**Revelation 19:11-16** May 29, 2022

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*Revelation 19:11 I saw heaven standing open and there before me was a white horse, whose rider is called Faithful and True. With justice he judges and makes war. 12His eyes are like blazing fire, and on his head are many crowns. He has a name written on him that no one knows but he himself. 13He is dressed in a robe dipped in blood, and his name is the Word of God. 14The armies of heaven were following him, riding on white horses and dressed in fine linen, white and clean. 15Out of his mouth comes a sharp sword with which to strike down the nations. “He will rule them with an iron scepter.” He treads the winepress of the fury of the wrath of God Almighty. 16On his robe and on his thigh he has this name written: King Of Kings And Lord Of Lords.*

Dear Friends in Christ,

**Our Help Is in the Name of the Lord**

***“I saw heaven standing open…”*** That’s how the reading began. Think about what that means. Heaven was opened, the veil was lifted, and the Apostle John saw what God was doing. He saw the answers to his questions.

Don’t we wish we would be so blessed after a week like this? ***“I saw heaven standing open…”*** makes us say, “Me too! Let me peek into heaven. Let it gates stand wide open like what John saw! Let me, dear God, see, not because I question or even doubt you, but I just want to stop my human mind’s insatiable curiosity and the impulse to ask. I want to know what to tell people who have questions and who question you. Maybe if I saw a little of heaven’s plans, I could let others know!” The desire to have the plans of heaven opened to our human eyes is not unique to the 21st century, or to America, or to the week of a school shooting, or a weekend when we remember those who have died serving their country, sometimes in far off lands, sometimes unrecovered, sometimes seemingly for nothing. Wouldn’t we love to have heaven standing open so that we could know God’s plans?

Well, that is exactly what the book of Revelation does. It is God’s plan in outline form. Revelation, called in Greek *The Apocalypse of John*, was most likely the last book of the New Testament to be written. Jesus had completed his ministry 60 or 70 years previous. The apostle Paul had gone on his church-planting missionary journeys some 40 to 50 years before Revelation. Just think of it! By the time of Revelation, there were a bunch of third and fourth generation Christians!

And yet… yet Christ’s kingdom was not asserting itself in the forceful way that some, at least at first, had expected. The Christian faith may have been fairly widespread through the Roman Empire and some points beyond, yet it was still a tiny minority. In most places it was getting less tolerated instead of more tolerated. There were sporadic outbreaks of persecution with violence and property destruction. Things didn’t appear to be going along swimmingly. And the lifeblood of the movement, the Twelve (you know whom I am talking about, right?) Jesus’ Twelve plus the Apostle Paul were passing from the earth. In fact, by this time only one survived: John. And if John should go, would these scattered gatherings of Christians survive without a direct link to Jesus?

At this juncture—when all but one of the Twelve had passed from the earth, and much of the initial vitality of the Church seemed to be sputtering—at this time the Lord Jesus gifted his apostle John to see heaven opened. And he gifted us in that it has been recorded. God laid out before John and us his plans in a big-picture sort of way.

It is really important that we understand this purpose of the book of Revelation. People, Christians, committed Christians, frequently say that they are a little afraid of the book of Revelation, or that it’s just too bizarre. Some seem almost to think that Revelation shouldn’t be in the Bible. Meanwhile, others spend way too much time guessing and predicting what earthly events might possibly correspond to every little detail of the vision of Revelation. They think that Revelation is a catalogue of predictions that we can unlock, if only we have the right guide or insight. To prove how wrong-headed this second group is, I only need point out how they have *invariably* been proved wrong for the last 2,000 years. And you know what God’s word tells us to do with people who prophesy things that don’t happen, right? *“Keep away from them!”* says Romans 16:17. The point of Revelation is neither to wow you with weirdness, nor to give you a map of the future fully zoomed-in to the last outhouse at a county park campground.

In the positive, Revelation *is* more like a map zoomed out to a coast-to-coast view. You don’t see every detail, but you see the interstates and major highways. You know there are more levels of detail below and behind, but what is really important is to get the big picture, because the big picture is what tells you that you are headed to the right place.

What God is telling you in this special book of the Bible is this: While you walk through the chaos of this fallen world, do not think that things have gone off the rails! Don’t imagine that God has lost control or just doesn’t care! All of this, even disasters and tragedies, will serve God’s eternal plan for you. And there will be resolution.

So, as we look at our reading, we need context. In Revelation, if you go back chapters four and five you are at the beginning of the vision. (Remember, our reading is from chapter 19.) In four and five it started with God in heaven and the Lamb of God whom it says looked as if he had been slain. That’s the foundation. From the beginning, Jesus’ sacrifice for sin is the lynch pin of God’s plan. In paying the ransom price of our sinfulness, he has purchased eternity for us. That’s what God’s whole plan is about! Upon that foundation God then lays out the story of human history. For about a dozen chapters the story of Revelation speaks of the struggles of humanity: pestilence, disaster, famine, human violence. It shows us the fallen world, Satan, human governments, the apostate church, all at war with God and his people. And now in chapter 19, we arrive at the end of the struggle.

In chapter 19, as all the world’s chaos reaches fever pitch, someone enters John’s vision, stage left. Something kind of strange happens as he is introduced.

