

Second Week of Advent: Dec 7 – Dec 13

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Sunday, December 7: The Message to Sardis

Lectio Divina

Read the passage four times. Allow for contemplative silence in between the readings. Let your mind fall silent, then, in faith, rest in the Mystery of God without looking at, listening to, or talking to your thoughts.

Rev 3:1-6

“To the angel of the church in Sardis, write this: “The one who has the seven spirits of God and the seven stars says this: “I know your works, that you have the reputation of being alive, but you are dead. Be watchful and strengthen what is left, which is going to die, for I have not found your works complete in the sight of my God. Remember then how you accepted and heard; keep it, and repent. If you are not watchful, I will come like a thief, and you will never know at what hour I will come upon you. However, you have a few people in Sardis who have not soiled their garments; they will walk with me dressed in white, because they are worthy. ““The victor will thus be dressed in white, and I will never erase his name from the book of life but will acknowledge his name in the presence of my Father and of his angels. ““Whoever has ears ought to hear what the Spirit says to the churches.””

Reflection

The Risen Jesus declares to the church in Sardis: “I know your works, that you have the reputation of being alive, but you are dead.” The Christians here are numb. They are asleep to the evils of empire and their own collusion with these evils. Jesus has to wake them up! “The majority of the church at Sardis is so comatose that it is near death, and in true apocalyptic form John urges the church to wake up and rise from the dead. Since a minority is said to have not soiled its clothing (3:4), we should understand this state of

slumber not as apathy, but as actively getting soiled through certain 'works' (3:2) while clinging to a good reputation (3:1) and assuming nothing is wrong. Thus the main problem is not indifference but presumption, and the need of those at Sardis is to identify and end the inappropriate activity" (Gorman, Michael, Reading Revelation Responsibly).

What are these Christians numb to? Why is this such a big deal? Michael Gorman tells us that Revelation sharply critiques the way things are, the status quo that we all just acquiesce to. But this is dangerous because the status quo promotes the idolatry leading to injustice. This idolatry has to do with a false sacred aura around the emperor and the empire itself. Gorman invites us "to see Revelation as a critique of secular power wherever and however it expresses itself oppressively, and especially as a critique of such power that is deemed sacred and granted devotion and allegiance...Revelation is a sustained stripping of the sacred from secular power—military, political, economic—and a parallel sustained recognition of God and the Lamb as the rightful bearers of sacred claims" (Gorman, Michael J. Reading Revelation Responsibly).

Thus, to counter this imperial idolatry, the Christians of Sardis and all Christians everywhere must return to God. How? Jesus gives us a clue when he tells the church of Sardis to be watchful or be awake (Rev. 3:2). This is a call to naked presence, which is a spiritual practice of intense depth and simplicity. It means that one is here and now, in this moment, without attaching to any thoughts. One sees what is going on inside the mind and chooses to let it all be and remain rooted in a state of mind that is silent. Don Joseph Goewey assures us: "you don't have to do anything; it's enough for you to simply be watchful and awake...by simply being aware, all that is false and neurotic within you will drop and your eyes will open to the divinity surrounding you. You will suddenly see that all is well; that you are already happy, right now, and always have been; that you are already at peace right now, and always were, but you just did not know it." Presence is effortless and enjoyable and quickly disintegrates illusion as fire consumes paper. Presence, which is our access (prayer) to Absolute Presence and Reality (God), dissolves fear and connects us to Divine Love.

Jesuit and spiritual master Anthony De Mello relates the following: 'Somebody once asked, "What is enlightenment like? What is awakening like?" It's like the tramp in London who was settling in for the night. He'd hardly been able to get a crust of bread to eat. Then he reaches this embankment on the river Thames. There was a slight drizzle, so he huddled in his old tattered cloak. He was about to go to sleep when suddenly a chauffeur-driven Rolls-Royce pulls up. Out of the car steps a beautiful young lady who says to him, "My poor man, are you planning on spending the night here on this embankment?" And the tramp says, "Yes." She says, "I won't have it. You're coming to my house and you're going to spend

a comfortable night and you're going to get a good dinner." She insists on his getting into the car. Well, they ride out of London and get to a place where she has a sprawling mansion with large grounds. They are ushered in by the butler, to whom she says, "James, please make sure he's put in the servants' quarters and treated well." Which is what James does. The young lady had undressed and was about to go to bed when she suddenly remembers her guest for the night. So she slips something on and pads along the corridor to the servants' quarters. She sees a little chink of light from the room where the tramp was put up. She taps lightly at the door, opens it, and finds the man awake. She says, "What's the trouble, my good man, didn't you get a good meal?" He said, "Never had a better meal in my life, lady." "Are you warm enough?" He says, "Yes, lovely warm bed." Then she says, "Maybe you need a little company. Why don't you move over a bit." And she comes closer to him and he moves over and falls right into the Thames' (Awareness: Conversations with the Masters by Anthony De Mello). Likewise, the Christians of Sardis needed a plunge in the waters of presence to dispel their numbness and illusions about empire.

