

A person in a grey hoodie and green pants stands on a red rock formation, looking out over a desert landscape under a dramatic sky. The person is seen from behind, standing on the edge of a red rock formation. The landscape is a vast desert with red rock formations and sparse vegetation. The sky is filled with dramatic, dark clouds, suggesting a sunset or sunrise. The overall mood is contemplative and inspiring.

May/June 2021

Today

refresh, refocus, renew

LIFE IN
THE SPIRIT

ALSO: EXPERIENCING JESUS

Dear Friends:

Are you familiar with the book of Revelation in the Bible? This book is a letter from John, one of Jesus' closest followers. This letter at the end of the Bible is filled with some stunningly beautiful passages, and the book as a whole is sometimes puzzling and hard to apply to our lives.



In the month of May, Pastor Jim Poelman opens Revelation for us by exploring how this word of revelation from God still speaks powerfully to our daily lives today—with a message of hope in the midst of so much turmoil and uncertainty in our world.

Then, in the month of June, Pastor Dean Deppe, a New Testament teacher, explores life in the Spirit. All of us want love, joy, peace, and the things that give meaning and purpose to our lives. But the truth is that only when we live in a right and close relationship with God can we truly find meaning and purpose in life. This new life comes through the power and the presence of the Holy Spirit. Through God's Holy Spirit, we begin living in eternity even now because the Spirit lives in us and unites us through Jesus Christ with the God who loves us.

May God's Word refresh, refocus, and renew you each day!

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Kurt Selles". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke at the end.

—Kurt Selles

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“Experiencing Jesus”
Jim Poelman



“Life in the Spirit”
Dean Deppe

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ReFrame
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may

Experiencing Jesus

Jim Poelman

The book of Revelation pictures God in heaven holding a scroll that has seven seals on it (Revelation 5). And we discover that only Jesus, the Son of God, is able to open this scroll and reveal its contents.

In the chapters that follow, God's amazing story unfolds. What we see and hear in these chapters are stories of visions given to instill, grow, and strengthen faith—a way of living close to God here on earth as we see signs of God working not only in heaven but also in the world around us.

This month we remember and celebrate Jesus' ascension to heaven (May 13) and the coming of the Holy Spirit of God (May 23). We do so in the context of a world that is hurting. May the sights and sounds of God's great story encourage us not only to have faith in the ascended Jesus but also to stay in step with the Holy Spirit, who lives within us to bring God's presence into our everyday lives.

Pastor Jim Poelman and his wife, Linda, served five churches in Ontario and British Columbia for thirty-nine years. In retirement they enjoy family times with their extended household of children and grandchildren—29 members in all—often creating lots of happy noise.

WHO IS WORTHY?

"The Lion of the tribe of Judah . . . is able to open the scroll and its seven seals." Then I saw a Lamb. . . . —Revelation 5:5-6

The apostle John, one of Jesus' closest followers, received amazing visions of Jesus, heaven, mighty angels, and much more while he was exiled on the island of Patmos (Revelation 1:9). John describes these visions in the book of Revelation, and together these passages help us to grow in faith so that we can learn to live faithfully for Jesus. Jesus is the Son of God, the Savior of the world, who came to lay down his life for us so that we can be saved from sin and death and live forever with God.

Our reading today describes a surprising, dramatic scene in heaven. God is seated on the throne, and he is holding a scroll that is sealed with seven seals. It seems that no one is worthy to break the seals and open the scroll. But then an elder says to John, in effect, "Look! The Lion of Judah has

triumphed, and he can open the scroll!"

And John sees a Lamb, looking like it had been slain—and this is no ordinary lamb. This is Jesus, "the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world" (John 1:29). As the Lamb takes up the scroll, the many thousands of angels in heaven and all the creatures and elders around the throne sing out, "Worthy is the Lamb, who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and strength and honor and glory and praise!" And in the following scenes Jesus, the Lamb, opens the scroll to portray the story of how God frees us from sin and death and sets us on a journey of living by faith.

Thank you, Jesus, for providing our salvation. Help us to live by faith in you. Amen.

A VOICE LIKE THUNDER

Then I heard one of the four living creatures say in a voice like thunder, "Come!"
—Revelation 6:1

When Jesus opens the first seal of the scroll, John hears one of the four living creatures speak with a "voice like thunder." If you have ever been caught in a quick-moving thunderstorm, you know the power of thunder. The loud booming of thunder from sharp cracks of lightning can make us run for cover.

The mention of thunder shows that God wants our attention. As the first seal is opened, we see a white horse, and its rider is determined to succeed in his mission. Soon we will also see three other powerful horsemen determined to win, but this first one is different. He is the only one introduced with a "voice like thunder."

The color of the white horse stands for restoration and renewal, being made clean and given new life. This horseman's mission is to restore God's

creation, and he is also given a crown.

If you are familiar with the story of Jesus' life and mission, you will recognize this first horseman. This is Jesus Christ, the one whom God "crowned with glory and honor because he suffered death . . . for every one" (Hebrews 2:9).

This horseman is on a mission, "as a conqueror bent on conquest." And he comes into the story again later, in Revelation 19:11-16. At this point, though, we are invited to picture him at the cutting edge of God's mission of salvation and restoration.

Thank you, God, for getting our attention. Open our eyes to the wonder of your ongoing mission of salvation through Jesus Christ. Amen.

