**Reading 1**

For our first reading this morning we will watch a short clip from Martin Luther King’s 1965 speech popularly titled “Our God is Marching On.” He spoke these words after having led the march from Selma to Montgomery in support of voting rights for African Americans – a protest that had initially been met with state violence at the Edmund Pettus Bridge.

Read the Full Speech: <https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/our-god-marching>

Video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hAmM7mSdgzM>

Transcript:

The burning of our churches will not deter us. (Yes, sir) The bombing of our homes will not dissuade us. (Yes, sir) We are on the move now. (Yes, sir) The beating and killing of our clergymen and young people will not divert us. We are on the move now. (Yes, sir) The wanton release of their known murderers would not discourage us. We are on the move now. (Yes, sir) Like an idea whose time has come, (Yes, sir) not even the marching of mighty armies can halt us. (Yes, sir) We are moving to the land of freedom. (Yes, sir)

I know you are asking today, "How long will it take?" (Speak, sir) Somebody’s asking, "How long will prejudice blind the visions of men, darken their understanding, and drive bright-eyed wisdom from her sacred throne?" Somebody’s asking, "When will wounded justice, lying prostrate on the streets of Selma and Birmingham and communities all over the South, be lifted from this dust of shame to reign supreme among the children of men?" Somebody’s asking, "When will the radiant star of hope be plunged against the nocturnal bosom of this lonely night, (Speak, speak, speak) plucked from weary souls with chains of fear and the manacles of death? How long will justice be crucified, (Speak) and truth bear it?" (Yes, sir)

I come to say to you this afternoon, however difficult the moment, (Yes, sir) however frustrating the hour, it will not be long, (No sir) because "truth crushed to earth will rise again." (Yes, sir)

How long? Not long, (Yes, sir) because "no lie can live forever." (Yes, sir)

How long? Not long, (All right. How long) because "you shall reap what you sow." (Yes, sir)

How long? (How long?) Not long: (Not long)

Truth forever on the scaffold, (Speak)

Wrong forever on the throne, (Yes, sir)

Yet that scaffold sways the future, (Yes, sir)

And, behind the dim unknown,

Standeth God within the shadow,

Keeping watch above his own.

How long? Not long, because the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice. (Yes, sir)

How long? Not long, (Not long) because:

Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord; (Yes, sir)

He is trampling out the vintage where the grapes of wrath are stored; (Yes)

He has loosed the fateful lightning of his terrible swift sword; (Yes, sir)

His truth is marching on. (Yes, sir)

He has sounded forth the trumpet that shall never call retreat; (Speak, sir)

He is sifting out the hearts of men before His judgment seat. (That’s right)

O, be swift, my soul, to answer Him! Be jubilant my feet!

Our God is marching on. (Yeah)

Glory, hallelujah! (Yes, sir) Glory, hallelujah! (All right)

Glory, hallelujah! Glory, hallelujah!

His truth is marching on. [Applause]

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**Reading 2: Paraphrase of Revelation 21:1-5, 22:1-7**

Then I saw a newly ordered heaven and earth; for the order of the first heaven and the first earth had been undone, and the tumultuous waves of injustice were no longer crashing down on the people. And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her lover. The union of what is and what could be was complete.And I heard a loud voice from the foundations of all reality saying,

“See, the home of God is among the people!
She has been with them all along,
unfolding her heavenly dwelling throughout all creation;
they will know her fully,
and God will be with them always;
God will wipe every tear from their eyes.
Injustice will be no more;
mourning and crying and pain will be no more,
for the first order of things have passed away.”

And the oneness who was the ground of all being said, “See, I am making all things new.”

Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the heart of God through the middle of the street of the city. On either side of the river is the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, producing its fruit each month; and the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations. Nothing oppressive will be found there anymore. But the heart of God will flow like the river through the city, and the people will be carried on by its currents of peace; they will see divine glory, both in the New City, and in themselves.

And the angel said to me, “These words are trustworthy and true, for the God of the spirits of the prophets, has sent messengers to show the people what must soon take place.”

“See, the union of what is and what could be is coming soon! Blessed is the one who keeps and acts on the words of the prophecy of this book.”

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**Pastoral Message: A Great Unveiling**

I lived in constant fear of being Left Behind as a child. Not a “what if my parents lose me at a grocery store or forget to pick me up from school” sort of left behind. I mean a fear of being Left Behind on this earth destined to face the tribulation while my parents and all other “true Christians” were raptured safely to heaven. On more than one occasion when I was growing up, I woke up to a seemingly empty house. I would race from room to room trying to find my parents (who inevitably were getting something from the basement, or outside in the garden), but for those few minutes of uncertainty I was terrified that the end of the world had come and I had missed the train out of here.

