

Matthew 5:1-12 ~ Revelation 7:9-17

Our Sacred Task

All Saints' Day ~ Sacrament of Holy Communion ~ Earth Day at 50 Years

November 1, 2020

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Introduction:

Who is able to stand? We begin our reading from Revelation at the point where already six seals of scrolls have been opened that portend judgment. Death and calamity flood the revelation the Lord gave to John on the island of Patmos, about sixty years after his ascension into heaven. We swoop into this vision today, just when the sun became black as sackcloth, the full moon became like blood, and the stars of the sky fell to the earth as the fig tree drops its winter fruit when shaken by a gale, and even the sky vanished like a scroll rolling itself up, with every mountain and island removed and the kings, magnate, and generals of the earth were crying out hidden in a cave, "Fall on us and hide us from the face of the one seated on the throne and from the wrath of the lamb; for the great day of their wrath has come, and who is able to stand?" (Rev. 6:12-17)

You may be having apocalyptic thoughts and nightmares as we inch closer, news cycle by news cycle, to Tuesday, Nov. 3, election day in this "terrible, horrible, no good, very bad"ⁱ year of 2020. This year, when as of Friday, our country has lost 228,701 souls to COVID (more than the population of Des Moines, Iowa) and the rate of contagion is on the rise in Europe, as well as right here in Wisconsin. This year as we face not one, but four major challenges: the coronavirus pandemic, the economic fallout from it, our long overdue racial reckoning, and the increasingly imminent threat of climate change, we have plenty to keep us awake at night. This week, it is hard not to obsess about which of the two men running for the office of President of the USA will be left standing. Who will we elect in what promises to be a record turnout year? And can we trust our electoral process in the midst of this pandemic, to yield an accurate result?

No matter who your candidate of choice may be, I believe it is accurate to say that both sides are equally fraught with what will happen to this country if their candidate loses. Both sides approach election day in fear and trembling that if their candidate loses, our country will shift and seize and morph into something that is no longer the democracy we have known and loved. The country we have fought wars and made sacrifices of life and limb to preserve. The other thing that both sides share, according to recent research, is that despite all the rancor between sides, a majority our country longs for an end to the divisive bickering and the deepening polarities that seem to be getting worse by the day.

I don't know about you, but I could use a little disclosure of heavenly secrets and a fresh shot of divine intention today, and that's what our last book of the Bible, The Revelation to John, is all about. Good news for us, today's passage is known as "a salvation interlude." As sci-fi and zombie infiltrated as Revelation certainly looks and feels, right in the middle of the suspense and horror with blood and carnage piling high, our text takes a break here in chapter 7, right between the sixth and seventh seals. Such a move would disappoint the most avid Godzilla fans: tipping everyone's hand only one third of the way through the movie. A spoiler that for us, this

day, may do just the opposite. May it help us all take breath, look up, and refresh our mental screens, by reminding us who our real Savior is, and what Jesus, the Lamb, is calling us to do here on earth during the short time we are given to inhabit this planet. No matter who we elect this week as President for the next four years, we already know our Savior will continue to reign supreme and continue to beckon us to our “sacred task.” Listen for this Good News we need to hear this day.

Communion Meditation:

Remember the character “Truman” in the 1998 psychological science fiction comedy-drama, film, *The Truman Show*? This is a brilliant, yet disturbing utopia dystopia film where a baby they named Truman was born and raised into a world where absolutely everything was “perfect” because his entire world as he knew it was actually a gigantic movie set of an entire town, where nothing ever went wrong. (Well, that’s how the movie begins.) Truman was carefully taught to believe this was real life. There was literally a huge dome over the set that looked like the sky and could produce sun, rain, thunder at the touch of a button from command central. Truman’s whole life, 24/7 was on camera, all the people in his life were actors, but he didn’t know that. His life was a TV show that could be watched around the clock. What was real and what was fake? And how do you know? Back in 1998, this theme made for a highly entertaining and disturbing, perhaps prescient, movie.

That literal dome over Truman’s head, encompassing his entire world, poses an important question for us today that both the Beatitudes of Jesus, and the Revelation of John provide the life-giving, life-saving answers and antidotes we need. Here is the question: How do we self-limit our own possibilities, as individuals and as a culture, bound by fear of the unknown, the containable, the not questioned? I believe Jesus came to set us free from the domes that bind us, domes that divide us, domes that deny the full humanity to all people on this earth. And from the domes that disconnect us from our God-given relationship to and responsibility for the ecosystem and the biodiversity of our planet.ⁱⁱ

Have you ever noticed how much of the Bible’s content sounds and feels like the best of science fiction? Both the Bible and sci-fi invite us into new ways of viewing things. They open up different ways to imagine life as we know it. Don’t we love science fiction because it expands our domes of time and space: the interplay between past and future as we as between earth and other planets, even galaxies beyond. Anything can and does happen in the world of science fiction. The Bible does this too. But unlike science fiction, Jesus is real. The real deal. Nothing fake about our Savior who bled O positive or O negative blood that Friday afternoon. Our Savior who cried and cried out, who died, and then was really raised from the dead. Not a zombie, but the “Lamb upon the throne,” who has the power to free us from our domes, and help us change the narrative: help us change how we look at ourselves, at others, and the earth we inhabit.