ARMED WITH A BOW

There before me was a white horse! Its rider held a bow. . . .

—Revelation 6:2

What does it mean that the rider on a white horse “held a bow”? Are we to imagine a soldier who has the training to kill with a bow and arrow? Or perhaps we picture a hunter, with bow in hand, standing over a downed deer.

It is tempting to read God’s story that way. But if we did, we would think the first rider is all about bringing death and destruction. To read the story that way would miss the surprising good news that the One who is skilled with a bow is *God*. He has worked with a bow for a long time.

In the first book of the Bible, Genesis, we find a promise that God gave to Noah after the great flood. “I have set my bow in the clouds” God said, “and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth” (Genesis 9:13, NRSV). We usually understand the

bow in the Genesis story as being a “rainbow.” But it is the same word that is used in this story in Revelation.

In other words, the first horseman, Jesus, is armed with God’s covenant promise. His goal is to bring God’s promises for the renewal of creation to every part of creation.

Lord, our Lord, you surprise us with your promises and your determination to bring life and healing to your creation. Thank you for so loving this world that you gave your one and only Son to give us life. Amen.

A RED FLAG

Then another horse came out, a fiery red one. Its rider was given power to take peace from the earth and to make people kill each other. To him was given a large sword. —Revelation 6:4

When Jesus opens the second seal, a fiery red horse comes out! Artists use red sparingly because it commands attention. And God, the master painter, used the brightest red possible to paint the mission of this second rider. This is a “red flag” warning us to be on guard.

This horseman receives power to “take peace from the earth and to make people kill each other.”

Peace, in this story, includes much more than just the absence of war. The Bible’s picture of peace is about the harmony in creation revealed in Genesis 1:31: “God saw all that he had made, and it was very good.”

The clearest example of this peace is found in the life of Jesus, given for our sake. He is described as the “Prince of Peace” (Isaiah 9:6). And when

he was born, a multitude of angels from heaven gave glory to God and announced the coming of peace on earth (Luke 2:14).

In the picture of the rider on a fiery red horse, however, this vision opens our eyes to the power of evil in our midst, robbing creation of God’s peace (shalom). We are especially warned to be on guard about this rider’s goal to create violence, making people kill each other.

We need to be wary of this red flag as we follow Jesus in his mission to bring peace on earth.

Thank you, God, for warning us about the fiery red horse and rider. Guide us to follow Jesus closely. For the glory of your name we pray. Amen.

DAILY BREAD

When the Lamb opened the third seal . . . I looked, and there before me was a black horse! Its rider was holding a pair of scales in his hand.
—Revelation 6:5

The third horseman in this story rides a black horse. This rider holds a pair of scales, which were used for everyday buying and selling. These scales, however, were rigged to inflate the costs of grain. The third horseman represents economic injustice, robbing many people of their daily bread and other basic needs.

In this picture we sense the care and concern of God over unjust practices, because a day's worth of wages for a small bag of grain or flour would have a big impact on most people for their survival.

Jesus knows the importance of having daily bread available for everyone. One of his most famous miracles was his feeding of many thousands of people when they were tired and hungry in a remote place. He refused to send the people away hungry (Matthew 14:16). And

when Jesus taught us to ask God our Father, "Give us today our daily bread" (Matthew 6:11), it was our basic needs for food, clothing, and shelter that he had in mind.

Following Jesus' example, we can live and work so that the scales for economic justice tip on the side of mercy and love. The rider on the black horse shows no care for the poor. But Jesus does! And he commands us to do likewise. Jesus also says to those who follow his example: "Come . . . [into] the kingdom prepared for you. . . . For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat. . . ." (Matthew 25:35-40).

Thank you, Jesus, for teaching us to care for people who are hungry. Lord, give us today our daily bread. Amen.

DEATH'S DOOM

There before me was a pale horse! Its rider was named Death, and Hades was following close behind him. —Revelation 6:8

The fourth horseman is too familiar to us. This picture represents death and grief disrupting our lives. Perhaps you are feeling death's dreadful presence today. May you be comforted in God's love and care.

At the time of this writing, the global death count from COVID-19 is over 2 million. The fourth horseman has created another pandemic. Death is always a terrible intruder, regardless of its coming to claim people in large numbers or in the sudden death of a person we love.

The Holy Spirit has given us powerful pictures to embrace for a time such as this. We have the good news of Christ's coming and of his rising on Easter Sunday morning, announcing death's defeat. We also have comforting pictures of Jesus grieving with those who mourn. Jesus wept with

Mary and Martha over their brother Lazarus's death (John 11:33-35). Jesus weeps with us too when this rider on the pale horse comes.

Jesus also knows this horseman as his "last enemy to be destroyed" (1 Corinthians 15:26). And God's great story closes with John announcing, "Then I saw 'a new heaven and a new earth,'" in which God will "wipe every tear from [our] eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain" (Revelation 21:1-4). Hallelujah!

Thank you, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, for your victory over death for our sake. Comfort us in your promise to put an end to death and to all our grieving. Amen.

THE SOULS OF MARTYRS

When he opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slain because of the word of God and the testimony they had maintained.
—Revelation 6:9

With the opening of the fifth seal, God's story brings us to the altar where God gathers the souls of followers who have died for their faith in him. The enemy tries to silence believers who are faithful to God's Word and to put an end to their testimony. Although they can be killed on earth, God keeps their souls safe in heaven. And they are not silent! The souls of the martyrs cry out with the passion of ancient laments to the Lord of all lords (see Psalm 13:1-2; 74:10; 94:3; 119:84).

