

Diving into Wonderland: Preaching Revelation in the Mainline Pulpit

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Many mainline preachers today are “lectionary preachers.” Their colleagues, especially their music colleagues, typically appreciate this trend. With the lectionary presenting a predetermined field of four texts each Sunday, preacher and musician can plan ahead – a commendable attribute that can lead to more faithful and stimulating worship. By following the lectionary over a three-year period, preachers ensure that their congregations will have heard sermons, listened to music, and participated in liturgy that reflects the voices of much of Hebrew Scripture, especially the Psalms, as well as the Gospels, the Acts of the Apostles, the Pauline Epistles, the Catholic Epistles, and occasional readings from Hebrews and James.

I have been at this lectionary preaching business for over twenty-five years and don’t intend to jettison this practice anytime soon. The lectionary has disciplined me to tackle the tough texts and has prevented me from preaching only from my own comfortable canon of favorite biblical texts. It has also provided a common set of texts for discussion with other pastors and worship leaders in preparation to preach. One of its great values is for people of faith across denominations and across the country and world to wrestle with and then discuss the same set of texts on a given Sunday. Despite those commendable attributes of the lectionary and lectionary preaching, I have several problems with it. The lectionary often ignores the oral and aural nature of the biblical narrative, chopping up longish narratives that were intended to be heard in full. It dances around the Gospel of John, weaving bits and pieces of the Gospel into the fabric of the three-year cycle, never giving a congregation a full year to wrestle with the unique witness to Jesus of the Fourth Evangelist. Perhaps my biggest complaint with the Revised Common Lectionary, though, is its aversion to including texts from the book of Revelation. Revelation is written in twenty-two chapters, and yet the few lectionary readings that come from the Apocalypse are brief snippets of texts from only five of the twenty-two chapters.¹

I lament the scarcity and brevity of texts from Revelation not because I advocate some sort of biblical equity of lectionary texts. I will not go on to argue for more texts from II Chronicles and perhaps a year-long cycle that features the book of Proverbs. What I will try to argue is why the mainline pulpit needs to take an occasional vacation from the lectionary (if lectionary editors continue their avoidance of the Apocalypse) and venture into John’s “Wonderland.”² I will also argue why the time to do so is now. Ironically, lectionary editors, and therefore, often the mainline pulpit, have succeeded in doing what many leaders of the early church, the early councils, and early Reformers could never quite achieve. Modern biblical scholarship and church practice have rendered Revelation silent as a lamb; they have written the Apocalypse into quiet obscurity, casting it into the outer darkness, effectively eliminating it from the mainline canon.³

On this point, some readers will say, “Thank God and good riddance.” Before embracing that sentiment, though, I would invite contemporary mainline preachers

and lectionary editors to step outside the church. Open a newspaper, turn on CNN, flip the channel to a right wing religious pundit or listen to the prevailing political rhetoric of the current powers that be and realize that Revelation has not gone quietly into the obscure good night. It has simply found different pulpits. Read the rhetoric of Christian Zionists with their intransigent insistence on protecting Israel since it is vital to their theological understanding of the Second Coming, listen to the rationale for a pre-emptive strike against Iraq ("the evil empire"), hear Saddam and Kim described as ruthless beasts, note how the United Nations now holds the moniker of "666" for religious neo-conservatives, and see that Revelation is the foundation document for much of the religious-political rhetoric being advanced today. At a cultural level, step into a movie theater or pick up a novel, and see that Revelation often looms large in the contemporary creative imagination.

While the mainline church is busy papering over Revelation with more palatable texts that appeal to our religious tastes, Hal Lindsay, and more recently, Timothy LaHaye have used the Apocalypse to sell millions of books describing who, in God's final plan, will be "left behind." Meanwhile, back at mainline central, we are embarrassed by the language and imagery of Revelation. We mainline Christians eschew violence, love love, and are thoroughly modern or gladly postmodern Millies or Maxes who haven't a clue what to do with this book, other than ignore it or belittle those who pay much attention to it. If Hal and Tim want Revelation, well, for goodness sake, let them have it. We're glad to be rid of this book that gives even the best of preachers homiletical indigestion.

