

Davidson College Presbyterian Church
Davidson, North Carolina
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“The Grapes of Wrath”
Revelation 13-14, Romans 13: 1-7
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I have a biblical scholar friend who, whenever someone asks him, “What does the Bible say about (blank)?”, prefaces his response by saying, “That question is like asking me ‘What does the library say about (blank)?’”

My friend is right.

The Bible is a library of 66 books written over the span of many centuries by scores of different writers. And sometimes, when it comes to a particular question about life and faith, the writers disagree.

Such is the case with the question, “What is the place of government in the life of a Christ-follower?”

Paul, writing early in the first century in his letter to the Romans puts forth one answer to the question. John of Patmos, writing several decades later, expresses an entirely different point of view in Revelation.

This is a good thing, I believe.

One way that I and others like to look at the disagreement between Paul and John is to take it as an impassioned conversation between two people of faith earnestly seeking to live in the light and hope of Christ in the midst of two different historical realities. Having two perspectives, rather than only one, is a gift to us, I believe, as we seek to hear God’s word to us as Christ-followers and as citizens of the most powerful nation on earth.

Listen first to Paul writing in Romans 13: 1, 6-7.

13 Let every person be subject to the governing authorities; for there is no authority except from God, and those authorities that exist have been instituted by God.

⁶For the same reason you also pay taxes, for the authorities are God’s servants, busy with this very thing. ⁷Pay to all what is due them—taxes to whom taxes are due, revenue to whom revenue is due, respect to whom respect is due, honor to whom honor is due.

Paul straightforwardly espouses a positive view of government.

We now move to Revelation and what John of Patmos writes. It is not so positive. In fact, John’s view of government is downright negative.

John is not as straightforward in his writing as Paul. Over the course of this summer series on Revelation, we have become familiar with John’s style of highly symbolic apocalyptic discourse. We have heard John’s impassioned exhortation to Christ-followers to risk persecution at the hands of the mighty Roman Empire by resisting the Empire’s demands for ultimate allegiance, to “stand up and stand out,” as Brian Blount puts it, in witness to the way of Jesus Christ.

Today’s Revelation reading consists of selected verses from chapters 13 and 14.

In the opening verses of Revelation 13, we are introduced to a beast from the sea.

You may remember from our reading two Sundays ago that the preceding chapter, Revelation 12, detailed the work of the dragon and its failure to defeat God and Christ, and having thus met failure, “went off to make war on the rest of her [that is, God’s, represented by the woman] children, those who keep the commandments of God and hold the testimony of Jesus.” (12: 17)

This dragon is seen as the force behind the beast from the sea. And the beast, we can surmise, embodies the Roman Empire.

¹⁸ Then the dragon^[a] took his stand on the sand of the seashore. **13** ¹ And I saw a beast rising out of the sea, having ten horns and seven heads; and on its horns were ten diadems, and on its heads were blasphemous names. ² And the beast that I saw was like a leopard, its feet were like a bear’s, and its mouth was like a lion’s mouth. And the dragon gave it his power and his throne and great authority. ³ One of its heads seemed to have received a death-blow, but its mortal wound^[b] had been healed. In amazement the whole earth followed the beast. ⁴ They worshiped the dragon, for he had given his authority to the beast, and they worshiped the beast, saying, “Who is like the beast, and who can fight against it?”

⁵The beast was given a mouth uttering haughty and blasphemous words, and it was allowed to exercise authority for forty-two months. ⁶It opened its mouth to utter blasphemies against God, blaspheming his name and his dwelling, that is, those who dwell in heaven.

In this passage, there is a reference several times to “blasphemies against God.” In the next section which I will read which refers to the beast of the land, there is a reference to commerce and how no one who does not bear the mark of the beast is permitted to buy or sell.

A word of explanation is in order, and it points to what had changed in the years between Paul’s favorable view of government and John’s unfavorable view.

Beginning with Augustus Caesar who was the Roman ruler at the time of Jesus’s birth, each succeeding ruler of the Roman Empire took on more and more titles that were divine. By the time of the writing of the book of Revelation, the emperor was Domitian and he had decreed that he should be addressed as “Lord and God.” The coins used by everybody, including those to whom John was writing, bore Domitian’s likeness and his title. It would be like the U.S. Mint printing completely new bills and coins every time we elected a new president and inscribing them with “In Hillary Clinton we trust” or “Donald Trump is Lord.” It was the Roman Empire method of growing the economy, I guess. But, even the everyday exchange of coins was an expression of blasphemy in Pastor John’s view; it was one of the ways that he was calling upon his Christ-follower audience to resist the Empire. (1)

¹¹ Then I saw another beast that rose out of the earth; it had two horns like a lamb and it spoke like a dragon. ¹² It exercises all the authority of the first beast on its behalf, and it makes the earth and its inhabitants worship the first beast, whose mortal wound^[a] had been healed.

