

NOVEMBER 1, 2020 WORSHIP SERVICE

MORNING PRAYER – LOIS HARDER

O God, on this first day of November, we're aware of the passage of time – sometimes we wonder how it can possibly be November already and at other times it seems as if every hour of every day of every week of every month of this crazy year is dragging slowly by. And yet – through the passage of time you are present with us, God. Your Holy Spirit is guiding, comforting, healing, tending to our anxiety and worries minute by minute, day by day. You have surrounded us with your love and with a great cloud of witnesses who've gone before us. On this All-Saints day we give you thanks for our forebears; we grieve their loss and celebrate their lives. Thank you for the things we learned from them, for the ways they passed on their faith and also encouraged us to come to our own faith understandings. Thank you for the legacies they left and for the bonds of love they forged with us and for us; help us to do the same for the generations that come after us.

Lord, out of our love for you and acknowledging our dependence on you, we bring you our prayers.

We pray for teachers and students, for support staff and administrators as they all continue to work so hard to make school a positive place where learning can happen. Whether students are in-person or remote, we pray for open and eager minds, for stamina and perseverance.

O God, these are trying times – times like we've never experienced before. We plead for wholeness of mind, body and soul. For those who are struggling to maintain health in their bodies or their minds, we pray for your healing touch, for the right resources to be available and for kindness and compassion to prevail. Be with those who live and work in long-term care facilities. Let them know your love and care. We celebrate with those at Bethesda, that all covid tests came back negative this week! Be with those who work and receive care in hospitals and clinics. Give energy, clear thinking and continued commitment to care that is needed.

We thank you, God for the miracle of new life – thank you for the birth of Gavin Ray to Tyler and Jenna Schroeder. Continue to be with their family as they welcome this new member. We pray for Chrystiana and Bryant as they anticipate the birth of their baby soon. Give them rest and calm for this passage.

We know, God that the next several days across this nation will be intense and filled with emotions that are running high. May your Spirit of Peace be carried forth by your people. May followers of Jesus show the world his upside down truth, his sacrificial love, his surprising, victorious death and resurrection. For the way of Jesus is the only true way to the power of reconciliation – through willing humility to an honest justice. Lead us, God and give us courage to trust and to follow. Help us to remember that our allegiance is to you, through your son Jesus, the Liberator and Savior of the world. We pray in his name. Amen.

SERMON: THE SWORD FROM THE MOUTH – CALEB YODER

We are nearing the final part of the book of Revelation, which has been our worship theme over the past month and a half. True to form, we have another passage with complex and confusing symbolism, as well as some great fodder for pleasant dinner conversation, with vultures eating the carcasses of those killed in battle.

This passage about the Rider of the White Horse is usually interpreted as a description of the second coming of Christ. We'll break this down a bit into the different symbols that are here.

Our purpose is to understand what this reveals about how God gains the victory, and where it leaves us as we seek to be faithful to God's voice in this challenging year.

In verse 11 we are presented with the rider of a white horse who is called "faithful" and "true." It will become clear that this rider is Jesus.

Jesus judges in righteousness and "makes war" – not what you are used to hearing in church. So, we'll have to unpack what that means, noticing that the making war is present, not future tense. This war is going on right now.

The white rider has eyes that are like a "flaming of fire." It's a way of saying that Jesus has perfect and impartial sight, and it connects this white rider with Revelation chapter 1 where John first turns to see the Jesus of his vision standing among the seven lampstands.

Jesus has many crowns, a visual way of saying, he is "king of kings and lord of lords." And then a detail I believe is especially significant:

He is clothed in a robe dipped in blood, and has the name "Word of God."

Whose blood are we talking about? If Jesus is a warrior, we would expect he might have the blood of the enemies he kills splattered on his clothes.

But the battle hasn't started yet. Remember our lessons from earlier in the series. We met Jesus as a lamb standing as if slaughtered. We also met faithful saints who wash their clothing white in the blood of the lamb, meaning they have willingly endured suffering, even giving their lives to following Jesus. This is how Revelation defines "conquering."

