

Davidson College Presbyterian Church
Davidson, North Carolina
Lib McGregor Simmons
“Life and Death Struggle (Life Wins!)”
Revelation 12
10th Sunday after Pentecost
July 24, 2016

We continue in the summer series on Revelation, and, in my opinion, this is probably the most challenging chapter so far for the stories found in chapter 12 are dramatic and deeply symbolic.

Through the ages, readers have tried to read the symbolism in Revelation as literally referring to events taking place in their various historical contexts. Pastor John and his readers would have found this quite amusing, I think.

What Pastor John is doing in this chapter and in other sections of Revelation would have been no more remarkable to his readers than what a modern day preacher might do in using a scene from the new Star Trek movie to convey a theological point.

(In case you haven't figured it out after five Revelation sermons, I will say it directly: we are not going to succumb to the temptation to interpret Revelation literally.)

The symbolism in chapter 12 likely comes from two places. One place is from the literary traditions of the Roman Empire of the first century. The ancient Romans loved to tell their own history in terms of mythological battle stories. The communities to whom Pastor John was writing would have known the great stories of the battles and victories of the gods and goddesses. Revelation 12 is probably patterned on one of those stories, the birth of the god Apollo, that the readers of Revelation would have known well. (1)

The second place where we see symbolic resonance is the central story for all Jews: the Exodus. You will remember how the Israelites were enslaved in Egypt, living hardscrabble lives under the oppressive thumb of Pharaoh. Ten plagues were visited upon the Egyptians, and when the final blow had been dealt and there was not a single Egyptian household where someone had not died, the Israelites made it as far as the Red Sea.

The dividing of the sea and the drying up of the sea to clear dry ground for the escape of the Israelites out of Egypt and into the wilderness are echoed in Revelation 12.

These themes appear not only in Exodus. In Isaiah 51: 9-10, God is addressed: “Was it not you who cut Rahab in pieces, who pierced the dragon? Was it not you who dried up the sea, the waters of the great deep?” Psalm 74: 12-15 speaks in a similar vein: “You divided the sea by your might; you broke the heads of the dragons in the water...you dried up ever-flowing streams.”

Listen for these ancient themes now in Revelation 12.



Wilderness.

Did you catch the two references to *wilderness* in today's reading?

“And the woman fled into the wilderness, where she has a place prepared by God, so that there she can be nourished.”

“So when the dragon saw that he had been thrown down to the earth, he pursued the woman...but the woman was given the two wings of the great eagle, so that she could fly from the serpent into the wilderness, to her place where she is nourished for a time.”

In Revelation, wilderness is...a gift.

It isn't the first time in the biblical record that we read of wilderness being a gift. I have mentioned that the wilderness is where the Israelites found refuge after the exodus. In Genesis 3, after the serpent has tempted the man and the woman away from intimacy with God, the woman Eve, along with her co-conspirator Adam, is promised protection in, where?, the wilderness. It was to the wilderness that Hagar fled for safety when Sarah tried to kill her and her son Ishmael. The gospels speak of Jesus's wilderness experience and how the angels ministered to him there on the heels of his temptations.

In Revelation and in other parts of the biblical record, our shared faith experience, wilderness is a gift. Wilderness is where God nourishes people in times of chaos. Wilderness is where God reveals God's very self in surprising ways. (2) Wilderness can be a place of, well, revelation.

Barbara Brown Taylor has written, “I have learned that the only limit to the revelation going on all around me is my willingness to turn aside and look.” (3)

In Revelation 12, Pastor John invites us to turn aside and look in order to regard our wilderness experiences as places where we meet God in surprising ways and realize anew that no matter how chaotic life may be in the moment, death and hate and evil will not win. Life and love will have the last word.

Many of you know the work of the author Frederick Buechner. He, perhaps more than any other author I know, has written of how we need not be afraid of wilderness for wilderness is where God lives and where God shows the divine self in the truest, most profound ways we will ever experience in this life. All we have to do when we are in the wilderness is to turn aside and look, and evidence for this will be revealed.

Frederick Buechner turned 90 on July 11. In observance of his 90 years, a book entitled *Buechner 101*, replete with an introduction by Anne Lamott who incidentally has never even met Frederick Buechner but who considers him an amazing mixed grill of gentle intelligence and is always thrusting his books into people's unsuspecting hands, has been published. (4)

Included in this collection of Buechner's essays and sermons is the commencement address that he delivered at Union Presbyterian Seminary in Richmond, Virginia, which, although it is not my own seminary, is a seminary that I have come to hold a deep affection my service as a member of the Board of Trustees. DCPC member Russ Kerr is currently a student there. Buechner is, of course, speaking to future ministers, persons whose calling it will be to stand with, sit with, pray with, weep with, preach to people who find themselves in the wilderness. He is honest, oh so honest, about the wildernesses that these not-quite-yet, but soon to be ordained, pastors will face, “We go in fear of the terrible needs of the ones we go to. We go in fear of our own emptiness from which it is hard to believe that any word or deed of help or hope or healing can come.” (5)

Buechner closes his commencement address with a gift for these future pastors. It is the gift of his own story of wilderness, where he dared to turn and look, as Barbara Brown Taylor says, and in return received revelation.

“I was sitting by the side of the road one day last fall. It was a dark time in my life. I was full of anxiety, full of fear and uncertainty. The world within seemed as shadowy as the world without. And then, as I sat there, I spotted a car coming down the road toward me with one of those license plates that you can get by paying a little extra with a word on it instead of just numbers and a letter or two. And of all the words the license plate might have had on it, the word that it did have was the word T-R-U-S-T: TRUST. And as it came close enough for me to read, it became suddenly for me a word from on high, and I give it to you here as a word from on high also for you, a kind of graduation present.

The world is full of dark shadows to be sure, both the world without and the world within, and the road we've all set off on is long and hard and often hard to find, but the word is *trust*. Trust the deepest intuitions of your own heart. Trust the source of your own truest gladness. Trust the road. Above all else, trust [Christ]. Trust him. Amen." (6)

Amid all the chaos and confusion of these days, Pastor John's word to us today is simply this: Trust Christ. Trust him. Amen.

1. Barbara R. Rossing, *Journeys Through Revelation: Apocalyptic Hope for Today* (Louisville: Presbyterian Women Horizons, 2010), 48.
2. *Ibid.*, 49.
3. Barbara Brown Taylor, "Dear Mr. Buechner, you rearranged the air: A Tribute to Frederick Buechner," in *Buechner 101* (Cambridge, MA, 2014), 19.
4. Anne Lamott, "Welcome," in *Buechner 101* (Cambridge, MA, 2014), 1.
5. Frederick Buechner, *Buechner 101* (Cambridge, MA, 2014), 28.
6. *Ibid.*, 33.