We may not know the names of the people whom God gathers beneath his altar. But we do know they are the people Jesus acknowledged when he said, "Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me" (Matthew 5:11).

These martyred saints have a special place in God's design to help us live by faith in his Word. They provide us with a one-of-a-kind, holy witness to what following Christ looks like. Faith is willing to sacrifice to stay true to God.

Give thanks today for the little-known and often unnamed saints who paid and are paying with their lives for being faithful to God. Thank God that the voice of the martyrs is not silenced. "Since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders . . . and run with perseverance the race marked out for us" (Hebrews 12:1).

Thank you, Lord, for the example of the martyrs. Guide us to be your faithful witnesses, we pray. Amen.

HOW LONG?

They called out in a loud voice, "How long, Sovereign Lord, holy and true, until you judge the inhabitants of the earth and avenge our blood?"
—Revelation 6:10

There are life lessons we can learn by listening to prayers. For instance, my parents' prayers nurtured me to be a follower of Jesus. By their example, I learned to give thanks to God, to ask for forgiveness, to pray for the coming of God's kingdom, and much more. They also taught me to lament, to cry out to God, for help and for justice on the earth.

We need to learn prayers of praise, and we need to learn prayers of lament. Jesus' prayer on the cross, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Mark 15:34) was a soul-piercing cry to God from Psalm 22.

In our reading from Revelation today, we listen again to the prayer of the martyrs: "How long, Sovereign Lord . . . until you . . . avenge our blood?" And we can see that this echoes ancient laments in the

Psalms (see also Psalm 74:10; 94:3; 119:84).

In this passage God opens our eyes to a bigger and better picture of faith. We are challenged to long as much as God does for justice and peace on the earth. The martyrs are not content just to be in heaven. They continue to work and pray for God's justice to be present on earth as it is in heaven. Their prayer also reminds us that God plans to restore not just our souls but also the whole earth, where we will live again one day in our bodies, restored and whole.

These are powerful words for living by faith today.

Thank you, Lord, for having us listen and learn from the prayer of the martyrs. Bring justice and peace, Lord. Amen.

WAIT A LITTLE LONGER

They were told to wait a little longer. . . .

—Revelation 6:11

Prayer is the Holy Spirit's gift to help us hold on to God and not let go when we are hurting. We cry out to God because we know our help "comes from the Lord, the Maker of heaven and earth" (Psalm 121:1-2). If we listen to the prayers of lament raised by God's people, we can see that they really knew God.

The prayer of the martyred saints in our reading today is based on the deep conviction that God is the "Sovereign Lord." The powers of the world—political, social, economic—may have prevailed in ending their lives, but these saints know there is more. Their death was not the final word. They continue to confess that God is the Sovereign Lord. They also know that God is like no other. God is holy and true to his word.

These saints also know that God listens and responds to

the cry of his people. And to their cry, "How long?" God answers, "Wait a little longer. . . ." In 2 Peter 3:8-9 the Bible helps us understand this, saying, "With the Lord . . . a thousand years are like a day. The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. Instead he is patient . . . not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance."

Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr., knew well this response to our prayers for help. He said, "How long? Not long, because the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice. How long? Not long, because 'Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord. . . .'"

Almighty God, listen to your children praying. Help us to keep the faith until you come. Amen.

GROUND ZERO

They called to the mountains and the rocks, "Fall on us and hide us from the face of him who sits on the throne. . . ."

—Revelation 6:16

The opening of the sixth seal places us on shaky ground. John sees a massive earthquake undoing all the stitches of created reality. All that we assume to be permanent parts of the created world around us—sun, moon, stars, blue sky, mountains, and islands in the sea—are dramatically changed or removed from their place. It's like ground zero in an event of mass destruction.

Everyone, of course, is affected. The powerful, the rich, and the poor all share in this common ground of chaos. All the supports that people are used to counting on are removed.

And what is *not* removed? God.

What do people do with this God who refuses to go away? We hear their cry of desperation. When people are brought face to face with God, they do what humankind has

attempted since the fall into sin (Genesis 3:1-11): they try to hide from God. Fear deepens their desperation—and they call to the mountains and rocks, "Fall on us and hide us . . . !"

Hiding from God keeps God unknown. Thankfully, hills do not respond to people's cries.

But God does! God knows what to do with our fear over coming close to him. He welcomes us with all of our fears and surprises us with an embrace like a parent welcoming a long-lost child back home (see Luke 15:11-24).

O God, we have often kept you at arm's length. We have tried to hide from you. Please remove our fear and welcome us home, we pray. Amen.

PONDER GOD'S GIFT

"Do not harm the land or the sea or the trees until we put a seal on the foreheads of the servants of our God."

—Revelation 7:3

In our reading today we see another scene unfolding from the opening of the sixth seal. In the previous scene we saw everyone reeling as the foundations of the earth tore apart and people had nowhere to hide. And now we see God's mighty angels holding back the four winds so that God's servants can receive his seal of protection. All who have faith in God and the saving power of the Lamb (Jesus) will be spared from the oncoming destruction.