I grew up in a very End Times oriented, apocalypse-happy faith tradition that taught that any minute Jesus was going to “rapture” or gather up all Christians to heaven, at which point the Book of Revelation would come to life on earth – complete with horsemen, human-eating locusts, seven-headed beasts and so on.

I know that the trauma and abuse inflicted through this ancient biblical text is real. It has been used to justify everything from patriarchy and indifference about the climate crisis, to a doctrine of eternal torture in hell and Christian nationalism. I understand for many this is not an ancient text they have any interest in exploring. But for me, the events of the past several months have repeatedly called me back to this book I still, after all my deconstruction, hold sacred. It still holds truths for me that give me a spiritually-constructive and justice-oriented lens through which I can view the world. So this morning I invite you to pick up this tragically misunderstood book with me and see how it might help give some language to what we are collectively experiencing in this historic moment.

Much of the misuse of Revelation comes from misunderstanding who the original readers were.

The Book of Revelation is actually an ancient letter written to scattered Christian communities living under Roman Imperialism. The book opens by addressing seven such communities, or churches, made up of refugees that had fled violence in their homeland. An anti-imperialist resistance movement in Palestine had just been squashed by the Romans in 70 CE; the Temple in Jerusalem – the one that had been rebuilt after the Babylonian Exile – had been utterly destroyed yet again, along with their ability to safely remain on their land. Once again the Jewish people (of which the new Jesus movement was still a part) had to adapt their faith in light of not having their sanctuary, their spiritual home, or any of their historic rituals that had grounded their community.

In search of a safe new home these Middle Eastern refugees found themselves in a foreign land that was hostile toward their faith and ruled by an oppressive dictator with a god complex. The dominant faith of the Roman Empire was the Imperial Cult, which centered on the worship of the Emperor. Being a good and faithful citizen of Rome meant declaring Caesar is Lord and offering religious sacrifices in his name. Christians unwilling to do so were considered traitors to Rome and faced imprisonment or even state-sponsored murder for not falling in line. Local governmental officials looking to gain favor with the Emperor would ramp up persecutions in their districts in an effort to root out any dissent.

Meanwhile corruption and political infighting plagued the capitol and natural disasters plagued the empire. The earth quaked, Rome burned, Vesuvius erupted, the economy collapsed, famine spread. One thing after another – it must have felt like the end of the world.

In the midst of all this a man named John wrote an apocalypse – the first word of the book and the first opportunity for modern readers to misunderstand what is going on. We hear the word apocalypse and we imagine world-ending catastrophes like the book will go on to describe. But this word (literally in Greek uncovering or unveiling) is not meant to describe the events themselves, but what those events do. It’s why the book is named Revelation. Through these earth-shattering events something is being revealed. As we see in the book of Revelation, and in our current moment:

**An Apocalypse is the Unveiling of What Is.**

The text describes a series of prophetic visions that expose patterns at work in John’s world that are causing destruction and oppression. These visions are not predictive; it doesn’t *have* to be this way. They are actually a “visionary critique” of what already is, as theologian Catherine Keller argues.

In a world in which outright critiquing the empire could get you killed, John chose a subversive literary medium through which to speak truth to power. It’s coded resistance literature designed to comfort and encourage an oppressed people living in constant fear for their lives.

Looking at the chaos of his time, John weaves together visions that unveil the true values of his time. Using poetic language to describe the destruction of Rome (code named Babylon), he accuses the kings and merchants of valuing the loss of their comfort over the impact these tragedies have on human lives:

*And the merchants of the earth weep and mourn for her, since no one buys their cargo anymore,**cargo of gold, silver, jewels and pearls, fine linen, purple, silk and scarlet, all kinds of scented wood, all articles of ivory, all articles of costly wood, bronze, iron, and marble,**cinnamon, spice, incense, myrrh, frankincense, wine, olive oil, choice flour and wheat, cattle and sheep, horses and chariots, slaves—and human lives.*

When the house is on fire, what do you rush to save? Restaurants and bars or our children and elders? Systems that benefit the few, or those who are most vulnerable? Property and statues or Black Lives?