Another word of caution, though. As soon as we turn the book of Revelation over to the religious and political crazies, the demonic powers and principalities of the world enjoy a good laugh. If they look at all today to the mainline church in America, they look to us for a national blessing, expecting of us a respectable theology that has a slight tint of the prophetic but is mostly a serene, priestly color. They relish in the increasing tendency of the mainline church to keep in its spiritual corner – diminishing the concept "spiritual" to something that happens between an individual and God and has little if any public consequence.

The demonic powers and principalities that laugh at the mainline's eschewal of Revelation today are also found throughout Scripture and are on a first name basis with Jesus in the Gospels. They play their most prominent role in the New Testament, though, in the book of Revelation. In an attempt to preach a "reasonable, sensible gospel," the mainline church has domesticated Revelation's rich metaphorical language, dismissing evil as a lack of education or will, as a failure to know the good or to do it. It has concentrated on making Scripture "plain" and serving up texts with clear moral messages and timely applicability for our daily lives but has left talk of demons and principalities and powers of evil for the more literal and less sophisticated readers.

The apocalyptic witness by the visionary on Patmos is not so easily tamed. Revelation stretches the religious imagination, luring readers into the role of cosmic puzzle solvers and then puzzles readers with more questions raised than answers offered. Revelation is replete with violent imagery. In fact, its depiction of violence is one reason the mainline church, especially the liberal theological tradition, often avoids this book. Ironically, this violent book with its militaristic imagery is a relentless witness to the ultimate impotence of violence and the redemptive victory of non-violence.⁴ What a needed witness to Western culture and church that has

concluded that Gandhi and Mother Teresa and King were hopeless idealists of the daydream of nonviolence. What a critical time for the mainline church to witness against the prevailing political ethic that the only way to fight the 9/11 beast emerging out of the chaotic, apocalyptic of sea of terrorism is with superior and vigilant violence.

New Testament scholar Brian Blount argues that the witness of Revelation resists blessing any form of violence by Christians and the Christian community as a righteous response to violence suffered. Blount argues:

John was interested not so much in creating a church of martyrs as he was in encouraging a church filled with people committed to the ethical activity of witnessing to the Lordship of Jesus Christ. On the surface, that sounds like an exclusively spiritual and pious act. In John's context, it was also a highly social, economic, and political one.⁵

Revelation runs counter to any notion that Christians can remain faithful to God and to Christ while remaining silent about the demonic powers and principalities that ravage culture and society.

While Revelation compels the church to witness to the social, economic, political, and religious realities of following Christ, it also tempers overzealous Christian social activism. John's vision is not one of humans bringing in the ultimate reign of God. His vision is one of Christians bearing a faithful witness amid the terror of a hostile and often apathetic world and church (such as Laodicea in 3:14-22).

John is not naïve about the difficulty of bearing a faithful social witness to the redemptive purpose of the Slain Lamb. A faithful witness is always made in recognition of the daunting reality that there are well-disguised beasts out there who wear white and always smile with perfectly pearly teeth and who laugh at the often innocent optimism of Christian social activists. John's vision is short on optimism about human achievement and long on the call of faithful Christians and Christian communities to bear witness to God's reign that will not finally be defeated by the most insidious and seductive fangs of evil. Revelation, therefore, does not deter Christian social activism, but it does offer a sober reminder that God alone will ultimately prevail over the demonic powers and principalities that pose as benevolent and righteous forces in our world (see 12:10-12).

John's call to witness to God's redemptive power amid a chaotic and demonic sea of rampant political coercion and pre-emptive violence is not a call restricted to the seven churches of Asia Minor (see chapters 2 and 3) or to Christians living at the close of the First Century. To bear an ongoing witness against the same type of virulent violence that slaughtered the Lamb is John's consistent call for Christians and churches in every age and culture. "Witnessing, not dying, was the goal John sought out for his hearers and readers," writes Blount, "Witnessing was the ethic by which he wished them to live."⁶

