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Revelation 7: 9-17

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“Coming Out of the Great Ordeal”

The book of Revelation is the last book of the Bible. It depicts a great battle between good and evil. The Cosmic Lamb is the good guy and the Beast is, you guessed it, the bad guy. This book belongs to the genre of literature known as “apocalyptic”, but it’s not what you think. It’s not a prophecy of what’s going to happen at the end of time. It’s a proclamation that despite appearances to the contrary, and in spite of current historical circumstances, the Holy One has not gone missing in action. The word apocalyptic simply means, “unveiling. The Beast that is causing so much suffering and oppression is defeated and unveiled as an imposter, his power is revealed as being limited, his glory a fading star, and his wisdom foolishness. Christ, the slain Lamb, is raised from the grave, and has already accomplished this unveiling. The wisdom and the way of the Christ, the author assures us in his book, will prevail.

The Beast in Revelation is the Roman Empire. At the time of writing Christians were being persecuted. They were living through a great ordeal and in need of a story of mythological proportions to assure them of victory. “Who are these, robed in white, and where have they come from?”, asks the elder in today’s reading. He answers his own question: “These are they who

have come out of the great ordeal; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the lamb.”

Strange language for our ears, I know. But is it really such a stretch to see life in terms of a great ordeal? Are we not those who are those robed in white? Who among us, here today, does not know what it’s like to have been through an ordeal, or even be in the midst of one now? Who does not know what it feels like to genuinely wonder if you’re going to make it through, and that if you are going to make it, it will be by the grace of God? We too need a redemptive story of mythic proportions within which to set our own ordeals.

Let’s face it. A lot of life is about enduring the ordeals that come our way – ones we didn’t choose, and over which we had no control. They can take over in an absolute fashion. Living with an illness, a marriage break-up, coping with grief, being overwhelmed by the demands of career and parenting, unemployment, depression, addiction. The beast rears his ugly head in these circumstances and tempts us to give in to despair and hopelessness. This is the voice that tries to convince us that the totality of life is defined by what it is we’re going through. In the midst of a depression, or living through the turmoil of a

wayward child, despair is King. It sits enthroned at the center of our heart and demands our allegiance. It tells us that death, not life, is ultimate.

I remember leading a workshop on creation spirituality. I asked people to go into the forest with an unresolved issue in their life and ask creation if it had any wisdom to bring to bear on their problem. We've been taught to imagine that creation is devoid of intelligence and soul. But why do we go to the forest or walk beside an ocean when we're at our wits end? What if creation is shot through with wisdom? Anyway, off they went. They were only out in the forest for 25 minutes, but many returned with very interesting tales to tell. One woman had been worried sick about her daughter, who was a drug addict. Her daughter's well being had taken over her life. What she heard the forest telling her was to give her worry to the wind, to entrust her daughter to the evolutionary Spirit that was at work in her daughter; to love her daughter with all her heart, of course, but to take back her own life. She had more life to live. She wept as her anxiety and despair was engulfed by a larger story of hope.

The gospel story is intended to function in this way in our lives as well. When despair threatens to engulf us, we're invited to set it within a larger context of this great story of hope. The author of the Revelation says that the ones robed in white are those that have "washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the lamb." Yes, the language is strange. But to a first

century Jew it would have made perfect sense. It's an allusion to the blood of the lamb that the Hebrews smeared over their doors when they were escaping out of Egypt. They too were coming out of a great ordeal; they were slaves of the Pharaoh. So, in the legend, God tells them to smear the blood of a lamb over their doorposts in order to be saved from death. This is the story of Passover. We don't go around slaughtering innocent lambs anymore, but we can write the story of Christ's life, death, and resurrection over the door of our hearts. We too can be spared the death sentence that despair metes out.

This gospel story reminds us that Christ's life is the divine pattern for all our lives. We're invited to open our hearts to life and give everything you have for love, like Christ. We do this knowing that with Christ we will be crucified, that the way of the open heart is still considered foolish in the eyes of the world. And then, like Christ, by the power of God, we will get back up and do it again, because despair and hopelessness do not rule. God does. When we realize this deep in our bones, then we are empowered to do what Peter did in the reading from Acts, and call forth life even in the midst of death. It's a powerful story that reminds us for the early Christians, even death had no dominion. The Beast had been slain.

Let's move out from the personal to the collective level. We are just now coming out of another great ordeal. Five years ago, two planes crashed into the twin towers in New

York, setting off the so-called “war on terror”. More Americans have now died in the war in Iraq than died in the twin towers, and tens of thousands of Iraqis have died as a result of this invasion. Both the terrorist attacks and the war were truly apocalyptic in the popular sense of the word. They have been catastrophic in terms of loss of life, loss of human rights, and loss of privacy. But they have been apocalyptic in the more precise meaning of the term as well.

There has been an unveiling. The most momentous decision a President will ever make is to ask Congress to support a declaration of war – it is momentous because you ask knowing that you are sending young men and women to their death. To ask this of a nation is to ask for their absolute trust in your judgment. We now know that this administration intentionally lied and deceived its way into war. George Bush did so knowing that he was lying when he made a connection between Al Qaeda and Sadaam Hussein – there wasn’t one; and he lied when he said that Iraq had nuclear weapons – there were none. And on both counts, he and his administration knew it and manipulated information to support the lie.

We now know the multimedia conglomerates supported this campaign of misinformation, through shoddy journalism and misplaced patriotic fervor. For example, it was common practice for the White House to release a story to the New York Times in the morning, and that after

noon appear on CBS and CNN talk shows quoting that same article for support, as though it originated with the New York Times. Not a single station or anchorman caught on. Bill Moyers plays the role of the Christ, unveiling the lies and deception in spectacular fashion in a documentary that aired last week on PBS. Remarkably, the Canadian Press played almost no role in the unveiling of the truth. And those journalists, like Rex Murphy and Margaret Wente, who supported the President and his neoconservative advisors in an unqualified manner, have yet to issue any apology, as far as I know.

It is painful to watch the likes of Dan Rather coming to terms with his own failure and with the reality that his President could do this. It’s painful for us as well. We don’t want to believe the most powerful nation in the world would risk the lives of young Americans, and countless innocent Iraqis, for ulterior motives. The Beast, the new Rome of the 21st century, took the form of a small group of neo-imperialists who got the ear of the President and Vice-President and an entire nation. And now, the emperor is naked. The Beast is revealed as a cadre of wealthy white men, who display all the characteristics of sociopaths, out of touch with their feelings, hiding behind a curtain of power and a veil of lies. Francis Fukayama is the one exception having publicly declared that he was wrong. The veil has been removed by courageous news organizations like Knights Ridder, and others.

The whole world is just now coming out of this great ordeal. Fact is being sorted out from fiction, reality from illusion. What the author of Revelation tells us is that once we emerge from the great ordeals of our life, personal and collective, God is waiting, like a mother, with Kleenex and a call back to life. "God will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and the sun will not scorch them any longer". The powers that tempt us to despair fall before the God of hope. The lamb that once was crucified by those very powers is now seated at the right hand of God, high and lifted up. To *this* one belongs dominion, and

power, and glory and honour. Despair is too easy. To retreat into cynicism is to declare victory for the Beast. Political apathy belongs to the realm of death, not life. With God as our comforter, let us pray for the grace to keep our hearts open, to forgive where cynicism seems more realistic, to engage when retreat into our private bubbles is the easier path. Let us rather, meet around the throne of the wounded and risen Lamb of God, and join with the creatures and the angels and all the saints who have come out of the great ordeal singing an unlikely canticle of hope