Whether we like it or accept it or not, our Savior calls us from a “Me-attitude” to the Be-attitudes. He has given us the map, with the Beatitudes, and shown us the way—all the way to the end of time. While on earth, our gospels tell the stories of how Jesus gave us a new way to imagine all the people that appear in his life as “the other”—to us. Think for a moment about

the woman caught in adultery, Zacchaeus the tax collector, the Samaritan Woman at the well, and in the Book of Acts: the Ethiopian Eunuch, Cornelius the Gentile. All people who were “othered” until Jesus came along. In today’s Revelation text, we are given a Jesus’ way of regarding other nations, tribes, all peoples and all languages. In Rev. 7:9, all the nations become related, none is supreme before the throne of the Lamb: all have palm branches, an ancient sign of victory, in their hands. In John’s vision, all are victorious. In Jesus’ realm there is no fear and no division when it comes to worth and worthiness.

The sacred task to which Christ calls us, actually began long before he walked this earth. Even the human Jesus, was standing on the shoulders of his earthly ancestors. I want to share with you a lovely bit of midrash, a story told by Rabbis, built on the stories of the Bible, that opens up our imagination to this idea. In midrash, time and sequence become fluid, perhaps the Rabbis were the original creators of the science fiction genre! With Steve Zeitlin, in his book, *Because God Loves Stories*, let us time travel back with a Rabbi who tells the story of Isaac’s Bar Mitzvah. We arrive just in time to hear Sarah, Isaac’s mother, giving him this charge at his Bar Mitzvah, the rite of passage for Jewish boys at age 13, “*Isaac, we could not finish what we began, but we know it is a sacred task, a holy task, to unite the peoples of the world under one God. This task was ours, it became yours, and you must hand it to generations to come who won’t understand you any more than you understand us. Remember this: ‘It is not yours to complete the task, but neither are you free to desist it.’*”ⁱⁱⁱ

The story jumps two decades to when father Isaac is speaking to his twin sons at their Bar Mitzvah, Jacob and Esau. In Isaac’s charge to them he says, “*Generations of your children to come will look at the same text—the Bible—and claim it as their own. They will see within it, hear within it, the call of God to kill each other in God’s name, to persecute each other, to throw each other off the lands of the earth.... I charge you, you must change the text, reinterpret the text. You must go back to the future and tell your children and your children’s children...God cannot call you good unless you create goodness in your world.*” And the Rabbi telling the story finishes up with a charge to us: My friends, Abraham & Sarah, Isaac & Rebekah, and Jacob & Rachel are here with us; the patriarchs and matriarchs, Elijah, beckoning us to go back to the future and create goodness in our world.^{iv}

This is our sacred task: Who will keep us from it? Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, political division, or the 2020 presidential election outcome? We know from Paul (Romans 8:35-39) the answer is no one and nothing in all creation, can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. We know we are here to carry on the work of Christ, here on earth. To be Christ’s body, to reconcile and heal; to let Divine Love reconcile all creatures and all of creation.

Think for a moment on this All Saints’ Day, how it is that *you* know about the love of Christ? We know this because of the people who have come before us. Whose shoulders are you standing on? Who has blessed you, brought you along carried you, listened to you when no one else would? Who are the ones in your life who are no longer walking this earth, but who loved you unconditionally as Jesus does? We each have our particular cloud of witnesses. You

will have a chance to remember them by lighting a candle and inviting them to join us in the feast of all the saints, during our sacrament of holy communion.

As we look back, let us also look forward into the future. What will our children and grandchildren say about us, remember about us, when they are lighting a candle and telling stories about their ancestors? What will our earth and our democracy look like in 2070, fifty years from now? I hear Jesus' voice beckoning each us to our sacred task of 2020. He is calling us to our feet, saying: "Listen, I am standing at the door, knocking; if you hear my voice and open the door, I will come in to you and eat with you, and you with me." (Rev. 3:20)

ⁱ *Alexander and the Terrible, Horrible, No Good Very Bad Day*, title of a movie in 2014, based on the book with that title, Judith Viorst, originally published in 1972 by Atheneum Books.

ⁱⁱ The ideas about science fiction and the Bible, and the dome metaphor from "The Truman Show" originate from a lecture I heard by Brian McLaren, titled, "Utopia and Dystopia: Preaching as Science Fiction," at the Festival of Homiletics, Minneapolis, MN, May 15, 2019.

ⁱⁱⁱ Steve Zeitlin, *Because God Loves Stories: An Anthology of Jewish Storytelling*, (Simon & Schuster, Touchstone Book: New York, NY, 1997), p. 53.

^{iv} *Ibid*, p. 54.