Which group do you identify with? Are you in the company of God's servants, people who live by faith? Or do you keep trying to run and hide away from God?

The tearing open of creation leaves no uncertainty. When God says the time has come, there will no longer be anywhere to hide. At this point we

need to ponder God's gift of grace. Because of Jesus, we can receive "the seal of the living God," for he has conquered death and says, "I give them eternal life . . . no one will snatch them out of my hand" (John 10:28).

God's seal on us is God's way of saying, "I am your God; you are my people. I love and care for you more than you will ever understand. I am not here to let destruction come upon you but to give life to all who put their trust in me." (See John 3:16.)

The gift of God's seal is yours to embrace—a call and commitment to stand with all who identify as servants of the living God.

Lord and Savior, your grace and goodness are wide and deep. Thank you for your love and your protective care. Amen.

12 X 12,000 STRONG

Then I heard the number of those who were sealed: 144,000 from all the tribes of Israel.
—Revelation 7:4

The visions in Revelation are filled with symbolism, so we should not read the number 144,000 literally. If that were the total of all whom “God so loved . . . that he gave his one and only Son” (John 3:16), it would be too few. John also soon sees “a great multitude that no one could count” (Rev. 7:9)—and that, of course, is far more than 144,000 people.

There is poetic beauty in the numbering of 144,000 servants of God here. The use of 12’s and 1,000’s is symbolic of completion and fullness in God’s kingdom.

In this scene God builds on three fundamental givens for all who put their faith in him. As believers in Jesus Christ, we are indebted to the story told and lived by the 12 tribes of Israel. Their story (in the Old Testament part of the Bible) is foundational to our faith in

Jesus. We also stand on the story lived and told by the 12 apostles of Christ (in the New Testament part of the Bible). We also know that $12 \times 12 = 144$. Then this is multiplied by the most common unit of numbering large quantities in John’s day, 1,000, to invite readers to imagine the vast impact that God is creating by shaping us as his servants. This is a picture of God’s grace flowing wider and deeper than we can fathom.

Since this is who we are and how many we are, imagine how God can use us to share his good news and love with the world!

Thank you, Lord, for giving us a place with your covenant people. And thank you for expanding your story beyond our expectations. In Jesus, Amen.

LEAVING FOR GOOD

"It is for your good that I am going away."

—John 16:7

Our Bible reading today takes us away from the Revelation story. Today is Ascension Day, 40 days after Easter, and on this day Jesus concluded his public ministry to return to his Father in heaven.

We might be tempted to read this moment in Jesus' ministry as a big loss. We might wonder if the good news of Easter, when Christ rose in victory over death, might not have been better served if Jesus had stayed here on the earth.

We are not the first to be puzzled about this, or to question the wisdom of Jesus' leaving. As Jesus himself remarked, his first disciples were "filled with grief" about the idea of his going away.

We can be thankful, though, that Jesus explained the reason for his leaving to go back to heaven. He said, "It is for your good that I am going away." And he went

on to say, "Unless I go away, the Advocate [the Holy Spirit] will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you."

Then, ten days after his ascension into heaven, Jesus poured out the promised Holy Spirit on his followers. That took place during the festival of Pentecost, when people from many nations were gathered in Jerusalem (Acts 2). And still today, through the Spirit's presence—that is, the presence of God living within each believer—the people of God are empowered to receive the gifts of God and to take the good news to every nation.

Until you come again, Lord Jesus, thank you for your ongoing ministry from the throne in heaven. Empower us by your Holy Spirit, we pray. Amen.

EVERY NATION

I looked, and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language. . . .

—Revelation 7:9

Picture this scene—a great multitude of people wearing white and holding palm branches and singing before the throne of God with all the angels and elders and other living creatures in heaven. They all sing great praise to God and bow down to worship him.

The sheer size of this choir is amazing. There are so many people in this multitude that “no one could count” them. It would be like trying to count the stars in the night sky or the grains of sand on a seashore (see Genesis 22:17). God’s gift of salvation is indeed given to a great multitude.

Even more amazing than the size of the choir is the composition of the crowd that the Lord has gathered. This gigantic crowd is made up “from every nation, tribe, people and language.” It is amazing how

God’s gift of salvation creates a bond of unity that reaches to the ends of the earth and breaks down the walls and divisions that we set up in our societies and cultures around the world.

This is a powerful picture of what God’s salvation looks like in the lives of real people. It is more than a picture of the unity God will create in the new heaven and earth. This is a call for the church today as well—to be faithful in welcoming God’s servants “from every nation, tribe, people and language.” God’s amazing grace brings us together from every people and nation.

Open our hearts, Lord Jesus, to the truth that your salvation breaks down the walls that divide us. Amen.

WHO ARE THEY?

"These are they who have come out of the great tribulation. . . ."
—Revelation 7:14

Perhaps John, the narrator of this story, had a blank and puzzled look on his face when he was asked: "These in white robes—who are they, and where did they come from?" It is easy to get lost in a crowd, especially "a great multitude that no one could count" (Revelation 7:9). No wonder John responded by saying, "Sir, you know."

The Spirit of God, who gave John this revelation, wants us to know who these people are. We do not know them all, but we know some of them very well. They are believers in Christ who have died and have gone before us to be in heaven with God. For example, I know the 33-year-old mother of two young children. It is good to see her standing. For the last five years of her life, she was confined to a wheelchair because of multiple sclerosis (MS). She is my oldest sister. I also know

the 17-year-old young man with a beaming smile. He was part of our family until he was suddenly taken away in a construction accident.

