

We Receive the Word of God

Revelation 6:12-17

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?'

The Witness

Love Came Down in Bethlehem

Rev. Robin Wells

On a recent trip to San Diego to visit my mom, we went to a store called City Lights. This store in my hometown is not the same as the City Lights Bookstore you might know as the home of beatnik poetry in San Francisco. In fact, some may say that City Lights in San Diego lacks the depth of intellectualism that you would find at City Lights in San Francisco.

This City Lights store in a city by the bay several hundred miles south of here is a store that is dedicated to selling Christmas ornaments year-round. In the middle of summer you can purchase strings of lights from City Lights to decorate and illuminate your surroundings at anytime of the year. This store, of course, carries the obligatory Christmas ornaments that are emblematic of a San Diego Christmas. There are the Santa Claus-as-surfer ornaments as well as the ornaments that represent ocean life. There are ornaments made of seashell, starfish and sand dollar, as well as ornaments made of plastic, foam, and ribbon, made to resemble dolphins, sharks, jellyfish and other sea life.

There is a section of the store for handblown glass ornaments and there are many artificial evergreen trees throughout the place that are dressed from top to bottom in thematic ornamentation. There are two sections to this store and if you go deeper into it, you will find a dark room dedicated to Halloween decoration too. But just outside the Halloween room, that is where you can find all sorts of objects that relate to the storytelling of the nativity and of Easter. There are various figurines of the Holy Family in different sizes, shapes and materials. There are more obscure figurines to add to any Bethlehem scene, like a village boy or a maiden carrying a basket of fruit.

When I am there, I typically spend some time in this section of the store marveling over the various ways the birth of our Savior is told through these collectable objects. At some point in our excursion, my mom will mention to a staff person that I am a pastor, which then invites conversation about any number of things. When I was visiting in August, and my mom and I were the only two shoppers in the store, the staff was working on their inventory and upon finding out that I was a pastor, one of the clerks said to me: "For this Christmas, we are seeing lots of inventory for lion and lamb figurines." She then added: "I'm Catholic, so I don't know what that's all about." (To be quite honest, I think most people wouldn't know what that's about.)

So, I took a moment to briefly explain why the symbolism of the lion and lamb together represents peace. The prophet Isaiah speaks of the peace that will reign with the advent of a messiah that is to come. In the peaceable kingdom that the prophet could foresee, ravenous beasts such as wolves, lions, leopards, and snakes, would no longer seek to destroy meeker animals for food.

Isaiah 11: 6-9 reads:

The wolf will live with the lamb,
and the leopard will lie down with the young goat;
the calf and the young lion will feed together,
and a little child will lead them.

The cow and the bear will graze.
Their young will lie down together,
and a lion will eat straw like an ox.

A nursing child will play over the snake's hole;
toddlers will reach right over the serpent's den.

They won't harm or destroy anywhere on my holy mountain.

The earth will surely be filled with the knowledge of the LORD,
just as the water covers the sea.

In God's peaceable kingdom, all of creation will know God. That is the future hope in a world very much in need of peace. We await a time when all of creation points to the God who made it, and the sign we have in Advent is the Bethlehem star that points to Jesus, the Prince of Peace.

In our Christmas narrative the birth of Jesus is announced as the "arrival of peace." In the Greek, the word used for peace is Eirene, which is also

the name of the goddess of peace in the pantheon of Greek mythology. The sisters of Eirene are Eunomia and Dike which represent good order and justice. Whereas Greek mythology parses peace into related components, the Hebrew word for peace, shalom, points us to a wholeness and harmony in all things.



In our scripture reading today, we have the imagery of the Revelation of John of Patmos who was imprisoned and in exile on the island Patmos. This last book of the Bible is apocalyptic and the main purpose of this type of literature in the Bible is not what popular culture might have us think. The purpose of the apocalyptic genre in the Bible is not to glorify death, destruction, and mayhem. In fact, it is meant to do the opposite. Apocalyptic literature in the Bible points to the power of God to triumph over evil powers in the world. The purpose of these kinds of writings is to proclaim hope in the midst of pain and suffering. And, what we receive in the gift of Jesus Christ is the power of love.

There is a lot going on in this text before us today. All of these environmental factors are going on in this scene and not a single human being can stand up to these events piled on top of each other. It doesn't matter how much money or land you have. It doesn't matter if you can command armies to go into battle. It doesn't matter if you are slave or free. We are all vulnerable to elements in this world that make us want to go run and hide and that is a profound truth in this text.

This also points to the heart of peace which is not just calm, quiet, comfort or consolation. The true peace of Jesus Christ comes after the world is shaken up a bit and people become united in the refuge they seek together. Our text has us in hiding "from the one seated on the throne and from the wrath of the Lamb."

Now let's think about that for a moment: Exactly who is the one seated on the throne who is also the lamb in this vision? It's Jesus. And what exactly is the wrath of the lamb? It's love!

It's all about love!

Our peace is powered by love. The peace we know in Jesus Christ is a peace that is not merely the absence of conflict, war, anxiety, trouble, or discord. Our peace in the reign of Jesus Christ is not just a personal feeling of serenity. Peace is in the wrath of the lamb which is the power of love. In this season, we are mindful of Jesus leaving his throne in heaven to sleep in a manger because of His great love for you and me and all of creation.

When Love came down in Bethlehem, it was only the beginning of the stars of the sky falling to earth, plopping like over-ripe figs to the ground in winter. Life is a complex mess, but Jesus is our polestar in redeeming what we have been given in every time and every place.

When we sing our "Silent Night" on Christmas Eve, we cannot be lulled into thinking that peace is the absence of action. The third verse of our beloved song calls Jesus, "Love's pure light." There is power in the love of Jesus. "Radiant beams from thy Holy face with the dawn of redeeming Grace," are what make Jesus Lord at his birth. It is the power of his love that makes for our peace. The love of Jesus is more powerful than fame, more powerful than control, more powerful than money or any kind of riches. Love is what empowers our peace and Jesus is the embodiment of both love and peace.

The wrath of the lamb is the wrath of love. While love is not easily angered and keeps no record of wrongs, it does rejoice in the truth. And the truth of the matter is that we do not live in a just world. We live in a time in which people go hungry, children are routinely separated from their families, and working people cannot afford adequate shelter. As Christians, we cannot be at peace with this sorry state of affairs. Our peace cannot be separated from the love of justice. The shalom that Christ promises is the completeness, wholeness, and restoration of what has become broken. When you hear those familiar lyrics of “sleep in heavenly peace,” I hope your heart awakens to the earthly shalom that the prophets envision. I hope that along with the Christ child in the manger your mind’s eye catches a glimpse of a lion and lamb together, sharing space, doing no harm, reconciled to God and to each other.

In your journey this week, you may encounter city lights or shining stars that point you to head toward Bethlehem and the one who is the embodiment of love and peace.

May God grant you peace beyond mere serenity. I pray you experience and express the deep peace of Jesus Christ who in the depth of his love for you is both the Lion of Judah and Lamb of God.

Amen.