Empire runs on illusion and lies. Waking up to reality is perhaps the best antidote to the foggy fantastical projections of empire. We fight back at a foundational level by being present and dispelling lies, especially the lies we tell ourselves and that the empire tells us.

The *Star Wars* movies and television shows, if one was not aware, are poignantly anti-fascist. Luke Skywalker, Princess Leia, and Han Solo are fighting an empire, after all. The ninth episode of the second season of the *Star Wars* streaming show *Andor* contains a scene in which the fictional senator Mon Monthma tries to wake up her fellow senators at the start of the vicious empire: "Of all the things at risk, the loss of an objective reality is perhaps the most dangerous. The death of truth is the ultimate victory of evil. When truth leaves us, when we let it slip away, when it is ripped from our hands, we become vulnerable to the appetite of whatever monster screams the loudest." The same is true for us. If we lose reality, all is lost. Then, we are all the Christians of Sardis. Hence, Jesus issues the most severe denunciation to this church. We must wake up.

Praxis

What is numbing you? What habits keep you unaware, insensitive, and anesthetized to reality? We wake up by accepting reality as it is in naked, effortless presence. Be present today.

Monday, Dec 8: The Message to Philadelphia

Lectio Divina

Read the passage four times. Allow for contemplative silence in between the readings. Let your mind fall silent, then, in faith, rest in the Mystery of God without looking at, listening to, or talking to your thoughts.

Rev 3:7-13

“To the angel of the church in Philadelphia, write this:

““The holy one, the true,

who holds the key of David,

who opens and no one shall close,

who closes and no one shall open,

says this: ““I know your works (behold, I have left an open door before you, which no one can close). You have limited strength, and yet you have kept my word and have not denied my name. Behold, I will make those of the assembly of Satan who claim to be Jews and are not, but are lying, behold I will make them come and fall prostrate at your feet, and they will realize that I love you. Because you have kept my message of endurance, I will keep you safe in the time of trial that is going to come to the whole world to test the inhabitants of the earth. I am coming quickly. Hold fast to what you have, so that no one may take your crown. “““The victor I will make into a pillar in the temple of my God, and he will never leave it again. On him I will inscribe the name of my God and the name of the city of my God, the new Jerusalem, which comes down out of heaven from my God, as well as my new name. “““Whoever has ears ought to hear what the Spirit says to the churches.””

Reflection

The Risen Jesus refers to himself as: “The holy one, the true, who holds the key of David, who opens and no one shall close, who closes and no one shall open” (Rev. 3:7). The Risen Jesus “holds the keys of David” because he is the true authority, which means the emperor is not. The Risen Jesus welcomes all yet hems in and keeps those under his care,

hence he “closes” the door that no one can open. The empire excludes many from its benefits. Indeed, that is core to being an empire: one group – the wealthy or a certain ethnicity – is above, privileged, and better than all others. The Risen Jesus, as the true authority, subverts the ego’s tendency – whether interpersonally or socially in its many imperial guises – to exclude and create hierarchy.

Verse nine is open to bad, antisemitic interpretations: “Behold, I will make those of the assembly of Satan who claim to be Jews and are not, but are lying, behold I will make them come and fall prostrate at your feet, and they will realize that I love you” (Rev. 3:9). The Christians in Philadelphia may have experienced some hostility from the Jewish community there. Thus, this verse does not validate ant-Semitism but reflects a sibling rivalry between Jews and early Christians (many of whom were Jews).

But the church in Philadelphia receives no condemnation. They are faithful. Thus, Jesus tells them to stay faithful. “Because you have kept my message of endurance, I will keep you safe in the time of trial” (Rev. 3:10). They are enduring; they are maintaining their faith. When we endure in the faith, we know the comfort of God in times of trial.

