



### *C. Wess Daniels*

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*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 the 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, emerges 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 the 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 both our anxieties about the future: what is left unknown and what we think we have all figured out. Grow our faith, and open us up to the apocalyptic imagination of John’s Revelation.*

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*BIBLE READING: Revelation 2—3*

“To the angel of the church in Smyrna” (2:8) [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. 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, or “suspicion of others” that are being 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 of 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.*

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*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” (5:6 NRSV).

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 affects 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 was seen as a troublemaker by those in power but was “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 effort to retaliate and create scapegoats to sidestep our corruption. Parker Palmer says, “Nonviolence is a commitment to act in every situation in ways that honor the soul” (*A Hidden Wholeness*).

*SONG: Blood of the Lamb (Woodie Guthrie)*

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

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*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 of the empire and the religion of the Lamb. The songs of empire are like the Siren’s song from *Odyssey*—it may sound beautiful, but when we turn our hearts toward it, 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 singing 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 the empire. It is sung by children and 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 Seeger)*

*PRAYER SUGGESTION: May those who sing this song be like Odysseus’s crew who put beeswax in their ears so they were 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.*

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*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 NRSV).

Every religious movement has its own liturgy, whether it is the high liturgy of the Episcopal Church or 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 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?*

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

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*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 participate in human slavery and would work to undo exploitative systems.

*SONG: Oh Freedom (Shirley Verrett)*

*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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*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 adorned for her husband” (NRSV).

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 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 bigger story than their individual histories because it is God’s story. This is where 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.” In 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 worshiping 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: The 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” (22:17 NRSV).*

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