Here is something similar. I never saw it, but I have been told that in south central Africa among the Tonga people, when a tribal chief is introduced in a formal ceremony with lots of people assembled, one of the chiefs courtiers has the special duty to *kutembaula mwami*, to proclaim his titles. Sort of like this: “Chief Shakumbila, senior chief of the Sala people, paramount chief of the Tonga, hunter of the crocodile, helper of the down-trodden…” and so forth. Supposedly this can go on for several minutes, title after title. I would have loved to have witnessed it!

That’s sort of what happens in this reading. Most of these six verses are titles and descriptions of the character entering the vision. He is called Faithful and True, The One with the Unknowable Name, Word of God, Lord of lords and King of kings. Pictures are painted of a warrior on a steed, one with fiery eyes, a blood-stained garment, and on it goes. Remember, heaven has been opened, and John is watching God’s plan. This is God’s plan for all the chaos and what is wrong in the world we live in. It is wrapped up in this mysterious rider on the white horse.

Our Lord Jesus Christ here, at the end of time, appears in a very different way from the *“Lamb looking as if it had been slain.”* *This* Jesus also looks different from what we are used to in the Gospels. This is disconcerting for some. Maybe it’s part of why some don’t like the book of Revelation. Here we meet one who’s eyes are not soft and empathetic, but blazing with fire. Here we meet not a shepherd carrying the lost sheep on his shoulders, but ready to swing the iron staff in his hands. Here we meet not one as like to us as a brother, but one whose name is beyond all human understanding. Here we meet not one who is ultimately approachable, but who bears the title King of kings and Lord of lords.

We do not see Christ only in view of his earth-bound humble service, taking the place of sinful mankind. In chapter 19 we see the resurrected and ascended-into-heaven Jesus; the one whom we confess in our creeds: *“He ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of God the Father Almighty. From there he will come to judge the living and the dead.”*

This rider on a white horse creates much cognitive dissonance for some: “That’s not the Jesus I know,” you can hear them gasp. But here is the thing: in the Gospels Jesus is in his state of humiliation; he is going about his task of saving us. Here, in chapter 19 of Revelation, he is neither in a state of humiliation, nor in his work to save people. This is the end of time. Verse 11 tells us, ***“With justice he judges and makes war.”*** His robe is dipped in the blood of his enemies, a sword flashes from the mouth of the one called The Word of God. He strikes the nations. ***“He treads the winepress of the fury of the wrath of God Almighty.”*** He is a conqueror bent of conquest. He comes to set all things right.

Why must it be this way? Recent events remind us that we *do* want public protectors, first responders, who will fight, even using violence to take out the bad guys. World events remind us that every nation needs soldiers capable of and willing to unhesitatingly use lethal force to defend their own nation. We wish it were not so, but humanity is fallen. The world is evil. Satan is a liar who finds many ways to spiritually murder. He speaks a filthy language that many find fun to repeat. God’s solution to our sorrow stricken lives in a fallen world is the rider on the white horse of Revelation 19.

This vision was an assurance to John and is to us that God will one day set all things right. His justice will be far more pure and complete than anything we can dish out.

This is the answer to this week’s difficult questions. Heaven has been opened to John and to us. God is telling us the answer to his questions about why we must suffer in this world and why God asks us to patiently endure and live on hope. The answer is found in the Jesus who does not look like the Jesus we call on in our prayers and hymns, because this Jesus will be quite another to those who have chosen to reject him.

By God’s grace, we call him Faithful and True, and we find joy in that. We find joy in knowing that we can believe what he says, and trust what he has promised. When he tells us that all who come to him have already been forgiven of their sins, we lose our fear of him. When he says that he will use *all* things for the good of those who love him, we believe him even as we wonder about tragedy after tearful tragedy. He has promised us an eternal place better and happier than the place we now live in. We accept that as fact.

But Faithful and True has another side. It cuts both ways. Even in the Gospels which highlight Jesus our loving Savior, we see little glints of this fearsome warrior. Remember Jesus chasing animals and money changers out of the temple with a whip. Remember Jesus pronouncing his seven-fold woe on the religious teachers who rejected his teaching and miracles. Remember Jesus who was unafraid to say, “Unless you repent, you too will all perish!” Jesus spoke doom to those who stubbornly refused him, who insisted, “I’ll do it my way.” To them Jesus will be faithful and true to his words. He will be the fearsome warrior who judges with justice and makes war.

Our Jesus, ascended to heaven, will come again to set things right. It doesn’t mean soldiers stop being soldiers and policemen stop policing and we , We do what God has given us to do, but we also leave the rest in his hands. Our ascended Savior will come again. Elsewhere it says, *“Christ was sacrificed once to take away the sins of many people; and he will appear a second time, not to bear sin, but to bring salvation to those who are waiting for him”* (Hebrews 9:28). We will be like those armies of heaven in our reading following him, ***“riding on white horses and dressed in fine linen, white and clean”*** (14). They/we bear no weapon, wear no armor, lift no hand to fight, only wear the celebratory clothes of the victors. Heaven stands open. We win through Jesus Christ, our ascended Lord. Amen.