In addition to unveiling the values of Rome, John’s apocalypse unveils the interwovenness of the oppressions and tragedies that have unfolded. In chapter six we find the famous Four Horsemen passage:

*“I looked, and there was a white horse! Its rider had a bow; a crown was given to him, and he came out conquering and to conquer… And out came another horse, bright red; its rider was permitted to take peace from the earth, so that people would slaughter one another; and he was given a great sword… I looked, and there was a black horse! Its rider held a pair of scales in his hand,**and I heard what seemed to be a voice in the midst of the four living creatures saying, “A quart of wheat for a day’s pay, and three quarts of barley for a day’s pay, but do not damage the olive oil and the wine!”… and I looked and there was a pale green horse! Its rider’s name was Death, and Hades followed with him; they were given authority over a fourth of the earth, to kill with sword, famine, and pestilence, and by the wild animals of the earth.”*

Power-hungry authoritarian conquest. War. Economic exploitation. Pestilence.

In John’s vision these evils and tragedies are all intertwined. Imagine a world with a system that produces enormous wealth gaps between those doing essential work and those who reap the benefits of that work. Now imagine if those wealth gaps largely followed racial lines because of a history of chattel slavery, Black codes, Jim Crow, redlining, a War on Drugs, and so on.

Imagine a city where there are more empty luxury apartments owned by the rich than there are unhoused people – yet the housing crisis is allowed to continue. A world increasingly cut off from the land and sources of good food, with growing food deserts and increasing pollution causing respiratory disease in low-income communities.

Just imagine.

How might the sudden spread of a powerful pestilence impact different communities within that world? What might that pestilence reveal about what was already wrong, and how all of these problems intersected with one another?

Being confronted and bearing witness to these truths can be overwhelming and painful. We may want to close the book at this point and say, “well that’s enough of that!” I can’t bear to read any more. But as any good psychoanalyst or apocalyptic author knows, things have to be unveiled and exposed before they can be dealt with. John doesn’t leave us to surrender to hopelessness, because:

**An Apocalypse moves us through the unveiling of what is to the Unveiling of What Could Be.**

As we heard from our second reading, the fall of Babylon opens the opportunity for a New City to be reconstructed from the ashes. The visionary critique is followed by a new imagination that Keller calls “a vision of a rehydrated world of social justice and environmental health, and a vision of comfort for all who suffer unfairly.” A world where the tears are wiped from our eyes, where all are nourished, have access to justly stewarded land, and health and equality and hope. A world founded on a truth whose time has come. As Keller goes on to say “I do not read here any guarantee, just an undying outer edge of the prophetic hope… it is a hope in the dark, and it works to twist catastrophe into catalyst.”

Our current moment has unveiled our values and the intersecting injustices that have lived for generations. But it has also unveiled what is possible.

It has shown us definitively that entire societies can adopt new policies and new behaviors almost overnight. This crisis has unveiled that we are capable of change. We can do something about the climate crisis and racial injustice if we have the conviction and the persistence to do so. We can do big things. *It doesn’t have to be this way*. But as Angela Davis has said, “You have to act as if it were possible to radically transform the world. And you have to do it all the time.”

Just as this crisis has unveiled the interwovenness of our pain it has also shown us the power of our interwoven struggles for justice. Collaboration and solidarity are possible across racial, economic, gender, and religious divides. We can and we must work together because that which impacts you also impacts me. The myth of personal independence has once again been exposed by the reality of our collective interdependence. We need each other. And so I am not free until everyone is free.

And this is the power of applying an apocalyptic metaphorical lens to the unfolding of events. It prompts us to ask, “What truths are being uncovered by these shocking and tragic circumstances?” It’s an invitation to take a peek behind the curtain to get a glimpse at what has always been there, but what we have until now been unable or unwilling to perceive. And it prompts us to ask, with Martin Luther King, with the oppressed of this ancient text and the oppressed of today, “How long?” How long?

Apocalyptic events have unfolded in such a way that we cannot take refuge in our normal daily rhythms. All we have is the urgent NOW. How many of us have said something like, “Time has no meaning anymore” over the last four months? This is the same temporally disoriented sentiment reflected in apocalyptic phrases like, “The time is near” or “The time is short” (which in the original Greek literally means “the time of possibility is contracted”). How long? Not long. At least if we stay vigilant, if we stay ready to make the most of the possibilities that have been unveiled.

To read ancient or contemporary events through the lens of apocalypse is not to suggest that these events are predetermined or are part of a closed future that is coming to a chronological end. It is an invitation to recognize the possibilities and the urgency of the moment in which we find ourselves. It’s MLK saying “I’ve been to the mountaintop, and I’ve seen the Promised Land.” It’s an open door and a voice saying, “Come up here and I will show you what must take place after this.” What must take place after this and are we ready to do the work that will bring it to pass? May it be so.