It is hard to keep the faith when times are bad. But that is when faith is tested, tried like gold in a fire. We are already one with God; our problem is that we do not believe it. We tend to believe in the ego’s fanatic need for control, security, and affection. Organized egos create structures of sin and, eventually, empires. Faced with personal problems, faith gets tested. But the test gets much harder when we are faced with social evils. Hence, Jesus reminds the church in Philadelphia: “Hold fast to what you have” (Rev. 3:11). Perseverance remains essential; holding fast is perseverance heightened and tried during rough, evil times. Either personally or socially, fear is the main issue preventing any follower of Jesus from holding fast to faith. But Jesus soothes us: do not be afraid, only trust.

Jesus promises that the victor receives the name of God and the name of the city of God (Rev 3:12). These are symbols of new life, sharing in the divine life beyond all sadness, loneliness, and even dearth itself. The victor is the one who perseveres in faith despite trials, temptations to imperial comforts, and the worship of false gods.

Praxis

Renew your faith. Use a prayer from the Gospels, such as “Father into your hands, I commend my spirit” or “God be merciful to me a sinner,” or use a prayer of your own to renew your faith. Repeat this short prayer often throughout your day.

Tuesday, December 9: The Final Message: Laodicea

Lectio Divina

Read the passage four times. Allow for contemplative silence in between the readings. Let your mind fall silent, then, in faith, rest in the Mystery of God without looking at, listening to, or talking to your thoughts.

Rev 3:14-22

“To the angel of the church in Laodicea, write this: “The Amen, the faithful and true witness, the source of God’s creation, says this: ‘I know your works; I know that you are neither cold nor hot. I wish you were either cold or hot. So, because you are lukewarm, neither hot nor cold, I will spit you out of my mouth. For you say, ‘I am rich and affluent and have no need of anything,’ and yet do not realize that you are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked. I advise you to buy from me gold refined by fire so that you may be rich, and white garments to put on so that your shameful nakedness may not be exposed, and buy ointment to smear on your eyes so that you may see. Those whom I love, I reprove and chastise. Be earnest, therefore, and repent. ““Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, [then] I will enter his house and dine with him, and he with me. I will give the victor the right to sit with me on my throne, as I myself first won the victory and sit with my Father on his throne. ““Whoever has ears ought to hear what the Spirit says to the churches.””

Reflection

The Christians of Laodicea appeared to believe the lie the Romans told them. They were seduced by promises of wealth. They were blinded by greed. Jesus calls them “lukewarm.” Michael Gorman reflects, “‘Lukewarm’ here means so prosperous and supposedly self-sufficient (3:17) as to be completely out of fellowship with Jesus. This is not a middle-of-the-road church but the most accommodating, not only participating with the status quo when necessary as a means of survival, but fully embracing the lifestyle and values of the elite and powerful. The only solution for this church is to re-invite Jesus into its corporate life (3:20), which will necessitate a rejection of the idolatries that have

impoverished, denuded, and blinded the church (3:18). The challenge is to accept a complete makeover” (Gorman, Reading Revelation Responsibly).

Jesus mocks the rich to wake them up: “you say, ‘I am rich and affluent and have no need of anything,’ and yet do not realize that you are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked. I advise you to buy from me gold refined by fire so that you may be rich, and white garments to put on so that your shameful nakedness may not be exposed, and buy ointment to smear on your eyes so that you may see” (3:17-18). The wealthy, deluded by the power, self-sufficiency, and raw opportunity money brings, are incredibly dangerous: think of what Elon Musk, Larry Ellison, Mark Zuckerberg, and Jeff Bezos have done to this country. They need to repent.

Further, privileged, wealthy Christians need to hear the message to Laodicea. They do not know the REAL. They think money grants reality. Villanova scholar Eugene McCarraher describes money as “the criterion of reality, meaning, and identity in a competitive commodity culture” (Enchantments of Mammon). The rich think money gives reality since it grants real value to existing commodities. But this is a lie, a fiction that we, humanity, have created. Ironically, money comes with a price: losing touch with that is real. But if we pray, turn away from money as a central concern, then we awaken to Reality. And when you know the REAL – GOD – it doesn’t make any sense to play the games of the world, to buy into and take seriously the system.

The Christians of Laodicea fell under the spell of empire. Hence, Jesus serves them a severe warning to wake up. Empire is the nightmare of possessions, prestige, and power organized socially. The rich Christians of Laodicea have to wake up from this precise nightmare. Wealth for them, as for many today, is a false god. Money is not the criterion of reality. It should not be the center of life for a follower of Jesus. That would be idolatry. Only God is the center of life, for only God is Absolute. Money is not. It is not eternal; it will pass away at some point because all things do.