My uncle once walked me through the cemetery where my grandparents are buried. At times he stopped to read the names on some of the other headstones there. He had known these people. He had been their pastoral elder.

We grieve the deaths of our loved ones. We miss them. To comfort us, God gives us this picture of a multitude before his throne. And they are not lost in the crowd. God knows and cares for each one, and he continues to be their shepherd.

Lord and Savior, comfort all who grieve the deaths of loved ones today.
Amen.

SILENCE

When he opened the seventh seal, there was silence in heaven for about half an hour.
—Revelation 8:1

With the opening of the seventh seal we might have expected the story to come to a speedy conclusion. But we do not meet a cosmic display of God's almighty forces. Instead, we are surrounded by heaven's silence for an extended time—so that we can receive an important message.

In our fast-paced lives there are very few places where we experience silence. Not only that, but we generally don't like to have times of prolonged silence. We'll do anything—listen to a radio, watch TV, send text messages, read or listen to a book, play games or sports, work, do hobbies, and more—to avoid staying in silence for very long.

Silence gives us space, however, for God to speak to our hearts. It is God who speaks in Psalm 46, saying, "Be still, and know that I am God." With the opening of the seventh seal,

the story line in Revelation moves toward darkness and devastation, destruction from powers that are allowed to test and challenge people on the earth. As those who live by faith in Jesus, however, we need heaven's silence—the stillness in which God can make himself known to us—to face any challenges to our faith.

You may be facing challenges today. The prolonged silence in today's Bible reading promises to be God's way of assuring us that we are not alone. God is with us as "our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in trouble."

Slow me down, Lord. I need to stop the noise and distractions so that you can reassure me of your presence, strength, and care. Protect me, in Jesus' name. Amen.

PRAYING

The smoke of the incense, together with the prayers of God's people, went up before God. . . .
—Revelation 8:4

In our reading today, another thought-provoking scene unfolds. Yesterday we reflected on a half-hour of silence that took place when Jesus opened the seventh seal (Revelation 8:1-2). And now an angel offers incense to go with “the prayers of all God’s people” being lifted up to the Lord.

Prayers are a fitting response to the command “Be still, and know that I am God” (Psalm 46:10). Our prayers are expressions of faith in God’s promise to be “our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in trouble” (Psalm 46:1).

The picture here invites us to see that God always hears our prayers. “The prayers of all God’s people” include the prayers of children, of people just learning to pray, and of believers who have prayed for many years.

My friend Hank may have thought his prayers had no

effect. He prayed that his coworker would come to believe in Jesus. But his coworker did not change, and after a while the two moved on to different jobs. When they met again years later, however, Hank was delighted to find that his former coworker had become a follower of Jesus. Hank asked, “What happened to make the change?” His friend said, “I listened to the prayers you gave when you invited me over for dinner in your home. You had a closeness to God that stirred my soul.”

Though the timing may not be what we expect, God always answers our prayers!

Thank you, Lord, for listening to all our prayers. Help us to trust in you as our ever-present help—always! Amen.

UNDER A DARK CLOUD

The sun and sky were darkened by the smoke from the Abyss.
—Revelation 9:2

In the ongoing story of the opening of the seventh seal, we read of trumpets sounding and of great destruction and darkness coming on the earth (Revelation 8:6-13). Today, as we read about the sounding of a fifth trumpet, we see the opening of the Abyss, a great bottomless pit that belches smoke like a gigantic furnace.

The Abyss is a detestable place, and perhaps it is best left locked. This is the Bible's way of describing the hiding place of evil powers and forces that threaten to undo the goodness of God's creation. Here Revelation pictures the Abyss opened and its occupants brought out so that their identity can be exposed.

Light has a way of exposing what otherwise would remain hidden. I'm reminded, for example, of what I see most mornings when I walk into my henhouse. The air in the

chicken coop looks clear until a beam of sunlight shines through a window. Then suddenly every dust particle in the air becomes visible.

When the Abyss opens, a thick cloud rises—darkening the world like smoke from a vast, raging fire. In our everyday lives, something similar happens when dark secrets of corruption and abuse are exposed. What was hidden comes out in the open, and it can feel like a dark cloud has come over us. There are times when we wish the Abyss had remained closed. We don't like it when dark sins are exposed, but we need to be prepared. With God's help, we need to look evil in the eye, name it, and work against its power to destroy.

Lord, shine your light into our darkness and set us free, we pray. Amen.

DESTROYER

The locusts looked like horses prepared for battle. . . .

—Revelation 9:7

It can be tempting to skip over this section in Revelation. Its message is troublesome. The swarm of locusts rising up from the Abyss, grotesque in appearance and ruthlessly determined to torment as many people as they can, are creatures we would rather avoid.

I think this fifth-trumpet scene applies the same technique Jesus used in parts of his Sermon on the Mount. This is hyperbole—the use of exaggerated pictures that are not meant to be taken literally. Consider, for example, what Jesus says in Matthew 5:29-30 (NRSV): “If your right eye causes you to sin, gouge it out. . . . If your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off. . . .” One of my church-education students responded to this passage by saying, “Wow! Jesus asks a lot.”

