17 The prophet's first vision, which includes three horses of various colors.</p>	<p>Tuesday, Zechariah 6:1-8 Zechariah's vision of four horses pulling four chariots.</p>
<p>Wednesday, Joel 2:28-32 The prophet's vision of the coming of the Lord. Peter quoted this prophecy on the day of Pentecost when he rose to preach a sermon.</p>	<p>Thursday, Zephaniah 1:14-18 The prophet's vision of the coming of God's wrath. Ask yourself this: What in this world is deserves God's righteous anger?</p>
<p>Friday, Romans 1:18-2:16 God's wrath against sinful humanity and his judgment.</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">Weekly Joys and Concerns</p>

