

SEQUOYAH HILLS

PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

“Seals: When the Sky’s Really Falling”

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Then I saw the Lamb open one of the seven seals, and I heard one of the four living creatures call out, as with a voice of thunder, “Come!” 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.

When he opened the second seal, I heard the second living creature call out, “Come!” 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.

When he opened the third seal, I heard the third living creature call out, “Come!” 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!”

When he opened the fourth seal, I heard the voice of the fourth living creature call out, “Come!” 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.

When he opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slaughtered for the word of God and for the testimony they had given; they cried out with a loud voice, “Sovereign Lord, holy and true, how long will it be before you judge and avenge our blood on the inhabitants of the earth?” They were each given a white robe and told to rest a little longer, until the number would be complete both of their fellow servants and of their brothers and sisters, who were soon to be killed as they themselves had been killed.

When he opened the sixth seal, I looked, and there came a great earthquake; 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. The sky vanished like a scroll rolling itself up, and every mountain and island was removed from its place. Then the kings of the earth and the magnates and the generals and the rich and the powerful, and everyone, slave and free, hid in the caves and among the rocks of the mountains, calling to the mountains and rocks, “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?”

Revelation 6:1-17

We continue in our series “Seals” in the Book of Revelation this morning. The past two weeks we started at the beginning of chapter four and have been moving straight through. This particular section of Revelation centers around a vision of a scroll that has seven seals, and what happens when those seals are opened. As we’ve seen, this scroll is a big deal because it seems to signify something like the final plan of God for creation, like a last will and testament, something would somehow give purpose and make sense of all this whole mess in the end. That sounds like a really good thing, and it is, and that’s how everyone in this scene of heavenly worship reacts to it. But today, as we come to the beginning of chapter six, and those seals start to be opened, it makes us wonder, just what was all that celebrating about. Let’s go to God’s Word. [Read passage.] Will you pray with me? Holy God for the Word spoken and heard today, may it not be mine but yours. Amen.

Well, we couldn’t really get away with a series in the Book of Revelation without a week taking a deep dive into the scary stuff. It’s chapters like this one that for many makes the whole book so intimidating, because how do we hear good news in these words of calamity? This sort of imagery is peppered pretty steadily throughout

Revelation from here on out, whether you want to call it judgment or tribulations or, using the word that this particular passage uses: wrath. Like in that last verse we read, the kings and generals and all the common free people and servants all huddle away and call to the rocks and the mountains, “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?”

And who’s to blame them for a bit of despair? You’ve heard of the phrase, “The sky is falling!” And it’s usually code for an overreaction, as in, the story of Chicken Little, who gets bonked on the head by a nut falling from a tree and then goes around telling everyone that the sky is falling, and a whole panic ensues. Well here in this vision, the sky actually is falling. V. 13, “and the stars of the sky fell to the earth as a fig tree drops its winter fruit when shaken by a gale.” All of that and then some these kings and generals and everyone else attribute to the wrath of the Lamb. If there’d ever be reason to hide in caves, I suppose that’d be a good one.

But a lot has happened to get us to the point of kings and generals and everyone else all hiding in caves crying out to be hidden from the wrath of the Lamb. Even just that phrase, the wrath of the Lamb has to make us do a bit of a double take. If you were with us last week, you might be thinking, “Wait a minute. I thought the Lamb, Jesus, was supposed to be harmless, forgiving, and merciful and all that. But then all these people hiding in caves are fearful for the wrath of this Lamb. How did we get from what we were talking about last week, with everyone in heaven rejoicing in worship, to this, with everyone hiding in caves? Well, what happened was, the Lamb, the one, the only one who was worthy to open up the scroll that seems to signify God’s last will and testament, a final plan, a purpose for all of this mess we see around us, actually goes about the work of opening it. He starts opening the seven seals.

My guess is even if you’ve never read this chapter of Revelation before, you’ve heard of the first four. Ever hear of the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse? This is where they come from. The first, a rider on a white horse, bringing conquest. The second, a rider on a red horse, bringing war. The third, a rider on a black horse, bringing exploitation and scarcity. And the fourth, maybe the most well-known, a rider on a pale green horse, and this is one of those passages where only the King James Version will do: “And I looked, and behold a pale horse: and his name that sat on him was Death, and Hell followed with him. And power was given unto them over the fourth part of the earth, to kill with the sword, and with hunger, and with death, and with the beasts of the earth.” If you’ve ever seen the movie Tombstone, it tries to pass Wyatt Earp off as the rider on this pale horse. Wyatt Earp goes on a revenge tour and tells the bad guys, “Hell’s coming with me! You hear me! Hell’s coming with me!” All that’s coming from here. But the point is, each horse and its rider were one of those first four seals being opened, and each seal brought its own set of calamities.

We hear those words, and we’re terrified. Conquest, war, exploitation, death. I thought the seals opening up was supposed to reveal some kind of purpose to all of this mess, but it seems to me it’s just compounding it. If this is the plan, maybe it’d just be better off staying sealed up.

That’s how a lot of Christians have felt over the years when faced with a passage like this. Maybe we just leave this stop off the tour next time. And it’s led to a whole spectrum of ways Christians have approached the Book of Revelation and passages like this one. Some time in the future, is there to be a sequence of four horses colored white, red, black, and pale green that will visit the world, or does this mean something else?

We touched briefly a few weeks ago on how we might understand some of the imagery used in Revelation, but I wanted to wait a little longer before going into some of interpretive lenses, so to speak, that could impact how we hear these words about these four horsemen and falling skies. The reason for that is that for the past two

weeks, the scene has been set in heaven, an eternal scene, and of course things might look different there. But now, John is talking about things that he sees taking place in the world. No heavenly veil now, so what do we make of it?

