

OCTOBER 18, 2020 WORSHIP SERVICE

MORNING PRAYER – LOIS HARDER

Creator God, we are gathered here before you to worship, to hear the message from your word, to receive inspiration and hope, to be comforted and challenged for the days ahead. We're gathered in a variety of ways – some are here, in-person, some here in spirit but from a physical distance. We come with all the contents of our hearts and lives... with gratitude –

We are grateful, God, for the fullness of our lives. For the harvest and the fall planting, for the beauty of the land, the open spaces in which we live. We acknowledge, humbly, those who lived on these lands long before we did – the Iowa, the Kicakpoo, the Potawatami, the Sac and Fox and others. Grant us grace, dear God, to continue to learn about and appreciate the first peoples of this land as they continue to suffer oppression and injustices that threaten their very existence.

We are grateful, God, for the gifts of healing and the many ways those gifts come to us - in the ways you've created our bodies to heal. Thank you for successful surgery this last week for Caiden; we pray for healing now for his arm. We pray for other young people in our community who have injuries – to their bodies, their spirits or their minds. We pray, gracious God, for all of us as we continue to deal with the illness and anxiety and fear that the covid virus brings. We pray for those whose test results have come back positive, for those who need to be quarantined for the coming days, for those whose jobs are more difficult, for those whose minds and spirits and bodies are exhausted and sick with anxiety and stress. We ask for your healing presence in our lives. We trust in your Holy Spirit that you promised would be with us in all times. We hope in your steadfast love, God. We acknowledge, humbly, that in our humanity, we often try to lean on our own understandings, we forget to depend on you, on your love and your mercy. Help us, God, to love and support one another, to be the hands and feet of Jesus through this time, offering care and compassion. Give us the wisdom also, God, to know what it means to care for ourselves through this time – to remember the command to love our neighbors AS we love ourselves, so that as we are healthy and able we're equipped to reach out to others.

We are grateful, God, for the gift of life, of remembering and celebrating the saints who've gone before. We pray for Belia, for Alexander and Carmelita as they grieve Ervin's sudden loss and celebrate his life. We pray for LaVerne and Arlene and other extended family members as they make plans to gather for this occasion. Be present with this family in ways that bring them your comfort, peace and healing. We acknowledge, humbly, that death is the passage from this life to the next; it's a part of life, as you have created it. Help us *all* to trust you in this mystery, to realize, again, that life is fragile and we don't control it.

We are grateful for this nation and for the opportunities it has offered us and many. We are grateful for all the nations of this world – they are each made up of your children. We pray for our nation and for the world, God. May your Holy Spirit be welcomed, allowed to move freely, to do your work of reconciling all people to one another and to the earth. We acknowledge, humbly, that humanity is hungry for power. Collectively, we often forget that our nation, this

earth, this universe is YOUR kingdom, it exhibits YOUR power, and YOUR glory now and forever. Amen.

PATIENT ENDURANCE AND FAITHFULNESS – PASTOR CALEB

Revelation 12:1-9, 13:1-10

How many of you came to church expecting to hear about dragons and beasts? You're soon going to be convinced I'm trying to ruin otherwise perfectly good services.

Some weeks ago, I talked about Revelation being a kind of lens to see our world differently than we are used to.

I'll expand that to say that Revelation is also a kind of drama with an intense plotline that puts the characters in conflict with each other. The fantastical characters that are out of this world are naming in a very different way the real struggle with evil that and continues to be real.

The woman, child, dragon and beasts together tell a chapter of the Great Story that we are a part of.

I think I've mentioned that I used to be a fan of the *Lord of the Rings*. This is a set of books and also movies set in an imaginary world called Middle Earth that is populated by elves, dwarves, hobbits, men, and evil creatures.

While popular, it's a less well-known fact that the author Tolkien was a devout Catholic Christian, and his Christian faith influenced his work in subtle ways. Elsewhere Tolkien wrote the creation story of Middle-earth, which parallels Revelation in some ways.

In the beginning, God, known as Ilúvatar, creates celestial beings called the Ainur or "Holy Ones." Ilúvatar begins to create the world by creating a musical theme. All of the Ainur add harmony to this musical theme.

Quoting a few segments:

Then Ilúvatar said to them: 'Of the theme that I have declared to you, I will now that ye make in harmony together a Great Music. ...

Then the voices of the Ainur, like unto harps and lutes, and pipes and trumpets, and viols and organs, and like unto countless choirs singing with words, began to fashion the theme of Ilúvatar to a great music; and a sound arose of endless interchanging melodies woven in harmony that passed beyond hearing into the depths and into the heights, and the places of the dwelling of Ilúvatar were filled to overflowing, and the music and the echo of the music went out into the Void, and it was not void....

At first the music is beautiful, with no flaws.

