

## Readings from Revelation

Writings for Fruit of the Vine 2015

C. Wess Daniels

### From Bafflement to Wonder

BIBLE READING: Revelation 1

“When I saw him, I fell at his feet as though dead.” (1:17)

In April 1963 Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., wrote an ‘open letter’ from a Birmingham jail to a group of ministers. In the letter he defends nonviolent resistance to racism and alluded to the new Jerusalem. The letter gave hope and direction to a fledgling movement and challenged its detractors.

Similarly, these words from Revelation were smuggled out of Patmos to small bands of Christians working to survive a powerful and terrifying imperial force. Reading Revelation one begins to see two ‘religions’ in conflict: the religion of empire and the religion of the Lamb that was slain. The contours of the empire’s religion were the same then as they are now: estrangement, control, suspicion of others, and violence. In contrast, the religion of the lamb is rooted in courage, patient endurance, love of strangers, and nonviolence.

Apocalyptic literature, like Revelation, comes when the group is losing or has lost hope. It is often about remaining strong, trusting that even the weak and outnumbered can be victorious through love and nonviolence.

Revelation was not meant to baffle but to spark imagination and wonder. The central image that formed the ancient Christian imagination was the “Lamb that was slain”—the lamb who did not retaliate. Do not succumb to the way of empire, remain faithful and patiently endure. Faithfulness to the Lamb is itself a witness.

SONG: [We Shall Overcome - Mahalia Jackson](#)

PRAYER SUGGESTION: Dear Jesus, we name our anxieties about the future, what is left unknown, and the places where we think we have it all figured it out. Grow our faith, and open us up to the apocalyptic imagination of John’s Revelation.

—C. Wess Daniels

BIBLE READING: Revelation 2–3

### Wake Up to What’s In Front of You

“And to the angle of the church in Smyrna,” [Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea.]

Presence makes a difference. Are you aware of the issues that people in your neighborhood are facing and the things they care most about?

I am the released minister at a Quaker meeting in a small paper mill town in the Pacific Northwest. The town has experienced development during the past ten to fifteen years. In some ways, this has been positive—the schools have improved, there are more downtown businesses, there are more high-tech jobs available, etc. There are other ways that development has a personal cost. The mill once employed upwards of 2,500 people. Last I heard they were around 400. Besides the loss of these solid living wage jobs, there is less affordable housing. If you’re poor you likely can’t afford to live in the

district that has the “good schools.” When I hear disparaging comments about the poor or having to go to the “poor school,” I wonder if there is interest in changing this situation.

Where you live and where you pray is essential to the work of God. Are you paying attention to the issues that exist in your zip code? Are there hidden issues of poverty, racism, and other ways that “suspicion for others” are ignored? Revelation reveals God’s concern for his people who are crushed and marginalized by those in power. It shows that the church’s presence is meant to make a difference.

Each place has its own story. There are places of light and places darkness often interwoven. In Revelation, pastor John calls his churches to “wake up!” “Strengthen what remains...” “Listen! I am standing at the door, knocking...”

SONG: [We Shall Not Be Moved - Mavis Staples](#)

PRAYER SUGGESTION: Jesus help us to wake up! Help us to listen and open the doors of change.

—C. Wess Daniels

### **The Angelic Troublemaker**

BIBLE READING: Revelation 4–5

“Then I saw between the throne and the four living creatures and among the elders a Lamb standing as if it had been slaughtered.”

What is an image that has stayed with you through the years? One image that stays with me is the Twin Towers falling on September 11, 2001. The videos of that horrendous day effects many imaginations around the world.

It is common knowledge that images influence the human brain much more than words do. Revelation is packed full of powerful imagery meant to stick with its first century readers, inspiring them and guiding them through treacherous terrain. Like an ancient political cartoon, Revelation was meant to provoke and challenge. It is rife with imagery and references to first century Roman culture and biblical imagery. And just like a political cartoon today, the “joke” is lost on us when we don’t know what is being referenced and satirized.

While the empire impresses on its people violent imagery and propaganda meant to shape and dull imaginations, the central image of the book of Revelation is “the lamb that was slain.” The lamb did not retaliate, but resisted nonviolently. The lamb who was seen as a troublemaker by those in power but ‘wise as a serpent and innocent as a dove.’ The Lamb is honored by God as the innocent victim, which is a total reversal of humanity’s constant effort to retaliate violently and create scapegoats to sidestep our own corruption.

Parker Palmer says: “Nonviolence is a commitment to act in every situation in ways that honor the soul.”

SONG: [Blood of the Lamb - Woody Guthrie](#)

PRAYER SUGGESTION: Meditate on the image of the Lamb that was slain. How might nonviolence become an even more deeply engrained way of life for me, especially when I find myself among the wolves?

—C. Wess Daniels

## **Finding Our New Song**

BIBLE READING: Revelation 6–7

“A great multitude of people that no one can count from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages standing before the lamb” (7:9).

In the mornings, while I write, I often enjoy listening to Taize. These meditative songs, often sung in Latin by well-tuned choirs help to focus my attention and center me. Their song is sung in a way that encourages hope and good faith. These voices blended so well together are precise, beautiful and hopeful.

Revelation shows two kinds of “religions” at work in the world: the religion empire and the religion of lamb. The songs of empire are like the Siren’s song from Odyssey, it may sound beautiful, but when we turn our hearts its direction, disaster awaits. The songs of the lamb found throughout the book of Revelation are mournful, worshipful, hopeful, and full of life (7:15-17). And they are sung by many voices blending together, a great multitude from every nation sing in the Lamb’s choir.