Is there a more compelling call to the mainline church and the mainline pulpit today as we live and preach in the context of a color-coded, terrorized, gun-toting, car bomb exploding, nuclear arming world than to witness to the final victory (see Revelation 5:5 "has conquered") of the Slain Lamb? How can the mainline pulpit remain blithely oblivious to and often dangerously condescending toward those who use Revelation as a blunt instrument to justify bloody conflict and ignore faithful

stewardship of God's good earth because it is destined for divine replacement anyway? To remain silent or diminish our witness to the power of the Slain Lamb is to prove the mainline church's irrelevance precisely when the world most needs our corporate and public witness. In *The Word before the Powers: An Ethic of Preaching*, Charles Campbell exposes the danger of the mainline church's silencing the witness of Revelation in order to embrace the advances of empire:

In the face of the all-encompassing claims and demands of the empire, the writer of Revelation metaphorically unveiled the empire as a beast that violently destroys people and a whore who seduces people to trust in its deadly ways. It is difficult to imagine a more dramatic unveiling of the divine claims and deadly realities of empire than one finds in the metaphorical visions of Revelation.⁷

For the mainline church in America that until recent years has enjoyed the protection and accolades of empire, it is tempting to try to turn back the hands of time, to nudge our way back into the good graces of the empire. Revelation offers us the counter-energy to resist this seductive impulse. This closing book of the canon reminds us who is Lord and gives us voice to sing our praise to the only One in heaven and on earth worthy of our ultimate allegiance—in any culture or century.

So, if I have made even a somewhat compelling case for occasionally setting aside the lectionary and preaching Revelation in the mainline pulpit, why is it still such a rare visitor to our Sunday liturgy and proclamation in the twenty-first century? I have already noted the restrictions imposed by lectionary editors and church planning, but there are deeper, more fundamental problems at play. Mainline preachers in the U.S. today have spread themselves so thin responding to penultimate responsibilities that many don't know Scripture well. They tend to read it only in preparation for the Sunday event, and they are especially vague on the witness of the Hebrew Scriptures. So when they do read Revelation, they are often as lost as other readers and are tempted to travel down the same interpretive rabbit trails as many peddlers of "Revelation fantasy" writing today.

Trying to enter and then interpret the world of Revelation while unfamiliar with Hebrew Scripture is not unlike grasping the import of Dante's *Inferno* by reading the *Cliffs Notes*. The new world imaged in Revelation is a world that emerges largely out of the religious imagination of Hebrew Scripture (and the Septuagint). The heretic Marcion has been dead for centuries, but his legacy of a canon devoid of Hebrew Scripture or at least one that is considered secondary to the New Testament witness lives on with gusto in the twenty-first century church. To preach Revelation faithfully and persuasively means extra work for preachers, because mainline preachers will need to refresh their understanding of their Hebrew heritage (particularly the prophetic voices of Isaiah, Ezekiel, Zechariah, and Daniel, not to mention the Exodus and Genesis narratives).

Perhaps the most daunting reason the mainline church and lectionary editors leave Revelation behind is its apocalyptic, bizarre witness. Modern biblical interpreters who assume there is one "correct" way to interpret the Apocalypse almost always either give up on making any "good sense" of this book or try to reduce John's three or four dimensional vision into a two-dimensional, decoded, moral map. Not sur-

prisingly, the code discovered and moral map drawn almost always are mirrors of the age and theological perspective of the interpreter.

As I write this article, Sunnis (the party of Saddam Hussein) are imploring the U.S. to keep troops in Iraq lest they be slaughtered in a civil war, the U.S. is speeding up its delivery to bombs in Israel, Hezbollah is pledging to bring Israel to its knees, the bodies of nineteen children in Lebanon are being removed from a building demolished by an Israeli air strike, and world leaders are puzzled why terrorism grows in such fertile soil. Meanwhile, the mainline church demurs from living out a vision of nonviolence while it swats at issues of sexuality and ordination until there is no corporate energy left to bear a public witness against war and violence and to the Lordship of the Non-violent Prince of Peace. The mainline church does not need to dive into Wonderland; we're living in it. Revelation should not only be embraced as a text for our apocalyptic times, it should be preached as an enduring witness against the constant enticement of empire to resort to and justify violence.