She understood. She knew that Jesus was not saying we should

literally harm ourselves, but she could see that he *does* call us to resist sin. The fifth-trumpet story says a lot about evil and the terrible pain it brings into people’s lives, and we need to resist it. With God’s protection we can do that, but we must see evil for what it is. What the Bible calls sin and evil is what we might define as “doing what I want, when I want.”

Sin may look and taste like candy. But God wants us to see sin’s real cavity-creating rot. Perhaps this truth is best brought home in the name of the driver-king who comes out of the Abyss. His name is Destroyer.

Who is your king?

Lord, deliver us each day from the evil one, the Destroyer. In Jesus’ name, Amen.

REPENT

The rest of mankind . . . still did not repent. . . .

—Revelation 9:20

God's great story has a single purpose: to grow faith in the truth that he teaches so that people can have full life with him. It is not enough that we listen to the story or that we even know the story well. We need God to change and shape us through its teaching.

The Bible calls this change *repentance*. The need for us to repent is so essential that we hear it again in our reading for today.

This story helps us to consider how hard it is to repent and how costly it is to refuse the call to repentance. As difficult as it is to listen to the events unfold after each of the trumpet calls in the Revelation story, there is this sad and puzzling recognition that “the rest of mankind . . . still did not repent.”

Sin is addictive and deceiving. We desperately want to hold

on to our “idols of gold, silver, bronze, stone, and wood”—that is, all kinds of things that distract us from paying attention to God and that we think will make us great or give us happiness. We hold on to these lifeless things rather than letting go to receive life from God.

What will you do as Jesus calls for repentance? He invites each of us to respond in faith to his promise when he says, “Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest” (Matthew 11:28).

Father in heaven, help us to turn around and to put our trust in you instead of in other things that cannot give us real life and happiness. Amen.

TAKE AND EAT

"Go, take the scroll that lies open in the hand of the angel. . . ."
He said to me, "Take it and eat it. . . ." —Revelation 10:8-9

Here we see a gigantic angel who can straddle both the land and sea. He comes with a message: "No more delay!" And he has "a little scroll" that is "open in his hand." What do these pictures mean?

Some thoughtful scholars of the Bible can help us here. First, it's important to know that the Greek word for "angel" (*angelos*) in the original text also means "messenger." God's mighty angels can do many things, but one of their main jobs is to be God's messengers to us. They come with important announcements, and these are often about the "good news" (*euangelion*) of God's salvation for us. This good news is also called the "gospel" (from an old English word meaning "good news").

This helps us understand what "the little scroll" is that lies open in the angel's hand. It is the gos-

pel, the good-news message that is open for all to see and hear and live by. John, the narrator, is invited to take this message and preach it to the nations, without delay. It may seem like a small message. But like the mighty angel, it is sent with the power of God, so it can go anywhere, crossing the land and sea to the ends of the earth.

John is also told to "take it and eat it." Why? God's good news is food for the soul, and it tastes sweet. Sadly, though, it can also bring a feeling of bitterness. The message is bittersweet because when it is shared, some people refuse to listen and believe (see Ezekiel 3:1-15).

Lord God, may your good news nourish us deep within our souls. And help us to share it, even though some refuse to believe. Amen.

SWEET AND SOUR

I took the little scroll . . . and ate it. It tasted as sweet as honey in my mouth, but when I had eaten it, my stomach turned sour.

—Revelation 10:10

Let's reflect some more today on what it can mean to say that the good-news message of salvation (represented by the little scroll) is sweet and sour.

When John, the narrator of this story, asked the angel to give him the little scroll, he was told, "Take it and eat it. It will turn your stomach sour, but 'in your mouth it will be as sweet as honey.'"

We like the "sweet as honey" part, but we don't like the idea of a sour stomach. Couldn't the good news of God just linger in our mouths and not sink down deep inside?

When I think about this, I am reminded of my friend Nuygen who, as an adult, came to know Jesus as his Lord and Savior. Nuygen took in the good news and savored it. He read God's Word, the Bible, and he studied it and loved it.

Then one day he reflected on Jesus' teaching that says, "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you" (Matthew 5:44). Nuygen had grown up in Vietnam in the 1970s, and his body still carried scars inflicted by ruthless enemies. Now the good-news message, which had tasted so sweet, turned sour in his stomach. Nuygen's memories of those scars gave him deep pain and bitterness and anger. But, in Christ, his faith grew stronger as his anger turned to forgiveness.

Faith in Jesus requires letting God's Word sink deep down inside us to change us, wherever we may need to be changed—and healed.

Spirit of God, sink your Word deep inside me to make changes where I need them. Amen.

GAME CHANGER

"We hear them declaring the wonders of God in our own tongues!"
—Acts 2:11

Today marks a "game changer" moment created by the coming of the Holy Spirit. On the day of Pentecost, 50 days after the celebration of the Passover in Jerusalem, the Spirit of God came to empower the church, just as Jesus had promised ten days earlier when he ascended into heaven (see May 13). People from many nations had come to celebrate the feast of Pentecost, so the timing was perfect for spreading the good news of God's salvation through Jesus, the Savior.

And how did the Spirit do that? The Spirit gave Jesus' disciples the ability to speak in other languages so that everyone could hear the good news of salvation. Out on the streets of the city people from all the surrounding nations heard about the wonders of God in their own tongues.