The song of the Lamb’s choir is different from other songs because it is sung by imperfect voices, courageous voices, and voices that have been told not to sing. The song is sung by many voices, heard in the marketplaces and in the corners of empire. It is sung by children, the elderly, it has been sung at bus stops, and lunch counters, it has been sung in little country churches, and in prison cells.

SONG: [How can I keep from Singing? - Pete Seegar](#)

PRAYER SUGGESTION: May those who sing this song be like Odysseus’ crew who put beeswax in their ears, they are not wooed by the Sirens’ song. May you know you are invited to lift up your voice, join this choir and make the Lamb’s song the song of your heart and of your life.

—C. Wess Daniels

## **What are We Creating?**

BIBLE READING: Revelation 12

“But they have conquered him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony, for they did not cling to life even in the face of death.” (12:11)

Every religious movement has its own liturgy. Whether it is the high liturgy of the Episcopal Church or it is the simple shaking of hands at the rise of meeting for worship. Often in evangelical circles “liturgy” can be seen negatively as “going through the motions.” But the word liturgy (Greek: leitourgia) means “public work,” or sometimes “the work of the people.”

In Revelation 12 we see two kinds of liturgy. Our passage falls in the middle of three scenes of worship found in chapters 11-15. With a dramatic conflict symbolized by a dragon and a woman, Michael and angels, and then two beasts in chapter 13. John is showing two religions in conflict.

The empire’s liturgy is propagated by temples, statutes, decrees, ordinances, bloodshed and mighty symbols of wickedness (dragon, beast, war-ready iron-clad horses). The liturgy of the Lamb is counter to this in every way. It is one that involves a multitude of voices, a woman clothed with the sun,

pregnant and ready to give birth, a newborn baby, angels, shepherds and those already slain by the empire.

The imperial liturgy takes away agency, stifles imagination, tells you what to do and think and how to behave. It devalues humanity and creation. The liturgy of the lamb invites us to be co-workers in the creation of a new world. This is our public work as the Lamb's people, to be committed so much to this alternative liturgy that even death cannot stop us from midwifing the beloved community into existence.

SONG: [What Wondrous Love is This? - Seth Martin](#)

PRAYER SUGGESTION: Prayerfully consider what liturgy shapes us today. Is it more like the practices of the empire, or the practices of the lamb?

—C. Wess Daniels

### **Crashing the Beast's Party**

BIBLE READING: Revelation 13:16-17; 18:11-13

“And the merchants of the earth weep and mourn for her, since no one buys their cargo anymore, cargo of gold, silver, jewels...cattle and sheep, horses and chariots, slaves—and human lives.” (18:11-13 NRSV)

Of all the misunderstood things in the book of Revelation, the “mark of the beast” is the most misconstrued. If John's primary interest is to instruct first century churches, then these chapters reveal an attempt to disavow participation in exploitative economics. John's analysis of the eikon ???(or image) reveals that poverty and economic exploitation are part of the imperial structure. Poverty isn't just one person's bad fortune or bad decisions. Structural injustice is attached to economic well-being. Martin Luther King, Jr., summed up this point when he said, “What good does it do to be able to eat at a lunch counter if you can't buy a hamburger.” John unmasks the same reality: economic inequity is not about accident, pathology or fate—it is created by a demonic “spirit” at work within the structures of society.

To be “marked” was a reference to the coins with the emperor's face and the “branding” impressed upon prisoners, slaves, and religious devotees. To refuse this was to refuse the very foundations of the imperial religion. Conversely, from John's perspective, you can't denounce it as Satanic while also participating in it.

A church hearing Revelation rightly would not have participated in human slavery and would work to undo exploitive systems.

SONG: [Oh Freedom - Shirley Verritt](#)

PRAYER SUGGESTION: Jesus, help us to understand rightly the pressing economic issues of our time that we may be clear-sighted in our support of just economic practices and reject those that exploit your creation for personal gain.

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### **Breaking with the Imperial Imagination**

BIBLE READING: Revelation 21:2

“And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adored for her husband.”

Revelation encourages people to stand out (you were neither hot nor cold!). John encourages asking questions and taking actions that rub against the imperial system even if it is costly. He knows that the imperial imagination has a dulling effect on its subjects. But those who worship the lamb of God will be inspired to wake up from their slumber and be drawn into a much bigger story than their individual histories because it is God’s story. It is here that uniqueness and tradition come together.

Jaroslav Pelikan writes, “Traditionalism is the dead faith of the living, whereas tradition is the living faith of the dead.” Revelation, the New Testament, and in the prophets long before, is a tradition of standing out, moving against the grain, and resisting the many temptations of empire.

The worshipping communities that have been shaped by an alternative story, theirs is a tradition that is marked by the image and liturgy of the “lamb that was slain.” This “tradition” has been passed down through many generations around the world at cost to their own “success,” sometimes livelihood, and sometimes bodies. It’s not a one-size-fits-all approach, nor will it help reduce costs and increase efficiency. Instead, at its best it is the beloved community, a city upon a hill, a light to the nations drawing all who are thirsty to come out of empire and find the living water.

SONG: [Times They Are A Changin’ - Bob Dylan](#)

PRAYER SUGGESTION: Use the closing benediction from Revelation as your prayer today: “The Spirit and the bride say, ‘Come.’ And let everyone who hears say, ‘Come.’ And let everyone who is thirsty come. Let anyone who wishes take the water of life as a gift.”

—C. Wess Daniels