

Revelation 6:1-11 (NRSV)

Then I saw the Lamb open one of the seven seals, and I heard one of the four living creatures call out, as with a voice of thunder, "Come!"² I looked, and there was a white horse! Its rider had a bow; a crown was given to him, and he came out conquering and to conquer.

³When he opened the second seal, I heard the second living creature call out, "Come!"

⁴And out came another horse, bright red; its rider was permitted to take peace from the earth, so that people would slaughter one another; and he was given a great sword.

⁵When he opened the third seal, I heard the third living creature call out, "Come!" I looked, and there was a black horse! Its rider held a pair of scales in his hand, ⁶and I heard what seemed to be a voice in the midst of the four living creatures saying, "A quart of wheat for a day's pay, and three quarts of barley for a day's pay, but do not damage the olive oil and the wine!"

⁷When he opened the fourth seal, I heard the voice of the fourth living creature call out, "Come!"⁸ I looked and there was a pale green horse! Its rider's name was Death, and Hades followed with him; they were given authority over a fourth of the earth, to kill with sword, famine, and pestilence, and by the wild animals of the earth.

⁹When he opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slaughtered for the word of God and for the testimony they had given; ¹⁰they cried out with a loud voice, "Sovereign Lord, holy and true, how long will it be before you judge and avenge our blood on the inhabitants of the earth?"¹¹ They were each given a white robe and told to rest a little longer, until the number would be complete both of their fellow servants and of their brothers and sisters, who were soon to be killed as they themselves had been killed.

Our coins may read "In God We Trust," but is that really true for us? Don't we often find ourselves trusting that our bank accounts, our doctors, our governments and armies will keep us safe from all that threatens us? With the arrival of the four horsemen in John's visions, God lays down a challenge for us all.

And so we've arrived at the violent and 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 really 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)?

While I think most of us would accept that God is not trying to talk to us about giant bugs, we are still left wondering what these images are about. Today's vision of the four horsemen is a great place to begin exploring the interpretation of Revelation's most difficult and troubling passages.

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 background 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.

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

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.

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. 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.²

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 not away from him? *Faith:* Will we trust God in all things and above all else?

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.

In God We (Ought to) Trust!

Look again at each of the 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 today's, are meant to be that proverbial wake-up call, the 2x4 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.

As John's visions continue through the remaining seals and then the trumpets, the 2x4 becomes a railroad tie. There is nowhere to hide from God (6:15-17) and no one else to trust. As the reader, you'll find yourself screaming at the page, "What's it going to take?! Is there no one who repents, no one who trusts God?"

Yet, in chapter 7, John hears and sees a faithful remnant. In chapter 11, we meet two faithful witnesses. Finally, we learn of some who look past their terror and give glory to God (11:13). The lukewarm complacency of Sardis and Laodicea have been overcome.

²The 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.

The Violent Imagery of Revelation

With today's Scripture passage, John's Apocalypse embarks on a relentless, over-the-top depiction of violence. Eugene Boring writes:

"When the Lamb opens the sealed scroll, catastrophic violence is unleashed upon the earth and its inhabitants. The world is devastated by war, famine, plague, and death (6:1-8). People are killed because of their faithfulness to God and cry out for vengeance (6:9-11). Sun, moon, and stars are struck; mountains and islands are displaced, as everyone from king to slave tries to escape the approaching wrath (6:12-17). The earth is struck with hail and fire mixed with blood (8:7) and sea and rivers turn to blood (8:8-11; 16:3-4). Demonic locust-like creatures stream out of the abyss to torment humanity, and people cry out for death but continue to suffer (9:1-11). A twilight-zone supernatural horde of two hundred million cavalry pour across the Euphrates from the East (9:13-19)."

It's ghastly and it doesn't end there. To make it worse, God is often depicted as the source of the violence. None of it seems to fit with the Jesus we meet in the gospels. So what do we do with these images? Skip over them as if they aren't there? Embrace them as a literal depiction of what awaits those who don't love Jesus?

