

OCTOBER 25, 2020 WORSHIP SERVICE

MORNING PRAYER – PASTOR CALEB YODER

Creator God and Lord of earth and sky,

Jesus our brother and Savior,

and Spirit who hovered over the waters at creation and hovers over us still,

We desire to worship you today.

We are in awe at this marvelous world

and too rarely stop to recall the joy and the mystery of simply being alive.

Renew our hearts today

and make the thought of your grace and love

compel us to honor you through the sacrifices of love and praise.

Together we have come against hard times this past year, even if we are in different boats on the same stormy sea.

We would like for life to be like the days when everything felt in order, and we would come on Sunday to offer our praise and thanks.

But for many of us, that order is gone and we feel like the Israelites who wandered through the wilderness.

Like Rome of ancient times, our country is one of great wealth, with many merchants gaining their wealth from its inhabitants. Every product imaginable is found here. Our popular culture is exported around all the world, and our military is the largest and most formidable of the world.

We told ourselves that we are the greatest nation on earth. Nothing can bring us low.

And yet we have been humbled by this pandemic, as many other countries in the world.

The virus has exposed the inequalities and racism of our country, how many are pressed on to hard times. We lament the 200,000 some deaths that have occurred, as well as the mental health toll of isolation for many.

We are seeing the terrible consequences of humanity's insatiable demand for more and more control and wealth while we encroach on the natural world, not respecting the natural bounds of created order that you intended.

We are reminded that we are only human and our existence is fragile.

We don't have the answers for the meaning of this time.

We only trust that you are constantly working all things together for good with our cooperation when we faithful.

In this time of disorientation we offer our prayers:

We continue to pray for folks connected to Bethesda in the stress of carrying out a lockdown and doing lots of testing intense testing of staff and residents.

We pray for residents and those who work there, that all may stay in positive and hopeful spirits.

We pray for other area nursing care facilities with similar challenges.

We pray for teachers and students as they continue to struggle to teach and learn in the midst of this pandemic.

We pray for those who have had hard medical news recently and are figuring out what it means for them.

We pray for those who for one reason or another are feeling isolated with winter now approaching.

We continue to pray for those in the community with serious complications of COVID.

We pray also for folks in states like Wisconsin, and countries like Colombia, Peru, Brazil, and Spain where the pandemic is rapidly spreading.

We offer prayers of lament for the unequal access, discrimination, and unjust deaths that so many people of color face, brought to our consciousness since the killing of George Floyd.

We pray that your Spirit would give the church clear vision and a clear path be an assembly of people from tribe, language, people, and nation, united by the common bond of the love of Christ.

In this election season, we pray for leaders with a vision for the well-being of all people in our nation, and for avenues of healing from our polarization and inability to discern truth in conversation with one another.

We pray for strengthening of our democracy, and moreover a renewal of the great commission of the church to boldly witness to Jesus and his way.

We believe you are making all things new.

You are bringing Babylon in all its forms under judgment, and you already have accomplished the ultimate victory in the death and resurrection of Jesus.

We pray for your kingdom to come and for your will to be done on earth as it is in heaven, as Jesus taught us... [Praying the Lord's prayer together]

SERMON: "THE FALL OF EMPIRE" – PASTOR LOIS HARDER
Revelation 17-18

This is NOT the sort of language we usually hear in church! Nor are these the sorts of images we usually think of in church. What is this doing in our Bible? This description of the great whore is repugnant, revolting and offensive! True to form, John the revelator is using language that is

symbolic and a little confusing and mysterious. So... what do we have here? Let's review just a bit.

We've been introduced to a fierce dragon, that represents Satan, a horrible beast that is symbolic of Rome and the Roman empire, another beast referencing the religious and political institutions that promote emperor worship. Today we meet, maybe the greatest symbol of evil in Revelation – a great whore named Babylon. Actually, this is the same beast already mentioned and introduced in chapter 13 – the beast of empire; but this time it's in a purple dress, symbolizing royalty and it's wearing jewels and pearls – ill-gotten wealth. This is another image that John is using to write about the worship of wealthy, powerful Rome.

