

The Invisible Made Visible
A Sermon Preached by Jess Cook
Acts 11:1-18 and Revelation 21:1-6
First Presbyterian Church, Stamford, CT
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A couple of months ago, as the plans for today's visit began to solidify, I did what has become a customary practice when preparing to visit a congregation, and I looked at the lectionary passages for the day. While I'll admit that I am often full of a sort of boisterous energy, it's not super common that I let out an audible whoop! In the way I did when reading today's texts.

I was so excited I actually texted Shelley a message - something to the effect of "I just read the lectionary texts for May 19 and they are like a QUEER PREACHER'S DREAM!!" Shelley, in her diplomatic and pastoral way, I'm sure replied with a smiley face emoji - and not even the flat-affect face, or the awkward, toothy face, but the big grin emoji. It wasn't until a later conversation when Shelley commented, with a certain inquisitive look on her face, that she'd love to hear more about why John's apocalyptic visions and a debate among the apostles about how to incorporate uncircumcised believers would be seen as a queer preacher's dream that I realized . . .

Oh wait. Maybe that's just me. . .

As someone who spent much of my life with a great deal of fear and trepidation over my own salvation, the book of Revelation always felt like an angry hive of bees which, if opened, would unleash a swarming affirmation of my damnable identity. I'd read too many Left Behind books, heard too many pastors and Christian friends and mentors assert that, while God would love me no matter what, living into my queer identity was fundamentally incompatible with a life of faith. Revelation felt like the vision of what awaited me and, at the same time, I had this sinking fear that whatever befell humanity at the end of time was also. . . my fault.

One of the greatest tragedies in the long and fractured history of the LGBTQ community and the church is that LGBTQ have been told our only place within scripture is among those condemned. It is hard to over-state my gratitude for the experience of finding my own story in scripture, not among the damned, but woven into the stories of so many of God's beloved children, messy and imperfect as we are, yet tenacious in our determination to live into the assuredness of God's abundant love. And still, regardless of one's own resolve and clarity, it is a hard narrative to shake.

I have spent years earning a theological education, studying the Bible in its original Hebrew and Greek, I have taken ordination exams and psychological evaluations, written statement after statement, and I believe down to my bones that there is nothing about my identity or anyone else's that would relegate us to hell. And yet, I am acutely aware that for many folks, the very image of a queer person in a pulpit is indeed the sign of a pending apocalypse. Just this week, televangelist Pat Robertson said that God will destroy America if the Equality Act is passed. The Equality Act, which was passed by the House in a historic vote on Friday, is a bill that seeks to shield LGBTQ+ people from discrimination in employment, housing, public spaces and other key areas. And it's not just the Pat Robertsons of the world who feel this way - it's a childhood friend telling me on a recent reunion trip that the fall of the Roman Empire, ironically the antagonist in today's passage from Revelation, was due in large part to the deviant homosexual practices that had run rampant in ancient Rome.

It is a particular kind of weight one carries, to feel that the rise or fall of an entire empire rests on the shoulders of their identity.

Now, I know, it may seem outlandish to hear such things. Yet, those stories have staying power, and in my time working in the church, I've found that it's not a conservative or a liberal issue. I regularly talk to people who are very supportive of the LGBTQ community who still believe certain parts of the Bible simply must be side-stepped in their process of inclusion. How do we hold these texts as sacred

if we have to dismiss the parts that don't make sense to us, or that don't fit with our understanding of who we are and who God is?

I believe we start by recognizing that while history is written by the winners, scripture, though it has been misused for centuries to justify atrocity after atrocity, was written by and for those on the margins. People who've built their lives on the backs of others don't long for a new heaven or a new earth. This one's working just fine.

The book of Revelation is an apocalyptic text - the Greek word apocalypsis means revelation - it is a revealing of things previously uncovered or hidden. Apocalyptic literature rises out of contexts when the reality is so unbearable that the only hopeful vision for the world is to see a new one. The horrors of the present mirror the cataclysm of the envisioned future. The trust with apocalyptic literature is that God is in control, no matter how bad things look, how hopeless they feel. For John's audience of Christians living in the Roman Empire at the end of the First Century CE, coming out as a Christian brought with it a great deal of risk, to their livelihoods and to their lives. John's revelation uses symbolism and metaphor to illustrate to people that, despite the destruction going on all around, God is in control. This assertion is not offered as a pass on any sort of inaction. Rather, it is a call for God's people to trust and to live as God's people, to follow the model of Christ whose refusal to succumb to empty religious practices or a death-dealing status quo was so strong that it got him killed.

Looking around today, it often feels as if we are living in a sort of apocalypse. Regardless of one's political leanings, it seems fair to say that we are currently moving through a difficult period in our nation's history. What's the use of debating, or even sitting down to break bread with one another, if every conversation dissolves into an argument? The country itself feels at times like an open wound, festering for too long and now so far gone there is no hope for healing.

The thing is, the things we are all reeling from aren't new. Racism didn't end when Obama was elected, nor did sexism end when Hillary Clinton ran for president. Homophobia didn't end when gay marriage was legalized, and new technology didn't prevent people's jobs becoming obsolete any more than widespread accessibility of a college education ensured access to the American dream. We are in a period of uncovering, where the systemic wounds that have gone unacknowledged for too long are being revealed.

And as messy as it is, thank God for that - thank God for that. Because no wound is ever cured by being ignored.

Forgive me if the wound language is off-putting; I know, it's kind of gross. And yet, John's revelation is not other-worldly. Nobody here is raptured up, no hard lines are drawn between the stuff of earth and the stuff of heaven - it's intermingled. The new city envisioned in John's Revelation is a city - not a spiritual realm, not an individualized pastoral landscape, but a city - it is an urban environment, messy where people's lives are intertwined, communal, interdependent. It seems that, even in the consummation of everything, we are in this together. Earth is not a place from which we escape, but a dwelling place for God and God's people. Like the sheet in Peter's dream, the new heaven and the new earth come down. God is in control. Our job is to prepare ourselves which means, in part, avoiding the temptation to turn away or ignore the stench.

