

**Davidson College Presbyterian Church**  
**Davidson, North Carolina**  
**Lib McGregor Simmons**  
**“Diagnosing the Illness”**  
**Revelation 6**  
**8th Sunday after Pentecost**  
**July 10, 2016**

In our summer series on the book of Revelation, we left off last Sunday at the point in Pastor John’s vision where God is on the throne in the heavenly throne room and a Lamb, slaughtered but still standing, a symbolic representation of the Christ who was slaughtered and resurrected to life, has been identified by one of the twenty-four elders as the one who is worthy to break open the seven wax seals on the scroll. The expectation is that with the removal of each successive seal, all creation will be brought closer and closer to the culmination of God’s cosmic drama.

There are seven seals on the scroll. Today we will read of the opening of the first six of the seals, saving the opening of the seventh seal for next Sunday.

The first four seals form a unit and parallel each other. Together, they tell of what has come to be known as “the four horsemen of the Apocalypse.” As each of the seals is opened, one of the four living creatures covered with eyes that we met last Sunday in Revelation 4 calls out “Come!” At this beckoning, a horse comes out, each of a different color and with a rider having particular attributes. These images would not have been foreign to Pastor John’s readers for they are reminiscent of images found in the Old Testament book of Zechariah.

It is also significant, Catherine and Justo Gonzalez point out in their commentary, that the common word for “rider” is not used here, but rather the unusual word construction, “the one sitting on it.” These are exactly the same words which were used earlier in Revelation to refer to God as “the One sitting on the throne.” Thus, the purpose of these words may be to depict these four horses as false seats of power—false thrones, so to speak, that seem to have ultimate power but do not. They are still subject to the One [God] who sits on the real throne.” (1)

REVELATION 6: 1-2

The first rider wields a bow. According to classical historians, as fearsome as Rome was a military power, its legendary legions never mastered the use of the bow. The bow was, however, a primary weapon of several of Rome’s principal enemies. In fact, it stood as a metaphor for the kingdom which Rome feared the most: Parthia. Just in case the bow by itself was an insufficient prompt for any Roman reader, John has placed the archer prominently on a white horse. The Parthians were renowned not only for their archery skills but, even more impressively, for their ability to fire their bows accurately while mounted on galloping, white horses. (2) The Romans had an obsessive fear of the Parthians, so in this image, Pastor John is tweaking Roman pride, saying in essence, “You think that you’re God. Ha! You can’t even handle humans like the Parthians!”

Here we can see that Pastor John is writing as much for the Romans as he is writing to his own community of Christ followers. (3) He expects Rome eavesdrop upon the opening of this first seal and those which follow and quail in the face of God’s judgment of its imperial power.

REVELATION 6: 3-8

The next three seals are opened in quick succession.

The second seal is opened. This second rider is seated on a horse that is red as fire, as red as blood, and he wields a sword. Even though Rome was supposedly the establisher of peace, the *pax Romana*, it was a peace achieved through what was called “the right of the sword,” that is, the authority of provincial governors to decree the death penalty.

The third seal is opened. A black horse gallops forth, its rider holding aloft a balance scale, used in that day and time for the weighing of grain. Economic hardship is its message, depicting the struggle of people who cannot afford to buy food because of inflation and rising prices while those in the top tier of society have more than enough. (4)

The fourth seal is opened. This horse is greenish, like a rotting corpse. This rider has a name: Death. He is accompanied by “Hades,” the traditional name for the underworld. As the other three riders representing various

ways that Rome seems to be powerful, but actually is not are loosed, the result is that Death itself rides rampant upon the earth.

#### REVELATION 6: 9-11

The fifth seal is opened. I will return to this image in a few moments. For now, simply note that the scene depicts the Christ followers who have been put to death by the Roman Empire. They are crammed into the crawl space under the heavenly altar, the symbol of divine judgment. They cry out, "How long!"

#### REVELATION 6: 12-17

The sixth seal is opened, and in some ways the sixth seal is a response to the cries of those beneath the altar.

You will remember that the number 7 denotes wholeness, completeness. Here there are seven catastrophic events and seven groups of people who experience them. The double set of sevens shows that vastness of the suffering. No one, not the most powerful emperor, not the lowliest slave, is exempt.