These disciples had not taken any language classes. The Spirit enabled them to speak in languages they had never learned. The crowds had come to Jerusalem expecting to hear the wonders of God spoken in the official language of the temple courts—even though they might not understand all that was said. But with the coming of the Holy Spirit, that changed. People could understand every word as they heard the good news about Jesus and God's salvation!

Whatever nation you are from and no matter who you are, God speaks your language. He welcomes people from every nation to hear and understand his good news, and he gathers us together from every nation.

Thank you, Holy Spirit,
for coming and speaking
our language. Amen.

GO AND MEASURE

I was given a reed like a measuring rod and was told, "Go and measure the temple of God and the altar, with its worshipers."

—Revelation 11:1

Here the apostle John is told to measure the temple of God and to count the worshipers. Perhaps the point of this exercise had to do with how many people could come into the temple courts to worship. Would the old temple in Jerusalem be big enough so that the people of God from all nations could worship there?

This got me thinking about the church buildings in the little village where I live. If I were to measure those buildings and count the worshipers who attended there, what would the report look like? I could probably point out the fine architecture and beautiful stained-glass windows, as well as the comfortable dimensions of the buildings. But if I counted the worshipers lately, both congregations would have the same number attending services: zero. That's because the

churches in our area stopped gathering for worship recently to help prevent the spread of COVID-19.

But God's church is not really about buildings, is it? What counts is not the size of our church buildings or how many worshipers gather there. What matters to God is that we are faithful witnesses where he plants us.

A child in one of my former congregations once said some wise words to her neighbor who struggled with addiction. She said, "Jane, you need Jesus." Her small voice was a faithful witness that God used to shine his life-giving light into Jane's darkness.

Lord, thank you for letting us be your witnesses wherever we are. Help us to be faithful. Amen.

GOD'S WITNESSES

"I will appoint my two witnesses and they will prophesy for 1,260 days, clothed in sackcloth."
—Revelation 11:3

The "two witnesses" in this story represent the place and the purpose God gives to his church and, by association, to every person who has faith in Jesus. The church is a witnessing community—this is who we are and what we do. We witness to each other and to our communities how life is to be lived "in step with the Holy Spirit" (Galatians 5:25)—"to act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly" with God (Micah 6:8). We do this because Jesus said, "You are the salt of the earth. . . . You are the light of the world" (Matthew 5:13-14). We are *his* witnesses.

We need to let this identity define us. There is a persistent notion limiting God's claim on who we are. We have learned to look to preachers, missionaries, chaplains, and evangelists as full-time kingdom witnesses. But God makes no such distinc-

tions. *All* who come to Jesus in faith are recipients of the Holy Spirit, who sends us into the world as witnesses (Matthew 28:19-20). Roofers, students, nurses, teachers, miners, chefs, volunteers—*all* people—are sent to share the good news of life made new in, through, and for Jesus.

The "two witnesses" are not dressed in the latest designer clothing. God dresses us in sackcloth. This is a subtle but firm reminder that we need to drink from the same well of repentance and forgiveness as everyone else does. We witness in humility, not self-righteousness or pride.

Thank you, Jesus, for the honor of being your witnesses. Please keep us humble, we pray. Amen.

HEADS UP, LISTEN!

"The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Messiah."
—Revelation 11:15

When our children were young, I sometimes used a "heads-up" call as I read a story to them. "Now listen carefully to what comes next," I would say. I did this because some parts of a story are key to understanding the whole.

As we read the story of the seventh trumpet call, we need to pay close attention and listen carefully. This part of God's story is key to understanding who we are and what we are called to do in this world. As God's witnesses, we need to know that God's kingdom is advancing right now, even though it may seem at times that the world is thoroughly corrupt and controlled by the forces of evil.

This part of God's story is shouted by "loud voices in heaven" and reinforced by the twenty-four elders seated around God's throne. Listen

carefully to what heaven announces: "The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Messiah, and he will reign for ever and ever."

We need to listen carefully because heaven's reason for rejoicing is often missed. In our everyday lives, we tend to think that God's kingdom will come someday and that Jesus, the Messiah, will then "reign forever and ever."

But the announcement is not in the future tense. The seventh trumpet call announces that God's kingdom claims the kingdom of this world *now*. And this present reality changes everything for all who live by faith in Jesus.

Jesus, please give us ears to hear that you are King, now and forever! Amen.

THE LORD GOD REIGNS!

"We give thanks to you, Lord God Almighty, the One who is and who was, because you have taken your great power and have begun to reign."
—Revelation 11:17

This vision of John in Revelation gives us one of the most important announcements that make up the good-news message of our salvation. It tells us not only that Jesus, the Savior of the world, "will reign forever and ever" but also that he is already reigning as the King of kings now!

This important message empowers us to be God's faithful witnesses wherever we are. With this news we can assure others that, in Christ, their lives can be made new and that eternal life isn't just something in the future—it begins now (John 3:36; 5:24; 10:28).

If you are familiar with the music of Handel's *Messiah*, you might recognize that some of these words in Revelation are part of a rousing section known as the "Hallelujah Chorus." When he composed

the "Hallelujah Chorus"—based on the seventh trumpet announcement: "The kingdom of this world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he shall reign for ever and ever"—George Handel said he wept in wonder and awe. "It was as though I saw heaven open and I stood before the very throne of God," he said.