But as the theme progressed, it came into the heart of Melkor to interweave matters of his own imagining that were not in accord with the theme of Ilúvatar, for he sought therein to increase the power and glory of the part assigned to himself.”¹

Like the dragon of the Biblical story, the character Melkor can't just go along with the same musical theme. He insists on creating his own music that is dissonant from theme of Iluvatar. From this point on in the story of Middle Earth, there is an ongoing conflict with this dark power.

Revelation 12-13 tells the biblical story from another perspective, using vivid characters to set up the plotline of the Great Story in a different way than we are used to:

There's a woman clothed with the sun, with a crown of 12 stars who is giving birth to a male child. We probably already know who the child is – that's the Christ child. The woman represents God's people – the nation of Israel and then the church.

However, this woman is pursued by a terrible dragon with seven heads who wants to eat the Christ child.

God provides protection to the Christ child and to the woman. The child goes up to God's throne, depicting Jesus' resurrection. Meanwhile the woman finds protection in the wilderness – which maybe represents the exile of God's people.

She is there for a symbolic length of time that amounts to three and a half years – half of the perfect number seven. The cosmic battle leaves the dragon or the devil hurled to earth to wreak havoc among the inhabitants of the earth.

John, the writer of Revelation, poignantly says in verse 17: *Then the dragon was enraged at the woman and went off to wage war against the rest of her offspring—those who keep God's commands and hold fast their testimony about Jesus.*

If you remember from earlier weeks, we talked about how Revelation turns the word “conquer” upside-down. Jesus provides the real pattern of “conquering” by being faithful all the way to his death on the cross.

So likewise, in verse 11, faithful people have “conquered” the dragon, not by joining a flesh-and-blood war, but “by the blood of the Lamb and the word of their testimony.”

By being willing to suffer and give patient witness. By loving their enemies like the slain Lamb did. Or as I'll explain later, by “patient endurance and faithfulness.”

In chapter 13, we are introduced to another character. A seven-headed beast with 10 horns that comes out of the sea. The beast has the body of a leopard, the feet of a bear, and the mouth of a lion.

¹ Tolkien, J.R.R. *The Silmarillion*. Ed. Christopher Tolkien. Random House: New York, 1977; pages 3-4

John made sure to make this creature impossible to draw. John also tells us a number of important details about this creature:

Everyone seems to be enthralled with this hideous creature and worship it. It wages war against God's people, and has authority over every tribe, people, language, and nation.

It's like the beast is a kind of corrupt photographic negative of the Lamb who is followed by people from every tribe, people, language, and nation.

Who is this beast? What does it really represent?

Most people I know wouldn't worship a hideous creature like that. Unless the beast really represents something that is normal or accepted for us – we just don't see its beastly nature.

If you remember, some Sundays ago I talked about reading Revelation as a "lens," an odd kind of glasses to view our reality differently, so that we might see what we normally don't see.

Maybe if we accomplish that, we will have a better idea how to be faithful to the God who purchased us by the blood of the Lamb.

It's helpful to compare Revelation to other biblical books like Daniel to understand what John is really trying to say with this crazy stuff.

We are not some day going to witness a monster like this show up on the coast somewhere. The beast represents something beastly that has always been causing problems throughout history and is still with us today.

In Daniel 7, written before the time of Jesus, the prophet has a vision with four different beasts. Revelation's beast is clearly a composite of the four beasts in Daniel.

In Daniel, the four beasts represent different human empires: Babylon, Media, Persia, and Greece. So the first clue is that we interpret the Beasts as a way of talking about Empire.

The Empire in John's day was the Roman Empire. It's not hard to connect the beasts with Roman imperial power, or connect the heads with particular Roman emperors.

The blasphemous names of that the Beast has written on its heads may represent the fact that Roman Emperors expected worship.

People buying and selling in market places might give a pinch of incense to an image of the emperor. Furthermore, you'd pay for what you bought with imperial coins that have the image of the emperor. This is possibly what the famous lines about the "mark of the beast" on all those who buy and sell might be referring to.

In Deuteronomy 6, God commanded the Israelites to affix parts of the law to their foreheads and their hands, in order to not forget. The mark of the beast is the opposite of this.

The emperor Nero in particular seems to have been on John's mind.

A contemporary historian described Nero as thirsty for popularity and jealous. Nero was the “show-off-in-chief.” He always “won” every competition in music, athletics or oratory. He bragged that no previous emperor had the extent of his power. He wanted the month of April renamed to Neroneus.

He engaged in profiteering from his position. He had a succession of wives and castrated and married a 12-year-old boy who reminded him of a wife that he had killed. He accused Christians of arson and persecuted them.