This leads to the conclusion that the blood on the rider's robe is his own. It is a reference to the death of Jesus on the cross which is the decisive way that Jesus has won the battle to become sovereign over history.

Jesus is followed by the armies of heaven, which could mean angels. However, they are wearing fine linen, which has been the uniform of faithful people. As we read on, we

have to remember that Revelation so far has never described or shown the faithful engaging in violence against others.

Earlier in the chapter we have the wedding of the “Lamb” (I didn’t know that lambs ever got married), and the bride wears fine linen, standing for the righteous acts of God’s holy people.

Going back to the rider of the white horse, we see he also has a sword!

I searched for images of this rider, and almost every one of them showed him with a sword in his hand, like the image of the right.

But if you read carefully, where does this sword come from? It’s from his mouth! That has to take some killer jaw strength!

If you haven’t figured this out already, we are not trying to read Revelation literally, because you quickly tie yourself in knots if you do.

We are not trying to read it as a code to “figure out” what will happen in the future. We are instead, approaching this book full of vivid symbols as a *lens* to both see God at work and to see idolatrous and destructive realities for what they are.

If the sword from the mouth is a symbol, what does it mean? It means that Jesus’ weapon is the Word of God.

You probably wouldn’t remember, but Jesus had a sword from his mouth at the beginning of John’s visions (Rev 1:16).

Or consider Hebrews 4:12: *“For the word of God is alive and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart.” (NIV)*

That doesn’t make this “sword” any less lethal. Truth can be jarring and unpleasant. But it’s a sign we aren’t setting up for a normal battle.

The next significant detail is that Jesus is said to tread the “winepress of the fury of the wrath of God Almighty.”

A wine press in ancient times was a way to squash grapes to get the juice out so that it could be used to make wine.

You can imagine that it was a complete bloody mess. Multiple times in scripture, this is a symbol of God’s judgment, and there’s judgment here too.

Consider these words from Isaiah 63:

*Why are your garments red,
like those of one treading the winepress?*

*"I have trodden the winepress alone;
from the nations no one was with me.
I trampled them in my anger
and trod them down in my wrath;
their blood spattered my garments,
and I stained all my clothing.*

So, we are left with some ambiguity. We clearly are not setting up for a normal battle like we see in our living room screens. But this isn't comfortable "we're all good people, let's all get along" language either.

Most of us have been given warnings of different kinds by our parents or elders. One that sticks in my mind comes from when my dad was teaching me how to attach different attachments to the compressed air line at the shop.

The story was of some young guys playing around with the compressed air and one shot the air up the other's butt and killed him.

So, taking this seriously, I'd hold the nozzle about as far away from my body as I could as I was blowing something off, lest a wayward stream of air somehow sneak around and go up my behind.

Of course, by the time we get to Revelation 19, we are almost past a warning. The destruction of the beast and the false prophet is certain. We have hopeful assurance of God's victory over the forces of evil.

To sum up the remainder of the passage, the beast and false prophet we introduced a couple of Sundays ago are captured without any fight. No shots fired – they are captured right away. Then the kings and generals who followed them are killed by the spoken Word of God (the sword of the mouth).

In ancient warfare, if it wasn't possible to collect the bodies of the casualties, then it was possible they would be victims of vultures. This is the kind of death that Goliath threatened David with in the well-known David and Goliath story.

What do we make of all this? God's judgment is an uncomfortable subject, but not to be separated from talking about God's love.

God's judgment is God's commitment to set things right. It is pretty easy in human imagination to think that can only happen through a bloodbath, since that's how things got so bad in the first place.

Given the symbolism of Revelation, we are wise not to say too much, and strive to be faithful without having all the answers.

Here are a few of my own thoughts, without claiming to have full insight or answers.

In my interpretation, Revelation is a revealing – an exposing of humanity’s games and a clear call for us to come out of this false way of life to a completely different way, which is the way of Jesus.

Revelation reveals the *self-destruction* that the dragon and the beasts create.