In the Roman culture of John's day, things were so corrupt that temple prostitutes were a real temptation. In fact, Messalina, the wife of Emperor Claudius, (who was the emperor just before Nero) was an empress by day and a common prostitute by night. Things were so corrupt that it wasn't enough for John to describe the corruption just as a horrible beast, he felt the need to also use this image – to contrast the whore's blasphemy of God to the faithful bride wearing white, that is to be in the New Jerusalem, the new kingdom that John assures his readers God is bringing.

This image graphically describes a culture that dominated the known world with exploitative, manipulative violence and materialism. And Rome wasn't the first world-power to behave this way; John was reaching backwards, borrowing Old Testament images that had been used in Isaiah 47 and Jeremiah 51, to describe Babylon. This apocalyptic, or revealing language uses the Greek *porneia* to refer to idolatrous, perversion – in this case, economic perversion because he saw Rome, like Babylon, offering herself for money.

Let's try to understand this better in its context. John talks about the whore being seated on the waters. We also read this about Babylon in Jeremiah. This is talking about the ancient cities' massive irrigation system that redirected the waters of the Euphrates River into the city, contributing to its economic power – those who controlled the water, controlled the economy. Rome, as we know also built a huge and complex system of viaducts and highways that reached far and wide and led to the well-known statement: All roads lead to Rome. In fact, the first century Roman empire so strongly and completely dominated the world and they were such voracious builders that many of these ancient Roman roads and viaducts are still intact. They're not used, necessarily, but when we were there in June of 2018 we walked on ancient Roman roads and we could see many remains of the giant viaducts that had been used to redirect water throughout the empire. Rome controlled the world's transportation systems and, therefore, its systems of commerce – both on land and by water. But this empire, like nearly all others, was built on the backs of oppressed and enslaved people so that the rulers got richer and the oppressed got poorer.

The blasphemous names and the cup full of abominations refers to the names that the Roman emperors insisted on being called. They took for themselves divine titles like "God", "Savior" and "Lord". Their images were stamped on the coins – the money that was used in the buying and selling of all goods, so that people constantly saw the rulers' faces and associated them

with all-powerful domination. This, then was the abomination and the impurity. The constant attention demanded by the emperor, the worship of a person and a system that glittered and was beautiful on the outside but internally was seductive, hideous and depraved. The ancient Roman economy was huge; there was not another nation whose own economy didn't feel the effects of Rome. And her dominion was dependent on the oppression and colonization of the people, the multitudes, the nations, the languages... all lived in quiet fear of the empire, and the empire became their common religion. They pledged their allegiance to it, by force or by choice, they had no god but Caesar, as demanded, and they lived in a precarious state that might have felt "peaceful" on the surface, but it was the furthest thing from God's notion of peace, shalom, where there is not a chasm between rich and poor, powerful and oppressed, hungry and fat. But those who refused to worship the emperor and his systems, those who were true to Jesus, who clung to the truth that Jesus is the Savior and Lord, the Lamb who has been slain and by his death and resurrection is the true victor, those were persecuted, tortured and killed. John writes that the great whore was drunk on their blood.

Yet, through this spine-tingling, graphic description of unmitigated greed and insatiable appetite for wealth and power, we begin to read some glimmers of hope. The beast and the whore, by nature, will hate one another. They will, eventually destroy each other. The beast will make the whore, literally, a waterless desert, she will be naked, no longer dressed in royal purple or fine jewels. The beast will devour the whore and then, in turn will also be devoured. As one commentator wrote, "The entire picture is one of mutiny... Rome's power of seduction has become disgusting, like a whore who is destroyed by her clients." Another writer says, "This passage shows one of the inherent flaws of the will to power. It does not unite; it divides. And that internal division of evil is God's will." And from that we move into the description of the great, evil empire falling.