Empire is a system that funnels wealth to the top, protecting the most privileged with military might. Howard-Brook and Gwyther mention certain signs of empire: “slave labor; demonization, genocide, and displacement of indigenous people; colonization of distant lands...cultural arrogance; and global military power.” Each evil serves to keep Roman emperors, senators, and landowners in power and, therefore, the most wealthy. They – and every empire – get away with this through convincing the people that it is a divinely sanctioned order. The Romans used their gods to bless the imperial order: “the divine Roman hierarchy can be seen as legitimating the system that transferred wealth from the many poor to the elite few” (Howard-Brook and Gwyther, Unveiling Empire).

Empires then and now constrict their own reality. It is a delusion, wholly out of step with Reality As It Is – God and the divine love manifested in Jesus that bends down to us, saves us, and demands justice for the poor. But the theology and culture of empire cast a shadow over Reality in favor of their preferred story. “The way the cultural code is presented tends to make the prevailing social arrangements seem the natural order of things. The culture says to us: the way things are is the way things should be, in accordance with the ‘divine’ will” (Howard-Brook and Gwyther, *Unveiling Empire*). We can think here of the way certain churches present American capitalism as equal to the Gospel. It is not!

“Revelation casts a critical eye on Rome's economic exploitation, its politics of seduction, its violence, and its imperial hubris or arrogance. To oppose the Roman Empire necessarily involved a rejection of the spirituality that helped the empire run like a well-oiled machine. Yet the rejection of that spirituality, manifest in the imperial cult, was part of a total rejection of the empire. This is a consequence of the inseparability of religion and politics in antiquity” (Howard-Brook and Gwyther, *Unveiling Empire*).

This passage also has one of the most tender and inviting lines of scripture: “Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, [then] I will enter his house and dine with him, and he with me” (Rev 3:20). Reflecting on this verse, the medieval mystic Meister Eckhart preaches, “You need not seek Him here or there, He is no further than the door of your heart; there He stands patiently awaiting whoever is ready to open up and let Him in. No need to call to Him from afar: He can hardly wait for you to open up. He longs for you a thousand times more than you long for Him: the opening and the entering are a single act.” If we open to God, we discover REALITY. We can shed the illusions of wealth and the story empire tells us so that those in power can clutch their treasures and never share.

The message to Laodicea is the last one Jesus has for the church. Michael Gorman sums up the point of all these messages to the churches: “The main point of Revelation 2–3, when heard faithfully today, is to listen for the Spirit of God identifying our own church’s peculiar unholy spirit and offering us the presence and grace of Christ to transform us into a more faithful people of God” (Gorman, *Reading Revelation Responsibly*).

Praxis

Jesus stands at the door of your heart, waiting to enter and dine with you. God wants to commune with you in the silence of your heart. Enter into contemplative silence; this is a silence in which you are not thinking but resting in the divine presence in naked faith. Sit in this silence every day this week for a few minutes. And, to help the poor, give alms.

Wednesday, Dec 10: Heavenly Worship 1

Lectio Divina

Read the passage four times. Allow for contemplative silence in between the readings. Let your mind fall silent, then, in faith, rest in the Mystery of God without looking at, listening to, or talking to your thoughts.

Rev 4:1-6

After this I had a vision of an open door to heaven, and I heard the trumpetlike voice that had spoken to me before, saying, “Come up here and I will show you what must happen afterwards.” At once I was caught up in spirit. A throne was there in heaven, and on the throne sat one whose appearance sparkled like jasper and carnelian. Around the throne was a halo as brilliant as an emerald. Surrounding the throne I saw twenty-four other thrones on which twenty-four elders sat, dressed in white garments and with gold crowns on their heads. From the throne came flashes of lightning, rumblings, and peals of thunder. Seven flaming torches burned in front of the throne, which are the seven spirits of God. In front of the throne was something that resembled a sea of glass like crystal.

Reflection

John of Patmos launches us into heaven in a series of visions in Revelation chapters four and five. The vision includes the perpetual worship of God and Jesus. This vision introduces us to one of the central images in Revelation: the throne. This image appears forty-three times throughout the book. The throne, along with an image set to appear in chapter five, is key to interpreting the whole book, especially its fantastical, strange, and violent imagery in chapters six through twenty.

