

Apocalyptic Réverbérations

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Revelation 1:4-8

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Revelation. Let's take a poll of your favorite books of the Bible and my hunch is that Revelation is not in the mix. In a discussion of this book this past week, I was reminded that John Calvin wrote a commentary on just about every book of the Bible, but not on Revelation. Did he run out of time, or were there too many wild beasts, dragons, symbols, numbers, and apocalyptic turbulence for him to make much sense or worry with Revelation. We are Presbyterians after all, Calvinists who do everything decently and in order, and Revelation is nothing if not beyond our notions of order and decency. Far from scandalizing prude Presbyterians and far from being some kind of code language that communicates to us directly that we are among the 144,000 of God's chosen, writer and Presbyterian minister Eugene Peterson reminds us that the intent of Revelation is not to give us coded insider information or even to explain whether we get the heavenly benefits package, rather 'the intent of Revelation is to put us on our knees before God in worship and to set the salvation-shaping words of God in motion in our lives.' The point of Revelation he reminds us, is not to get us some special information or tell us if we won the divine lottery ticket, but to turn us into 'awed worshippers, sacrificing sufferers, and devout followers.'¹ It is a glimpse of the future and a glimpse of ourselves, gathered before God with the multitudes in a colorful mosaic of praise and thanksgiving before the throne of the crucified and risen Lord.

Thomas Gillespie, former President of Princeton Seminary, pointed out that in the workroom of the president's office, hanging near the copier, there was a framed piece of artwork hanging on the wall that depicted 'a medieval castle in the background,' and in the foreground was a dragon, lying on its back, 'slouching up against the tree. The dragon is using a lance' from a recently defeated knight 'as an after-dinner toothpick, and scattered all around are pieces of a knight's armor—breastplate, helmet, shield.' Below the scene a caption reads: 'no matter how hard you work, no matter how right you are, sometimes the dragon wins.'² Sometimes the dragon has won in these times recently. Racism persists. Injustice seems to often prevail. We can't wave a magic wand and end a pandemic. Supply lines breakdown. Inflation continues to rise. Wars and rumors of wars continue. Sometimes the dragon wins. And the dragon takes many forms. In another apocalyptic text, the book of Ezekiel, the prophet Ezekiel sees the 'dragon take shape in the kingdom of Egypt, in the person of Pharaoh and his official policies.'³ Here in

¹ Eugene Peterson, *Reversed Thunder*, 24.

² Thomas W. Gillespie, 'There Be Dragons,' *Princeton Seminary Bulletin* vol. xxv no. 2 (July 2004), 129.

³ Thomas W. Gillespie, 'There Be Dragons,' *Princeton Seminary Bulletin* vol. xxv no. 2 (July 2004), 130.

Revelation the dreaded dragon is the sovereignty, power, and vastness of the Roman empire and its imperial decrees and policies. How can fledgling communities of Christians ever measure up, make a difference, participate in something powerful in the face of the powerful policies of Egypt, Rome, or even the empires and kingdoms of our day? But Revelation offers us a vision of Jesus Christ that transcends and goes beyond any and all kingdoms of this world. Throughout Revelation, we are peppered with visions of the slain Lamb surrounded by multitudes, Christ as King over all heaven and earth, and at the end in Revelation 22, a vision of Christ at the Second Coming. Our passage today at the very beginning includes the voice of the Lord God, proclaiming to us, 'I am the Alpha and the Omega, the One who is and who was and who is to come...' At the beginning, God. All along the way, God. And at our end and at the end of all things, God. That is the vision of Revelation that finds its way into what was, what is, and what is to come. As Peterson reminds us, these visions are intended to 'make us supple and alert,' and to remind us that Christ comes to us in 'every time, under any condition,' and finds a way to gather a faithful response and a community that reflect his faith, hope, and love, in any context and any current event.⁴

Like the book of Revelation, today is a much-neglected Sunday in our liturgical calendar, Christ the King Sunday. It marks the end of the church year before we give way to Advent and turn our attention to the coming of the Christ child. But Christ the King Sunday marks the end of the church calendar and also points to the end of all things, when God's story will be complete and gather together all our stories and all our lives and everything lovely in all creation that reflects God's glory and fulfills God's purposes. Between Christ's first coming and Christ's second coming, in this time between the times, we acknowledge that sometimes the dragon wins, sometimes evil endures, sometimes the brokenness of this world threatens to overwhelm us and discourage us, but the Book of Revelation and the presence of Christ the King Sunday marking our life together year after year after year reminds us that though dragons may win sometimes, though brokenness may persist, though our spiritual lives sometimes flounder, ultimately God prevails in the end, Christ reigns as King, and the Spirit's purposes for us and all creation reach fulfillment. Revelation is not so much a new revelation, new information, but the culmination of the first 65 books of the Bible, where Christ reorients and recenters every life and every time in his own time at the end of time. Where what seemed like feeble efforts to show up and be faithful bear fruit. Where what seemed like feeble efforts to love our enemies and pray for those who want to do us in nevertheless tether us together in a community of reconciliation. Where what seemed like impossible efforts to stand against injustice and to work for racial reconciliation bring us at least into a kingdom