In practice, though, what often happens in the mainline church with respect to Revelation is not unlike what happens to adult readers who chase Alice down the rabbit hole. They discover a world of word plays and puns and puzzling prose. As adults dive into Wonderland, they often conclude that all this is a child's nonsense, utter meaninglessness as the Lobster-Quadrille would urge or they feel compelled to decode this ancient mystery as Queen Alice might do.⁸ As adults dive into Revelation, they often conclude that it is either a senseless waste of time in Wonderland or a Gnostic mystery that will reveal the inner workings of the mind of God—for the select few, in the know—while all the other poor slobs are “left behind.”

Revelation is neither a “child's nonsense” nor a fanatic's file of God's limited elect. Born in response to the oppressive realities of the Roman Empire, Revelation calls the community of faith to untiring and uncompromising witness to and worship of the One who is sovereign over the principalities and emperors of heaven and earth. The Apocalypse is not a jaunt through Alice's Wonderland; it is a bold apocalyptic word of resistance when believers are tempted to dilute the faith and bear witness to something less than the Lordship of Christ.⁹

To preachers preparing to climb into mainline pulpits in Apocalyptic America, the overwhelming temptation is to maintain silence on the Apocalypse. Given the pervasive fears gripping our world and the stark, but hope-filled witness of the prophet from Patmos, I urge preachers to re-engage this thorny book. May all who preach embrace the opening invitation from John to his readers: “Blessed is the one who reads the words of this prophecy, and blessed are those who hear it and take to heart what is written in it, because the time is near” (1:3).

Notes

1. Revelation 1:4-8 appears in Years B and C; Revelation 5:11-14 appears in Year C; Revelation 7:9-17 appears in Years A and C; Revelation 21:10; 21:22- 22:5 appears in Year C; Revelation 22:12-14, 16-17, 20-21 appears in Year C.

2. In the interest of integrity in worship and fairness to colleagues in music and education, preachers who stray from the lectionary for any reason should do so in planning and cooperation with other worship and educational leaders.

3. Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza has written, “Mainline churches often still relegate the last book of the

Bible to oblivion or reject it outright. . . . Revelation's vivid depiction of natural calamities, cruel tortures, and mass destruction shocks many liberal Christian readers. . . . Revelation remains for many Christians not only strange and difficult but also theologically offensive – a book with 'seven seals', seldom read, seen as a curiosity in the Bible, and at most quoted very selectively." *Revelation: Vision of a Just World*, Proclamation Commentaries (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991), 6.

4. As Mitchell Reddish states, "Revelation can function as a call to a nonviolent lifestyle. That may seem like a strange statement, given the extensive use of militaristic and even violent imagery in the book itself. Yet one must distinguish between texts that use language and imagery to encourage or endorse violence and those that use traditional imagery to subvert violence. The Apocalypse belongs in the latter category. The book of Revelation exhibits a creative transformation of traditional symbols and language, what Austin Farrer has called a 'rebirth of images'." *Revelation*, Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary (Macon, Ga.: Smith & Helwys Publishing, 2001), 17.

5. Brian Blount, *Can I Get a Witness* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), ix.

6. Ibid, x.

7. Charles Campbell, *The Word before the Powers: An Ethic of Preaching* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press), 142.

8. According to Fiorenza, "Apocalyptic language functions not as predictive-descriptive language but rather as mythological-imaginative language. It is not like a cloak which can be stripped down to its theological essence or principle. It does not appeal to our logical faculties but to our imagination and emotions. It is mythological-fantastic language – stars fall from heaven; the world becomes a palace with three stories: heaven, earth, and underworld; animals speak, dragons spit fire, a lion is a lamb, and angels of demons engage in warfare." *Revelation: Vision of a Just World*, 27.

9. Campbell claims, "in the context of the principalities and powers, Christian worship is fundamentally an act of resistance. . . . what the powers desire most from human beings is our worship; they claim to be the divine regents of the world and to offer us life if we will only serve them. In this context, it is not surprising that the fundamental practice of the redeemed community in the book of Revelation is worship. There is no more subversive act where the powers are concerned than praising the God of Jesus Christ, who has exposed and overcome them. Indeed, in Revelation such worship is offered up, not coincidentally, by the martyrs, highlighting the connection between worship and resistance." *The Word before the Powers*, 142.