This passage invites us to that powerful place of being in the presence of God and knowing that he makes our new life possible right now. The Lord God Almighty has come in his "great power" to begin his reign of hope and healing!

Lord, thank you for coming in power and grace to heal our brokenness and to give us new life. Amen.

SEEING AND WELCOMING

They did not receive the things promised; they only saw them and welcomed them from a distance. —Hebrews 11:13

Hebrews 11 gives us a glance in the Bible's rearview mirror. The faithful witnesses mentioned in this chapter lived long ago, even before Jesus came. And they had this in common: they all lived by faith in God's promises. And before they died and were taken to live with the Lord, "They did not receive the things promised; they only saw them and welcomed them from a distance."

"Seeing from a distance" is how we can describe the sights, sounds, and scenes in the book of Revelation. Revelation 11 closes with a scene in which all heaven rejoices and gives thanks to God because "the kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Messiah." It is a powerful picture of God reigning on earth as in heaven. And the promise is that "he will reign for ever and ever." Hallelujah!

With eyes of faith, we can see this "from a distance." Close-up in the world around us, though, we often see terrible things such as cancer, COVID-19, poverty, racism, violence, addiction, and death. And there are times when these appalling things make us weep. At such times, faith is the Holy Spirit's muscle that enables us to see "from a distance."

Faith also welcomes the future of God's full kingdom today. Faith has this power because it is "confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see."

"Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done"—here today—"on earth as it is in heaven." Amen.

EYES ON JESUS

Let us run with perseverance . . . fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. . . . —Hebrews 12:1-2

Yesterday we saw that Hebrews 11 encourages us to learn from people in the past who lived by faith. Hebrews 12 reminds us to keep going with perseverance, “fixing our eyes on Jesus” as we live by faith wherever God has placed us in this world.

Jesus is the pioneer of faith. We celebrate this truth whenever we sing, “Amazing grace—how sweet the sound—that saved a wretch like me. I once was lost, but now am found, was blind, but now I see. . . .” Jesus, the good shepherd, came to seek and save all who are lost in sin and darkness. And when he finds us, he restores us, gives us new life, and takes us to live with him (see Luke 15; 19:1-10). Jesus can do all this because he made salvation possible. He paid the price for all our sins by giving up his own life. He took our place and died for

our sake. Then he rose again in victory over death—and he shares his abundant, eternal life with all who believe in him as the Lord and Savior.

Jesus is also the perfecter of faith. He lived perfectly by faith for our sake—never failing or falling away. In obedience to God and complete trust in God’s salvation plan, Jesus “endured the cross, scorning its shame” for our sake, remaining faithful for his Father’s glory. Jesus “endured such opposition” so that we “will not grow weary and lose heart.”

Let us keep our focus on him, for he is with us always (Matthew 28:20).

Thank you, Jesus, for being “the pioneer and perfecter of faith.” Help us to focus always on following you. Amen.

WHEN DID WE SEE YOU?

The King will reply, "Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me."

—Matthew 25:40

Yesterday we reflected on staying focused on Jesus so that we "will not grow weary and lose heart" (Hebrews 12:1-3). In today's reading we learn that we need to "see" Jesus in other people in order to live faithfully.

We must learn to see Jesus where we least expect to find him. Jesus explains it this way in his parable: "I was hungry and you gave me something to eat . . . I was a stranger and you invited me in . . . I was in prison and you came to visit me."

Notice that Jesus does not say, "There was a stranger who came to your community. . . ." Jesus says, "*I* was a stranger and you invited *me* in."

Jesus also anticipates some confusion that people could have while hearing this story. So he has the people in the story ask, "Lord, when did we see you hungry . . . or thirsty

. . . [or] a stranger . . . [or] sick or in prison . . . ?" And he says, "Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me."

Jesus identifies with people who are disadvantaged and marginalized. The Lord cares for all people in need, and so should we. And we should not be involved in oppressing or discriminating against anyone. Faith helps us to see Jesus in people who are hungry, sick, imprisoned, strangers in our midst, and more—and he calls us to provide the love and support they need.

Jesus, thank you for showing us how much you care for people we easily overlook. Help us to share your love and care faithfully. Amen.

HOW THE STORY ENDS

I saw "a new heaven and a new earth," for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away. . . . —Revelation 21:1

There is one more scene we should see in Revelation before we close our reflections for the month of May. We need to see how God's great story in Revelation ends. Revelation 21 blesses us with the sights and sounds of "a new heaven and a new earth."

Before reading a book, my father liked to know how the story ended. He had little time for reading, so before reading the first chapter, he turned to the last chapter. If the ending caught his interest, he figured the book was a good read.

When we reflect on the Word of God, we need to turn to the final chapters in Revelation again and again. Faith needs to know how the story ends. Faith needs to be assured of the ending, especially when it can be hard to see God.

Perhaps you are in such a place today. In a real way, we all are in this place. In fact, the whole creation is crying out as it waits for its full redemption (Romans 8:18-22). We hunger and thirst for justice. We long for the day when God's holy name will be fully honored. We pray for the day when there will be no more pain, and when people of every nation and language will hold each other up with love and dignity. We look forward to the day when sin is gone for good and the creation is cared for as the beautiful garden of God's delight.

Shall we live and work faithfully toward that day, for Jesus' sake?

Come, Lord Jesus; come quickly to make all things new. Amen.



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