⁴ Eugene Peterson, *Reversed Thunder*, 39.

made up of every nation, every race, every tribe, every ideology, all right sized by Christ's mending, reconciling, and re-shaping of all that we thought mattered.

It is easy to dismiss this vision of the Second Coming as otherworldly, fantastical, and detached from the triumphs and tragedies of this world and our own lives. That may be why Calvin decided to take a runner on Revelation. Who knows? But equally destructive is to live life in this world with no vision at all for the future, reducing life in the present to kill or be killed, looking out for ourselves alone, allowing too many to live in survival mode or to live life like some kind of religious squid game where we try to endure to the end while we amass all we can, gratify whatever we can, and get ours however we can, especially if we know that 'no matter how hard we may work, or how right we may be, the dragon may still win.'⁵ But not always; the dragon does not always win and if Christ the King Sunday has anything to impart on us, not at the end. We are not just hurtling along to some unknown future, but Christ the King Sunday reminds us instead, that the future is already held in the crucified hands of the coming Christ, and his future kingdom is breaking into our present from beyond.

The last verse of a hymn that I am fond of in our hymnal, 377 *I Want to Walk as a Child of the Light*, goes like this: 'I'm looking for the coming of Christ. I want to be with Jesus. When we have run with patience the race, we shall know the joy of Jesus. In him there is no darkness at all. The night and the day are both alike. The Lamb is the light of the city of God. Shine in my heart, Lord Jesus.' Nearly all those words come from Revelation. Sometimes the dragon wins, sometimes evil seems to have the upper hand, sometimes our gratitude is overcome by fear for the future and reducing life to getting ours. All that is true. Sometimes. But Revelation tells us that none of that is true, ultimately. And Christ the King Sunday is our once-a-year liturgical reminder of that future, coming to meet us, year after year after year.

The story goes that Martin Luther was once asked that if he knew if he only had one day to live, how he would spend it. Not exactly the same thing that the early Christians were waiting for expectantly, but certainly along the same lines. How did Luther answer? He answered that if he knew he had one day to live, he would say his prayers, he would plant a tree, and he would have a drink of his favorite German beer. One might think such sentiments are not all that theologically profound, but I wonder if that is what Christ the King Sunday and maybe Revelation for that matter are all about. We worship and say our prayers with confidence that the Lord Jesus Christ triumphs and comes to meet us, bringing his future kingdom into our present. We plant trees, we work for that future, we plant trees that we will never get to climb, we sow seeds we will not get to see bear fruit, we give to the things we think matter even if we don't always see immediate results, we work to build and lay stones of a splendid cathedral that we may never see finished to

⁵ Thomas W. Gillespie, 'There Be Dragons,' *Princeton Seminary Bulletin* vol. xxv no. 2 (July 2004), 130.

completion. Now we may debate Luther on beverage, but again, I wonder if part of our calling is to enjoy the goodness of God's creation in this time, not taking it for granted, not hoarding it and trying to build bigger barns of it, but to simply enjoy the goodness of our daily bread whether it comes in the form of Luther's libation or table fellowship with those God has put before us and among us or the daily common gifts of life together. To await and work for the future, is not to wait to be raptured into some nether world detached from and completely indifferent to this one. To await and work for the future, means that we live with confidence that our lives will be oriented and brought to fulfillment by Christ the King, God's eternal purpose will be fulfilled for us and all creation. It means that we plant trees and take on a life of self-giving even in times when the world does not appear to resemble a realm where Christ is King. It means that we find signs of God's kingdom in the good creation of our time even as we look to a time when all things we will reach fulfillment and completion.

Christ the King Sunday may be a second tier or even third tier event in the life of our liturgical calendar, but it represents the culmination of everything, Advent, Christmas, Easter, Pentecost, all of it, it represents the direction we are all headed, where all the evil that seemed to triumph and all the good that seemed to flounder is reoriented and made right, it points to the One who is already coming from the future to meet us in our present, taking all our lives and all of life, all our triumphs and disasters, gathered together, mended into an unbroken communion of life and praise. For now, we say our prayers, we plant trees, and we rejoice in the goodness of God's creation, until Christ's kingdom comes.