It is a little naïve to just talk about human beings as essentially good. We all have goodness in us and to some degree or another we are wounded and broken and wayward and we get caught up in participating in evils bigger than ourselves. Otherwise, how do we account for how it was that the “good people” of Germany (including Mennonites) in the World War II era allowed the Nazis to ruthlessly murder 9 million people? And the harder question: *what makes us better?*

We have a choice about which story we will be part of. Will we choose the way of the Lamb who was slain, or will we be too impressed by the beasts of our day?

The battle here is not really one against individual people, but against the systemic forces of evil that we too easily prop up without undergoing our own thorough transformation.

Going back to the metaphor of the sword from the mouth, I wonder if maybe judgment is a form of *truth-telling*. If that’s the case, the ultimate judgment, if you haven’t already been in a process of forgiveness and healing, would be to receive a perfect knowledge of how your choices have harmed others.

The truth-telling extends to exposing our dishonesty as a country. The former slave Frederick Douglass said, around 1845:

I love the pure, peaceable, and impartial Christianity of Christ; I therefore hate the corrupt, slaveholding, women-whipping, cradle-plundering, partial, and hypocritical Christianity of this land. Indeed, I can see no reason, but the most deceitful one, for calling the religion of this land Christianity.”

These may seem like harsh words, but I think I would feel the same if I was enslaved and mistreated by so-called Christians.

More than a century and a half later, I think we delude ourselves if we think that the public face of Christianity in America is much truer to the faith of Jesus. We are too easily caught up in fighting for our own relative privilege and dominance, rather than in a willingness to serve the good of all and to suffer.

At the beginning of our passage, Jesus is named “faithful and true.”

This word true is more than just having facts – sometimes we have to be OK with not having all the answers.

It’s true in the sense of saying, “she’s true to her word.” It’s not deliberately using falsehood to delude yourself or others for your own gain.

It’s the truth of being completely trustworthy which we find in the example of Jesus.

The beast has power only because people give it power. Yet when we receive the truth of the good news that there is another way in Jesus, we find freedom, and the power that these other forces have over us diminishes.

I’m aware, as all of you are, that we are just a few days from a major election, and there are many reasons why election anxiety may be higher this time than others.

You may feel apprehension about what happens if the candidate or candidates you favor don’t win.

You may care less about that and feel apprehension about further division in the community, as our polarization strains relationships.

Or you may even be concerned about the possibility of violence and civil unrest, whether because of disputed results, or because a segment of people may refuse to accept the results based on their own chosen sources of information.

I appreciate these words from Heidi Regier Kreider, our conference minister: *“When I vote, I do not place ultimate faith in human leaders, or equate God’s reign with a particular political party, program or policy. Rather, I vote because I care about the common good, and want to advocate for a government and leadership that uses power and resources for the benefit of all.”*

In other words, voting is yet another place to live by the command to “love our neighbor.”

Revelation helps us with our election anxiety when we center and ground ourselves in the truth and trustworthiness of the way of Jesus – the way of loving enemies, caring for the poor, and peacemaking.

The story of Jesus is the surprising story of an upside-down, unconventional king who was the ally of the suffering and the marginalized, and less so of the rich and the powerful.

We are called to pursue truth. A full commitment to truth, not only grounds itself in the story and example of Jesus, but also understands that truth is bigger than we allow. We need to listen to one another's stories, even when they don't all agree with our preconceived narratives of how things work.

Our song of response is appropriately called, "The Word of God is Solid Ground" and is an English adaptation of a song from the Ausbund, the oldest Anabaptist collection of songs, from the 1550s.

Jesus himself is the Word of God, as verse 13 states. Let us breath deep, and let's invite the peace of Christ to remain with each one of us.

PRAYER OF DEDICATION

For the gifts that you have given us, O God, we are grateful. Accept and bless what we return to you. May it be a blessing that reaches beyond what we can see or imagine. And may it glorify you. Amen.

BENEDICTION

Go in truth – in the name of the one who is True.

Go in love – in the name of the one who showed the world how to Love.

Go in peace – in the name of lamb who was slain, who gives peace that passes all understanding.
Amen.