Again – John harks back to Old Testament allusions to write about this, borrowing imagery from the fall of Babylon and again, Babylon and Rome are referred to interchangeably. The angel is announcing the fall of Babylon but John has chosen to incorporate it here, immediately after writing, "The woman you saw is the great city that rules over the kings of the earth." Chapter 18 implies that those who supported Rome believed even God could not bring her down; the overwhelming pride and arrogance brought spiritual poverty. Yet another writer said this: The wealth Rome is so proud of is not a sign of God's blessing or Rome's hard work, it is directly related to the oppressive military might and economic exploitation that are hallmarks of that society. The wealth of Rome was built on the continued exploitation of weaker nations, on the robbing of the colonies, and on slave labor. It was the power of the beast that made possible the wealth of Rome."

The weeping and wailing in Chapter 18, the grieving over Babylon's fall is not an outcry of revenge from the poor or a gloating at the destruction of the enemy – it is genuine grief and sadness at the loss of human life and spiritual integrity. There is rejoicing though, at the coming of God's justice. There is the warning to the faithful not to participate, to resist the whore's allure; there is also the promise of plagues, pestilence and mourning, fire and judgment – all of which come as a natural consequence of the empire's own behavior. There is true grief at the

total loss that the empire will experience – Travis recited the long list of losses in the reading. There is not revenge – but there is God’s justice. Rome reaps what she has sown and she disappears like a great, heavy millstone being thrown into the sea.

The main point John is trying to make here, as was the main point being made in the book of Daniel is that “when all the political powers of the world have fallen – and they will – God’s kingdom survives... ‘The ultimate power of the universe is the power of God manifest and effective in the self-sacrificing power of the Lamb.’”

Now, here’s the hard part. The literal fall of Rome didn’t happen for more than three centuries after Revelation was written and the pagans of the time were blaming the Christians for its fall, claiming that they were undermining the empire by refusing to serve in the army. Those Christians in the mid-5th century had to cling tightly to their faith in the power of the Lamb. So, what can we take from chapters 17 and 18 of the book of Revelation in the bizarre year of our Lord 2020?

As we look around at the national and international systems of imperial power in our world, how can we claim and cling tightly to our faith in Jesus, the Lamb? How can we teach our children that in a world of violence and a time of vitriol, followers of Jesus are called to seek first God’s kingdom. What are ways that we can stay focused on the coming of God’s kingdom when we have no idea what God’s time-frame is? Are there ways that we can encourage one another in our faith, build one another up, cheer each other on and maybe challenge each other as we follow Jesus together? These are difficult times – maybe we need each other now more than ever and in ways we haven’t for a long time. I’m asking questions rather than proposing answers because I think the kind of faith that Revelation calls us to is a faith that digs down deeper than we’re generally accustomed to going with each other. I want to pose questions that might inspire and encourage us to give serious thought to our faith. What did you hear in this morning’s text? What do you need to live out what you heard? Maybe our study of Revelation could be a jumping off point in a Sunday school class? Maybe it could open a conversation around your dinner table? Maybe you’d like to have a phone conversation with a friend about something you heard. Maybe you’d like to talk to one of your pastors about it? Caleb and I welcome conversations with any of you about these questions or others you may have.

I pray that John’s strange vision of these disturbing images will move us to question more deeply, consider more carefully, risk more willingly on our journey as followers of The Lamb; I pray that we will seek more earnestly God’s kingdom here on earth, as it is in heaven. Amen.

PRAYER OF DEDICATION
(from *Sing the Journey* #147)

*God of extravagant mercy,
with hands outstretched you have poured out
wonder and pleasure and delight,
goodness and beauty and bounty.*

*So take these offerings, we pray, as a protest against all that is:
evil and ugly and impoverished,
trivial and wretched and tyrannical,
in our world and in ourselves*

That we, too, may be poured out for the world. AMEN.

BENEDICTION

Salvation and glory and power belong to our God, who alone is our refuge and ever-present help in trouble. Go with the love and the upside-down power of Jesus.