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I have a confession to make to you. When I planned this sermon series on Revelation for the summer following my sabbatical leave, I was nervous.

Summer, after all, is summer, and summer is about family picnics in the park and family reunion gatherings in the mountains. Summer is about building sand castles on the beach and body surfing the waves. Summer is about lazy afternoons dangling a fishing line in or waterskiing on the lake.

In the minds of most, summer does not scream REVELATION!!!!

And so I wondered how in the world Revelation was going to mix with the lazy, hazy, crazy days of summer.

I hope that each of you has, in fact, enjoyed some lazy, hazy, crazy days this summer. But along with the picnics and the beach trips, this summer has been marked by pain. And this past week, especially, has been, well, just horrible.

As I think about the killing and death this past week in Baton Rouge, in Minnesota, and in Dallas, I find myself keeping company with those who cry out from beneath the altar when the fifth seal is opened, "How long? How long? How long?" must suffering and pain and injustice go on, O you who supposedly sit on the throne?"

I'm reminded that when Martin Luther King Jr. spoke in Montgomery on March 25, 1965, at the end of the Selma to Montgomery march, he cried out "How long?"

"How long will prejudice blind the visions of men, darken their understanding, and drive bright-eyed wisdom from her sacred throne?

When will wounded justice, lying prostrate on the streets of Selma and Birmingham and communities all over the South, be lifted from this dust of shame to reign supreme among the children of men?

When will the radiant star of hope be plunged against the nocturnal bosom of this lonely night, plucked from weary souls with chains of fear and the manacles of death?

How long will justice be crucified and truth bear it?"

Dr. King asked "how long?" more than fifty years ago. My struggle is this: if God is God, if the One who sits on the throne really has the power, why have we not gotten there by now?

But here we are...still crying out.

How long will parents of black boys and young men cry out, "Is my son next?" "Do black lives really matter?"

How long will families mourn the deaths of their police officer husbands, wives, sons, daughters, fathers, mothers?

How long will white people like me close our eyes and our hearts and minds to the truth of our privilege and our complicity in the racial injustice which shackles our entire nation?

In the cry "How long?" is gathered up our mourning, our anger, our fear, our shame, our confusion, our doubt that anyone, even God, has the power to set things right.

Yes, we do cry out, "How Long?" and one of the gifts which Revelation gives us is permission to express our lament as we come to worship during a painful summer.

The other gift we are given is this: when we read Revelation 6, is that we are given to remember that when the saints cried out, they were asking, not **if** things will one day be set right, but **when** they will be set right.

How long will it be before things are set right?

Listen to the words of Dr. King:

“I come to say to you this afternoon, however difficult this moment, however frustrating the hour, it will not be long, because ‘truth crushed to earth will rise again.’

How long? Not long, because ‘no lie can live forever.’

How long? Not long, because the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice.

How long? Not long, because

Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord;

He is trampling out the vintage where the grapes of wrath are stored;

He has loosed the fateful lightning of his terrible swift sword;

His truth is marching on...”

It is right that we lament today, but we must never forget that Revelation does not only give us permission to weep. Revelation is, in the first century and in the twenty-first, a call to action to each of us individually and all of us collectively join the Lamb who bears the scars of his slaughter and yet who has defied and defeated death and injustice in all its forms and thus still stands and marches forth into the world to set things right so that justice, truth, peace, and love reign forever and ever.

And so, my brothers and sisters, let us not be discouraged. Let us keep our eyes on the Lamb. Let us be brave in burying the lie that is racism. Let us journey forth with Christ, the Lamb, as our companion, our guide, and our Savior, and with the assurance that God’s truth is still marching on.

1. Catherine Gunsalus Gonzalez and Justo L. Gonzalez, *Revelation* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1997), 46-47.
2. Brian K. Blount, *Revelation* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2009), 125.
3. *Ibid.*
4. Barbara R. Rossing, *Journeys Through Revelation: Apocalyptic Hope for Today* (Louisville: Presbyterian Women Horizons, 2010), 35.