I'm especially indebted now to a resident expert in the Book of Revelation. I don't know if you knew this but we in fact have a few resident experts on Revelation in our congregation, but one of them is our own Kenan Smith, who actually wrote and published a commentary on the book. If you've ever dived into some kind of commentary on Revelation, odds are there's some kind of breakdown similar to what I hope to offer, but a lot use slightly different nomenclature—this isn't even exactly the same as what Kenan offers—so what I'm about to share with you comes with the caveat that this is an overly simplistic look at some of the main ways Christians have interpreted Revelation.

The first is often called the “futurist” interpretation. It's probably the most common these days, or at least the most well-known. As the name would imply, it interprets Revelation as a description, albeit a coded one, of events to come at the end times. If you've ever heard of the book series called *Left Behind*, that's an example of a futurist interpretation of Revelation. In the case of the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse, it'd say that these “seal judgments” are an actual sequence of events, with conquest leading to war, with war leading to exploitation, and all of it leading to death on all fronts, culminating in what seems to be creation itself revolting against the corruption within it, with worldwide earthquakes, sun blotted out, stars falling, the whole nine yards. Those are events that we can expect to happen at the end of things, in a futurist understanding.

The second is often called the “preterist” interpretation, with “preter” meaning “before,” as in, it interprets Revelation as a description of events that have already taken place, usually events in the first century AD. The gist here is that the early church, facing persecution, is given this revelation to help them make sense of the horrible things that have already taken place. So instead of trying to anticipate what would happen, it means they'd be hearing these words that interpret what they had already witnessed. For example, and Kenan does a masterful job of outlining this in his book, it's possible in a preterist interpretation that these Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse are a description of a military campaign by the Roman Emperor Nero to suppress a Jewish uprising.

The third is sometimes called the “idealist” interpretation. And through this lens, it interprets Revelation as if the visions here are describing the broader scope of history, especially as it faces the church, as in, captures the “ideals” or the characteristics of movements that the church would encounter in its ministry and its trials. So in that view, these Four Horsemen wouldn't be referring to specific events, but more to the trials throughout history that the church would encounter through conquest, war, exploitation, and death.

When it comes to all the various lenses, I love what Kenan has to say on that front. His commentary actually outlines four different ones, but the same point applies. He says that only using one exclusively will mean that you'll miss shades of meaning in the text that another lens might reveal, so he'll dip into all of them at times.

For all of them, though, for these seals opening up, whether they're events yet to happen or things that have already happened or a big, broad category of things happening throughout history, question still stands: how is this good news? How is this cause for all the rejoicing we saw just a chapter ago? Why does all of this have to happen? It seems that question was actually on the minds of a few others within this very vision. After the four riders, the fifth seal opens, but instead of calamity, it's a vision of the souls of the Christian martyrs who cry out to God, asking how long it would be before he judges the world. And they're told to rest and to wait a little bit longer.

But it's powerful to me, that somehow rolled into this vision of judgments being meted out upon the earth, there's also this vision of those crying out for it, not fearing it. And I think the voices of these martyrs are the voices we sometimes hear too: why is this happening? How long will this happen? God, where are you? How long will you wait? These are voices crying out *for* judgment, not hiding from it. Why would that be?

Judgment is one of those words that we sometimes get scared of or avoid in Scripture. We usually think of it in terms of, well, the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse and so we steer clear. But we miss its purpose. We often think of judgment in terms of punishment, but really its purpose, ultimately, is restoration. When we hear a word like judgment in Scripture, we might think of an angry God unleashing his wrath, when really we should hear it as: this is God, setting things right.

It's like this, and you'll hear me use this analogy more than once, and granted it's overly simplistic. If you have a shoulder that's out of socket, is that how shoulders are supposed to be? No. Do you want to leave it like that? No. But is the process of putting it back into socket a pleasant one? Definitely not. If the ideal is for everything to be aligned with God's purposes, that's what we call righteousness: everything in right relationship with everything else. That's the shoulder in socket, as it should be. But when something gets out of whack and has to be put back into right relationship, corrected, set right, that's the shoulder out of socket, and judgment is what sets things right. It's not just mere punishment. Something was out; something was wrong; and God sets things right.

That's ultimately what these four horsemen and the voice of the martyrs are all dealing with. How will God set things right in a broken world? It's like the whole world has been put out of socket, and it's like in order for it to be set right, the forces that have corrupted it, like conquest, like war, like exploitation, like death are allowed to run amok so that they can be unearthed and dealt with conclusively. Judgment is God setting things right.

But the reason it's good news is because it's also a message that God actually cares. Our Jack is getting to the age where discipline, or judgment if you will, is becoming more and more of a factor, as he's exploring his independence, shall we say. But I remember growing up any discipline that my dad would bring, or either of my parents for that matter, wasn't merely to punish, but to instruct, wasn't just to avenge, but to set right. And thinking back to it now, what would have been more devastating to me? A father's discipline or correction, or a father's indifference altogether. Now talking about this on a day like Father's Day can be a loaded thing, because all of us have different impressions of fathers, some can have very positive memories and associations with our fathers, while others decidedly have very negative ones, so the notion of a father's loving discipline is not something that we can just assume to be the case across the board.

But if this vision says anything about our Father in heaven, or about our Lord, the Lamb, Jesus Christ, it's that indifference isn't in their vocabulary. All of these things happening tell us that it is not in God's nature to say, "Well, it doesn't really matter." It says that our God will not abide evil to endure forever. Whether it be genocide, or injustice, or racism, or persecution, it will be dealt with, and things will be set right.

And in the meantime, as our own Kenan Smith writes, "For sure, sometimes we do not know why some type of suffering has come into our individual lives. This is true even when we are caught up in some great historical crisis. However, regardless, there is always a very simple answer and solution—draw near to God. Seek to do his will."

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.