¹⁶ Also it causes all, both small and great, both rich and poor, both free and slave, to be marked on the right hand or the forehead, ¹⁷ so that no one can buy or sell who does not have the mark, that is, the name of the beast or the number of its name. ¹⁸ This calls for wisdom: let anyone with understanding calculate the number of the beast, for it is the number of a person. Its number is six hundred sixty-six.

Ah, here is the infamous “mark of the beast.” We have spoken before in this Revelation series of the importance of numerology. Apparently, letters were assigned numeric values, and thus 666 would have been readily known as referring to a specific person. There is a great deal of speculation about who the person might be – the emperor Nero who was now dead, another emperor, but, honestly, nobody really knows. Remembering that the number of perfection and wholeness is 7, then it seems plausible to me that no matter to whom 666 may be referring, the one who bears this mark is far from the perfection and wholeness of the Christ to whom John’s first-century readers and we are called to bear witness.

14 Then I looked, and there was the Lamb, standing on Mount Zion! And with him were one hundred forty-four thousand who had his name and his Father’s name written on their foreheads.

¹² Here is a call for the endurance of the saints, those who keep the commandments of God and hold fast to the faith of^[a] Jesus.

¹³ And I heard a voice from heaven saying, “Write this: Blessed are the dead who from now on die in the Lord.” “Yes,” says the Spirit, “they will rest from their labors, for their deeds follow them.”

Reaping the Earth’s Harvest

¹⁴ Then I looked, and there was a white cloud, and seated on the cloud was one like the Son of Man, with a golden crown on his head, and a sharp sickle in his hand! ¹⁵ Another angel came out of the temple, calling with a loud voice to the one who sat on the cloud, “Use your sickle and reap, for the hour to reap has come, because the harvest of the earth is fully ripe.” ¹⁶ So the one who sat on the cloud swung his sickle over the earth, and the earth was reaped.

¹⁷ Then another angel came out of the temple in heaven, and he too had a sharp sickle. ¹⁸ Then another angel came out from the altar, the angel who has authority over fire, and he called with a loud voice to him who had the sharp sickle, “Use your sharp sickle and gather the clusters of the vine of the earth, for its grapes are ripe.” ¹⁹ So the angel swung his sickle over the earth and gathered the vintage of the earth, and he threw it into the great wine press of the wrath of God. ²⁰ And the wine press was trodden outside the city, and blood flowed from the wine press, as high as a horse’s bridle, for a distance of about two hundred miles.

.....
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 hath loosed the fateful lightning of His terrible swift sword:
His truth is marching on.

You recognize these words as the opening stanza of The Battle Hymn of the Republic (and hopefully you also recognize that the images that are found in the song are from Revelation 14 which has just been read.)

Julia Ward Howe wrote the poem that became the Battle Hymn of the Republic. In November of 1861, Samuel Howe, Julia Ward Howe's husband, was charged by the Governor of Massachusetts to inspect the sanitary conditions of his state's troops. Samuel and Julia made the trip down to Washington D.C. in order to do so. On her carriage ride back to the Willard Hotel after reviewing the Union troops, she heard the troops and civilian spectators belting out the popular song, "John Brown's Body," based on the story of the abolitionist leader of the Harper's Ferry raid. One of Julia's traveling companions suggested that Julia, a published poet, write some more elevated lyrics.

Julia Ward Howe recounted, "I went to bed that night as usual, and slept, according to my wont, quite soundly. I awoke in the gray of the morning twilight; and as I lay waiting for the dawn, the long lines of the desired poem began to twine themselves in my mind. Having thought out all the stanzas, I said to myself, 'I must get up and write these verses down, lest I fall asleep again and forget them.' So, with a sudden effort, I sprang out of bed, and found in the dimness an old stump of a pen which I remembered to have used the day before. I scrawled the verses almost without looking at the paper." (2)

Do you catch the parallels between Julia Ward Howe's writing of her powerful poem and Pastor John's writing of Revelation?

One parallel is that the words have come to the writers as a dream, a vision.

Another parallel is that apocalyptic images provide a means for the writers to convey encouragement and hope to their audiences.

During this series, I have mostly cast Revelation in a positive light. And I continue to remain convinced that the book of Revelation is a gift that promotes encouragement and hope and healing for the world...that this is the vision that it ultimately holds out, not a nightmare of fear, violence, and destruction. (3)

Certainly, for Julia Ward Howe, Revelation gave her language to inspire the cause of ending slavery. She reflected later in her life that she was particularly struck by the sight of the campfires where soldiers were guarding the railway lines. The closer that she drew to the city, the more acute grew Julia's sense of powerlessness. "I thought of the women of my acquaintance whose sons or husbands were fighting our great battle; the women themselves serving in the hospitals." But Julia's husband was too old to fight while her sons were not yet of military age. "I could not leave my nursery to follow the march of our armies," she said, "neither had I the practical deftness which the preparing and packing of sanitary stores demanded. Something seemed to say to me, 'You would be glad to serve, but you cannot help anyone; you have nothing to give and there is nothing for you to do.'"