Lots of ink has been spilled about the number of the beast: 666. In John’s day, each of the letters of the Hebrew language had a numerical value. The first 9 letters were the numbers 1-9, then the next 9 were 10-90, and the remaining 100-400. It turns out that if you try to spell the name “Nero Caesar” in Hebrew letters it comes out to 666.

There have been lots of proposed names, but this is the most likely. Confirmation that this method is on the right track is that if you attempt to transcribe the word “beast” with Hebrew letters, it also gives 666.

So if I’m connecting the beast to the Roman Empire, or to actual Roman rulers, it might seem like this is reading Revelation as a “code,” but since neither Nero, nor Rome is around anymore, what relevance does this have for us?

It would make sense that Rome would be on John’s mind, especially since he is exiled to his island by the imperial government. It also makes sense that John uses coded, cryptic, and symbolic language, given that imperial officials may have read his letter and given him more trouble if they knew what he meant.

But there’s a reason this book is in our Bibles. It describes the dark patterns that have been at work in human history, and calls us to resist and separate ourselves from the Beasts of our day.

The beasts described in Revelation and Daniel do not subscribe to the natural order of God’s creation. They are inhuman. Any time our culture, our economy, our way of life, our government, or our military creates inhuman results, something beastly is at work.

These beasts are not tied specifically to one king or president. Nero might have been a particularly bad emperor, but others such as Marcus Aurelius seem like decent human beings. It was still the same imperial system that created peace through military conquest.

The beast is not one particular political party. It’s not the just the government, nor a particular corporation.

I think the term “domination system” of Walter Wink probably gets closer – A system that allows some to amass wealth at the expense of others and a system that propagates violence and oppression.

No one in their right mind worships something as ugly as this beast. That's because beastly things are always disguised as innocent, normal, or even attractive. John is offering an expose -- exposing the beast for what it is, just as the virus has exposed plenty of uncomfortable truths about our country.

J. Nelson Kraybill writes: *"We may need Revelation to jolt us out of our slumber, to open our eyes to see the idolatry and injustice that pervade globalization and empire today. Something beastly is at work, for example, in a world where people starve to death or die of preventable disease while nations spend billions on weapons and leisure."*²

I ended our scripture reading on 13:10 on purpose. The last line is a great clue: "This calls for patient endurance and faithfulness on the part of God's people" (NIV).

What is patient endurance?

Patience wasn't particularly a virtue in the Roman Empire. It was embraced by Christians who, according to Alan Kreider, frequently wrote and gave sermons about patience.

"Patient endurance" is the language of nonviolence; the call to endurance and faith is pointedly not a call to actual warfare or dominating other people.

Although Revelation has many images of violence that don't exactly match our sensibilities as modern people, a careful reading doesn't uncover any call to violence against actual human beings on the part of faithful people.

Patient endurance, while following the Lamb, refuses to buy into the systems created by the world, living out an alternative, and insisting on loving our enemies.

One early Christian writer put it like this: *[Christians] live in their own countries, but only as aliens. They have a share in everything as citizens, and endure everything as foreigners. Every foreign land is their fatherland, and yet for them every fatherland is a foreign land."*³

There's that word "endure" again. Patient endurance sometimes means suffering – In Revelation's jargon it's "washing your clothing in the blood of the lamb."

In the Roman Empire, there were periodically pandemics. While the wealthy would flee to the hills, the Christians would stay behind to care for the sick – both members of their churches as well as neighbors. Sometimes this care came at the cost of their lives, as it has for some health workers in the current pandemic.

Teachers, school administration, nursing home staff, and health care workers all have known self-sacrifice during this pandemic, and that's an important piece of "patient endurance."

² Kraybill, J. Nelson. *Apocalypse and Allegiance*. Brazos: Grand Rapids, 2010

³ Epistle to Diognetus 5:5

We can find some perspective and hope in this moment remembering that history has had many difficult moments. There have also always been people who drew deep strength from a connection with the God of Jesus and lived on the edges of mainstream culture or power in the spirit of the simple way of Jesus.

We stay hopeful, because we don't believe any beast will sets the rules of the game. As we'll see in the coming weeks, we believe in the ultimate victory of God and the Lamb.

OFFERTORY PRAYER –

We plow the fields and scatter the good seed on the land. But it is fed and watered by God's Almighty hand. God sends the snow in winter, the warmth to swell the grain, the breezes and the sunshine, the soft refreshing rain. We thank you, God, for all things bright and good, the seedtime and the harvest, our life, our health, our food. No gifts have we to offer for all your love imparts, but that which you desire, our humble, thankful hearts. ALL good gifts around us are sent from heaven above, so thank the Lord, we THANK YOU LORD, for all your love.

BENEDICTION –

Go now, with the God of Love, the provider of all good gifts, the great healer, the good shepherd. Go in God's Peace. Amen.