

Revelation 7:9-17
Psalm 34:1-10, 22

1 John 3:1-3
Matthew 5:1-12

When I was in college, I took a course on the book of Revelation. It is a strange, terrifying book to read, and very difficult to understand. The first book we were to read was one by Hal Lindsey, *The Late Great Planet Earth*. Reading this book literally terrified me. Lindsey interpreted the political situation of the 70s as signs that the end was near. He believed that the Soviets would invade Israel, that the European Union would become a revived Roman Empire ruled by the Antichrist, and the great battle, Armageddon, would be a nuclear exchange killing a third of the world's population. Although he never came right out with a date for the end, many readers believed that he indicated that the end would come in 1988. In 1980, Lindsey predicted that the decade of the 1980s could very well be the last decade of history as we know it." Here it was, the early 70s and this guy was predicting the end of the world was going to be 1988. I didn't want the world to end when I was only 36. ! I had a whole life in front of me.

This end-times interpretation of Revelation continues to be very popular today. Other publishers and authors continue to produce books, such as the *Left Behind* series of book. Some of these authors have made tens of millions of dollars and their salves gave a much-needed financial boost to some publishers. However, this is a misinterpretation of Revelation. John did not share this Revelation to provide God's people with a timeline of events and a cast of characters. Revelation was not written to scare the you-know-what out of us, like *The Late Great Planet Earth* frightened me.

When John wrote this book, the Roman Empire was persecuting Christians. Some believe the highly symbolic, coded language was used so that the authorities did not know that the Empire was being criticized, protecting the Christians. These were all

code words to comfort the Christians who were frightened and persecuted. Revelation was written during dangerous times for Christians, and was written to assure the Christians that in the end God will conquer, that in the end God will be victorious. Revelation is a book of comfort and hope, not fear.

While we may not believe in the highly speculative interpretation of these end-time authors, we live in dangerous times. The Russians still threaten us as we are hearing about how the Russians hacked into our election system, and tried to influence the elections, a threat to the democracy we hold so dear. A nuclear holocaust is possible. North Korea expanding both their rocket and nuclear capabilities is frightening, especially with someone as alarming as Kim Jung-un. We have now been in war for sixteen years in the Middle East, the longest war for the United States. We continue to lose our men and women. Ever since 9/11, we no longer feel safe within our own borders. The terrorists are still striking around the world, as we witnessed in New York City this past week. There is more and more evidence that Climate Change is causing more severe storms, in both numbers and severity. Severe droughts, low-lying coastlands and islands threatened to be flooded and health risks caused by climate change. Minorities in our own country are afraid because of the increased incidents of hate speech and white supremacy rallies. These threats these dangers do not have to be real to frighten us. The perception of danger are just as frightful as the reality of danger. We do live in dangerous times. There are dangers, real or perceived, that frighten us.

As it did for the Christians in the First Century, Revelation continues to remind us that God is in control, Talk about job security for our musicians. good will prevail, that God will triumph. But we need to sing!

Our passage today is not one about dragons or wars. It is a scene of God's people singing. An enormous crowd, with palm branches in their hands--their robes washed white in the blood of the Lamb—stand before the throne. There are so many of them, one cannot count them. They have come from everywhere, from every race and tribe, from every nation and language. They are everybody, and they sing! That is what saints do. In our troubled time, we need to sing. They are before the throne of God, for the one who is seated on the throne will shelter them. They will hunger no more, and thirst no more; they sun will not strike them, nor any scorching heat.... He will guide them to springs of life, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.” They sing because of God's care.

Think of singing in the African American church tradition, from the time they were slaves, through the Civil Rights movement, to today. Some of the spirituals were regarded as codified protest songs and the spirituals often signaled impending escapes or secret gatherings. For example, some believe “Steal Away to Jesus” was an incitement to escape slavery. In the African spiritual “Sweet Canaan,” the words, “O Canaan, sweet Canaan, I am bound for the land of Canaan,” expressed more than just hope for reaching heaven. It expressed the hope of slaves to reach freedom in the North. North was their Canaan. Singing these spirituals helped to give the slaves hope for not just heaven, but freedom, and an abundant life now. They were encouraged by the story of the Israelites being freed from their slavery in Egypt. These spirituals helped

sustain the enslaved community. Singing was very much a part of the Civil Rights movement. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. described the freedom songs this way: "They invigorate the movement in a most significant way.... These freedom songs serve to give unity to a movement." Cordell Reagon, a founding member of the Freedom Singers of the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee said, "Without these songs, you know we wouldn't be anywhere. We'd still be down on Mister Charley's plantation, chopping cotton for 30 cents a day." Singing has given hope, singing has given strength, singing has provided inspiration and motivation. Singing has carried people through troubled times.

The music of the saints provides a different score to political theory. The music of the saints provides a different score to the world. The music of the saints provides a different score to the dark forces of the world. Sometimes the world tricks us into refusing to sing. "My second-grade music teacher told me I couldn't sing." "I don't know the words and tunes to these new hymns. How can I sing them?" "My voice left me years ago; I can't sing anymore." The world, the powers, do not want us to sing. We may not sing in four-part harmony. Our singing may sound more like a cacophony than harmony. But, we must keep singing. Evil, war, social upheaval, famine, poverty, and greed cannot stop us from singing. Sickness unto death, fear, anxiety cannot stop us from singing.

Singing, we proclaim the good news. Singing, we are reminded of what God has done in the past. Singing, we are reminded that God is with us. Singing, we are reminded that in the end God will be victorious. Singing, we are reminded that God is a

God of hope. Singing invigorates us to effect God's kingdom; invigorates us to bring
God's will "on earth as it is in heaven."

Blessing and glory and wisdom
and thanksgiving and honor
and power and might
be to our God forever and ever! Amen.