The apocalyptic language of Revelation turned that around for Julia Ward Howe. She answered Pastor John's question "Can I get a witness?" by writing a song that has made a lot of difference, not only in helping to bring slavery to an end, but as recently as last month when it was played and sung at the Dallas memorial service for the five police officers who had been killed on that horrible night of terror.

Apocalyptic language and images have their place—and I hope that the language and images of Revelation have called forth hope and encouragement for you this summer as we have moved through its chapters—but when one stops to consider it, in the library of the Bible's 66 books, apocalyptic language has a very small place. We find it in the Hebrew books of Daniel and Ezekiel and in other snippets strewn through other Old Testament prophets. We find it in Revelation and uttered in a few places by Jesus and recorded in a couple of the gospels.

In the midst of the violent images and language of Revelation 13 and 14, Pastor John drops a decidedly nonviolent line that jumps off the page full of violent images which lands in our hearts during these days when so many of us are finding ourselves to be at war within ourselves regarding how we to understand and relate as Christ-followers to our nation's government. Here is the line, Revelation 14: 12: "Here is a call for the endurance [nonviolent resistance] of the saints, those who keep the commandments of God and hold fast to the faith of Jesus."

In these lines, it seems to me, Pastor John seems to be calling Christ-followers to embody and to create for this nation and for the world a culture of nonviolence, a culture of hope and peace.

I am grateful that in the very week when we come to the chapters in Revelation which are the most violent, those images are counterbalanced by the images of the Olympic Games. Sure, there is much to be cynical about the

Olympics—the doping and the commercialism and such, but in the Olympics, I think, we get a glimpse of what it means to live faithfully with one foot in Romans and the other foot in Revelation, with a patriotism that is healthy because it derives from a sure sense that God is God of the whole world and there is no human ruler, no president, no dictator, which deserves our ultimate obedience and that we all, each person and each nation, have a role to play in cultivating a global culture of hope and peace.

As has been noted by numerous commentators over the course of the past few weeks, there is something brand new at this Summer Olympics. I'm not talking about golf (although that is a very good addition!) I'm talking about the team of 10 refugees which the IOC is funding to the tune of \$2 million.

The stories of each of the 10 athletes are profoundly moving, but none more so than the story of Tegla Laroupe, a former world-record holder in the marathon and the winner of the New York Marathon in 1984 and 1985, who is not competing herself but is serving as the team's leader.

When Tegla Laroupe was a young girl growing up in Kenya, her father did not want her to go to school. He expected her to be a babysitter. He gave her a nickname "Useless."

But Tegla Laroupe was and still is far from useless.

"Perhaps no one represents hopefulness in international sport more resolutely than Laroupe. She refused to succumb to a life of expected subservience as a young woman and has spent her post running career offering possibility instead of despair.

'People treat these refugees like criminals,' Laroupe said when she was interviewed last Monday. 'We need to treat them with respect.'

Under the banner of the Tegla Laroupe Peace Foundation, she has organized peace races among tribal rivals in Africa, trying to resolve conflicts [nonviolently] instead of [with] weapons. She has mediated tribal disputes over grazing land, water and cattle raiding. She persuaded 700 members of her tribe, the Pokot people, to surrender 38 guns as part of an anti-rustling campaign. She has campaigned for the rights of girls and women in patriarchal societies of East Africa. She operates a school for nearly 400 children, trying to keep them from becoming child soldiers, providing shelter for those orphaned by AIDS and dislocated by war, offering the nourishment of food and education in the face of poverty, conflict, and cultural skepticism..." (4)

And now she is the leader of the Olympic team representing the millions of people around the world who have no country and are suffering because of wars which have displaced them.

One of those team members is Yiech Pur Biel, a 21-year-old runner who fled his village in South Sudan in 2005 and has not heard from anyone in his family since then. Laroupe found him at the Kakuma refugee camp in Kenya.

He says, "Tegla is our mother, not only our leader. Most of us run because of war. Madam Tegla gives us a chance for other people to know the history of our lives. And we can forget what happened before. We can celebrate. We can have hope..." (5)

It is no small thing, I think, that the Olympic Games which are taking place in this year of 2016, a year which has been marked by terror and political division and war in so many ways, a year when hope seems to be in short supply, are taking place in the shadow of the outstretched arms of statue called "Christ the Redeemer."

May we stand with him, with Paul and with John, with our brothers and sisters throughout the world, bearing witness to Christ's hope and peace.

1. William C. Pender, *Revelation* (Louisville: Geneva Press, 1999), 70.
2. Howe, Julia Ward. *Reminiscences: 1819-1899* (New York: Houghton, Mifflin, 1899), 275.
3. Barbara R. Rossing, *Journeys Through Revelation: Apocalyptic Hope for Today* (Louisville: Presbyterian Women Horizons, 2010), 55.
4. Jere Longman, "Groundbreaking Marathoner Now Fights for Rights," *The New York Times*, August 5, 2016.
5. *Ibid.*