But, really . . . how do we do that? How do we respond in the face of such atrocities? I believe today's passage in Acts can actually tell us a lot about that.

The story of Peter's dream is repeated twice, nearly word-for-word, in Acts 10 and 11. It's as if the authors want to be sure we hear it. In this dream, a sheet comes down from heaven, full of all kinds of animals - clean and unclean. A voice echoes down with it, commanding Peter to kill and eat. And what I love about Peter here is his willingness to debate God's the way he does. It's as if Peter needs to

remind God about how we do things here. I'd like to think if a voice called out to me from heaven, I'd be inclined to listen; but, I know better. Peter is told not once, not twice, but three times that what God has made clean Peter must not call profane.

This is a point when the church is in its infancy, and the apostles are trying to figure out how to incorporate new converts into the faith. When God instigated the covenant with Abraham in Genesis 17, God marked circumcision as a sign of that covenant. The Law, given to the Israelites by God, involved strict guidelines about what was clean and what was profane. For people forcibly removed from their land and enslaved, these practices were a lifeline to remembering who they were and whose they were. As the early Church began to form, Jewish Christians maintained certain assumptions about what it looked like to be in relationship with God. Of course they did! They had no context for understanding a relationship with God apart from these outward marks. But the new converts did not have the same history, or experiences - for them, the outward marks of circumcision or eating particular foods would've been done just for the sake of doing it, empty rituals with no significance.

Now, in just a few chapters, it's Paul, not Peter, who is called to the Gentiles, yet Peter is the one who had the dream and shared the message. Peter, the rock, who'd been there throughout Jesus' ministry, who remembered Jesus saying they would be baptized by the Holy Spirit and then, they were indeed, baptized by the Holy Spirit. Peter's dream didn't make any sense to him - he had to get the instructions three times. But Peter had seen enough by this point to know not to make assumptions about what God would or would not do.

Peter's place of privilege among the apostles made it easier for them to hear the message than it would've had it been told by the newly converted Paul. So, when he reports his dream to the apostles, they listen. The new converts received the same baptism we did, Peter asserts. And the

apostles know enough by now to trust that if God can raise Jesus from the dead and send the Holy Spirit to live among them, that there are times when it's best to let God be God. Our job is to stay awake, to listen, to follow, and to trust that God knows what God is doing, even if it defies the things we know to be true.

There was once a town in the midst of a severe drought. Every day, a group of well-intentioned church folk would walk up and down the steep road to the church in the center of town and pray for rain. And every day they would pass by the house of an old woman in town who, though she lived only fifty feet or so from the church, never went inside. Each day, as the church folk would walk by, she would pause whatever she was doing, look up at the group, shake her head, and return to her activity. This went on for several weeks, while the ground remained dry and cracked. After some time, one of the well-meaning church folk, fed up and frustrated by this woman's judgment and the lack of rain, stopped in front of her porch, hollering up to her: "Who are you to judge us? At least we are doing something to try and bring rain. If you have better suggestions, please do let us know."

The woman paused her sweeping and turned to the group: "I've seen you all walk up and down this hill for weeks now, each day you hold your head high, saying you are going to pray for rain, that you are sure God will answer. And yet, never once have I seen anyone carrying an umbrella."

For so many of us, there are times when the world feels as dry as the cracked and hardened ground of a land too long in drought. We may pray for rain, look for that magic fix or perfect model that will bring things back to life. We often feel like we've got stuff pretty figured out, so we do things the way we've always done, until at times we may forget why we were doing them in the first place. To say we forget our proverbial umbrellas is an understatement; it's more like we forget what it has ever felt like to have rain.

When we baptize infants in the Presbyterian Church, we do so in part to show that God's grace is offered to us even when we do not have the capacity to ask for it. Our job is to nurture people in the faith, to teach them, and to learn from them what it means to be the community of God. The promises we make when we baptize people are not conditional. Our call is to affirm the belovedness of the people being baptized, and to remain open to the Spirit to show us new things. Our job is not to decide who is worthy, or who is clean - God does that.

At some point in seminary I came across the idea of remembering my baptism every time I interacted with water. I'm sure it was the writing of Martin Luther, but I couldn't cite the text for you. This idea has held so strongly through years of practice that it now comes without thought - rain starts falling and every drop that falls on my head, ever plink I hear on the gutter reminds me that I am loved, even when I do not have the capacity to ask for it. Tear ducts become wellsprings within me, sometimes gushing open at the most unexpected moments. The rain on my back, each tear a reminder of the Holy Spirit within me, grounding me in who I am and connecting me to everything around me. It rains and I am loved. I cry and I am loved. I wash my hands, and I am loved. Hard as I may try sometimes, I have realized that I cannot outrun my belovedness. None of us can.

It is easy to look around scarcity, which is scary. The world is a mess, we are at wits end. We want to clamp down on what we know, on models we have seen work in the past, and we try the same formula again and again. We pray for abundance but then push against learning anything new. This, we assert. This is how God works. This is what the community of God looks like.

At this point in my life I know enough about God to know I don't know much about God. I don't know why particular things happen, or how things fall or don't fall in place. I don't know what happens when we die. But I do know that the Spirit seldom moves in a way that fits within the Church's expectations. Our job is to remember who we are and to trust that God will continue to be God.

And we - we are baptismal people, called to remember our belovedness and God's unending grace.

And as baptismal people, we should always be ready for rain. Amen.