Professor Boring offers us some guidance in this:

1. John's focus is not on future suffering, but the suffering endured by the Christians of his day. Apocalyptic thought puts this suffering in a cosmic context. Just as elsewhere the Bible gives vent to the community's frustration and desire for revenge (read Psalm 137!), so it does here. The desire for revenge is not what God wants from us, but it is often what we give him.
2. John doesn't invent these images. As the page two text box discusses, John draws on many biblical images and much biblical theology. We don't talk much about the wrath of God anymore, but carve it out and you've lost much of the Bible. Across the span of biblical literature, God is relentless in his desire for justice and for the elimination of sin.
3. We always have to bear in mind that these images are not literal depictions of a to-be-experienced future. They are metaphorical and the question to ask ourselves is: "What is the message behind the metaphor?"

Like I suspect is true of most readers, I'm put off by these images. Their horror tends to close my mind. Yet, what does it *really* take for us to repent and shake off the powers of this world that want to enslave us to a way of living devoid of Christ. Does a gentle prodding get the job done? A hearty shout in the ear? A firm poke in the ribs? No . . . moving me to genuine repentance calls for shock therapy. And John delivers it.

READING WITH HEART & MIND, SEPTEMBER 23 - 29

Sunday, Revelation 12 - 13 The cosmic story of good and evil, of God and the powers that oppose God, is now retold as a conflict between God and Satan. What powers do you think are represented by the beasts? In Jesus day? In our own? To whom could we "sell out" now?

Monday, Revelation 14:1-5 We return to the faithful remnant, the 144,000. How would this vision encourage suffering Christians?

Tuesday, Revelation 14:6-13 Three angels arrive with messages. How would you restate each message in your own words? How do these help us to understand the purpose of the more dramatic images that John is given?

Wednesday, Revelation 14:14-20 The image of the "grapes of wrath" in the Battle Hymn of the Republic is taken from this passage.

Thursday, Revelation 15-16 John now has a vision of seven plagues. There really isn't much new here, illustrating the repetitiveness of these images of violence.

Friday, Revelation 17 This is one of the most well-known of the images in Revelation. Given that the great whore is seated on seven mountains (17:9), plainly signifying the seven hills of Rome, what message would you take from this image if you were being persecuted in Asia Minor at the time? As you've probably gathered, I believe that the best place to begin interpreting Revelation is with its meaning for those to whom it was written. There is a message for us here, but it's best to begin with the message to these first-century Christians. Honestly, this is the best approach for all biblical interpretation.

Saturday, Revelation 18 The focus now shifts from the Whore of Babylon to the fall of Babylon, which was obviously Rome in the minds of the first-century Christians. Who are the principal targets here? What might this mean when it comes to recognizing the powers of our own world that, knowingly or not, oppose God and the way of God?

Sermon Notes

Bible Academy starts tomorrow!

**It is not too late to register
go to www.thebibleacademy.com**

There is something for everyone in this fall's academy and we hope that you'll still make plans to be a part of it. Brochures for the fall session are available around the church.

Scott Engle's Sunday morning class, *Something More*, is now meeting in Festival Hall at 11am. We hope that you'll join us!

Because Scott is now preaching in the 9:30 service each week, his Sunday class is moving to 11am in Festival Hall. It is open to adults of all ages and focuses on a deeper understanding of Scripture. We'll have more time to deal with the Scripture passage and topic for the week. If you have questions, you are welcome to call Scott at 214-291-8009 or e-mail him at sengle@thebibleacademy.com.

Hold the date!! Kim Edwards on October 25 at 7pm

Kim Edwards, author of the huge international bestseller, *The Memory Keeper's Daughter*, will be at St. Andrew as part of our new St. Andrew Author Series. Her most recent book has been on the NY Times bestseller list for 63 weeks!

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. 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?
2. If you haven't read any of the scary images in Revelation, you might dip into chapters 8 and 9 – anywhere in there! How do we hear God's message in the midst of such powerful imagery? What do you think God's message to us is in these passages?
3. The four riders are unleashed by the first four seals. When the fifth seal is opened, John sees Christian martyrs gathered under the altar in the throne. The martyrs want to know when their deaths will be avenged. Desiring vengeance seems so natural at times, but is it God's way? How do we get past our desire for revenge when we are wronged?
4. The martyrs under the altar are not promised vengeance; they are told to wait "until the number would be complete." What do you think that means? What value could there be in waiting for Jesus' return?
5. We don't suffer for being Christians, though many Christians in other places do. How do you think your reading of Revelation would change if you and your family were being persecuted for your faith in Jesus Christ? How can we get emotionally closer to the suffering experienced by John and his fellow believers?