The throne is a symbol for divine power, the divine center, and divine transcendence. In other words, the throne is a symbol for God as God. Michael Gorman reflects, “relatively little is said about the identity of the one on the throne. Rather, this one is described as resembling precious stones, radiant and beautiful, and surrounded by a rainbow that is similarly precious, bright, and stunning. This is obviously ‘the Lord God the Almighty’ (4:8)” (Reading Revelation Responsibly). By showing us the throne, John of Patmos is showing us reality, where the real power lies. It is not with the emperor.

The throne images the utter transcendence of God. This is perhaps the most crucial point about Revelation: God alone is God and not our experience of the divine, our feelings about the sacred, or our theological understanding. God is not a thing.

In an unknown sermon, Meister Eckhart, that radical mystic of medieval Germany, preaches, “God is Nothing...God is incomprehensible as Nothing: God is superessential, superrational, superintelligible...To know God is to know him as unknowable.” God is much bigger than we think, than we *can* think. Too many use God to sanctify their own agendas, often political and cultural. But God is utterly beyond us and all existence; hence, uncontrollable and unthinkable.

To follow Jesus, a certain belief in God has to be dropped. The image of the throne is not a simple statement of monotheism. It is a radical critique of all worship, devastating belief in all gods. Only God is God, not the emperor or the empire. But, even more, God is not what we think. Especially as revealed on the cross, God does not come across as one of the gods.

In the years immediately after the death and resurrection of Jesus, Christianity was an illegal religion in the Roman Empire. Since early followers of Jesus would neither burn incense to the Roman gods nor worship the emperor - the civic and religious duty of every Roman - they were condemned as atheists. As St. Polycarp and other Christians, for instance, were led into the arena to be devoured by lions for their faith in Christ, the crowds chanted “Away with the atheists!”

The early Christians would never have submitted to the gods of imperial religion, least of all the oppressive emperor. Yet, we do on a regular basis. Some want a God who is the ultimate safety net making sure no bad things happen to his worshippers. Fantasy! Some want the God of order, who’s in charge of the cosmos and always squashes chaos. Illusion! Some want a tender God of love to comfort them, make them feel good, and stroke their egos with assurances. Nope! That’s not God!

God is not one of the gods. God is *not* what we think. God as revealed by Jesus is dangerous. Terrifyingly, Jesus crucified reveals *the godless nothing*. On the cross, God is known in godlessness and abandonment. This is certainly not one of the mighty gods of Rome. Even more, this crucified God is Reality Itself and, hence, transcends space and time. God transcends being and is no particular thing. In this sense, God is *not God*. The word God may not even be the best word for the Ultimate Reality.

If Jesus shows us the crucified God, the godless nothingness, then he also expects us to follow him along the way of the crucified God. This is the way of self-denial, taking up our crosses, and following Jesus into loss, weakness, humiliation, and deprivation. The

Gospel intends to rip away everything we cherish insofar as these cherished objects and beliefs prevent true happiness and justice for the poor. Instead of affirming belief in one of the ideological gods of our time, smash their idolatrous statues prominently set up on the altar of our hearts. To follow Jesus is to surrender all our creeds. Suspicious of any ideology that asserts itself over love, over the needs of others, especially the poor, and the centrality of the Holy Mystery, we deny ourselves.

Let's admit it. We don't believe in God. We believe in our own ideologies, whether of the right or the left. Truth be told, everyone uses God to rubber stamp their convictions. We believe in the free market and in supposed family values. The crucified God affirms none of these. Jesus denounces all forms of wealth, schemes to store up material goods, and commands us to let go of family attachments if they get in the way of the godless God displayed bruised, battered, and broken on the cross.

Jesus commands us to love this God — the crucified God, the godless nothingness! I am sure there are many ways to love God. I do not pretend to offer the only way, not in the least. Still, I offer you a formula for practicing love of God based on the idea that only the Gospel impels us to be good atheists! Here is the formula: *Close your eyes, take a deep breath, stop thinking, and enjoy the bliss of the godless nothingness within.* This is a formula for contemplation. When we engage in contemplative prayer, we're not relating to the imperial god who guarantees order and certainty. Leaving belief in *a god* behind, we commune with and are consumed by the godless nothingness. We're not confirming our belief in *a god* but devastating it as we follow Christ Crucified into the godless nothingness who rips away ego, annihilates false gods, and immerses us in love.

Praxis

Practice silence. Close your eyes, take a deep breath, stop thinking, and enjoy the bliss of the godless nothingness within.

Thursday, December 11: Heavenly Worship 2

Lectio Divina

Read the passage four times. Allow for contemplative silence in between the readings. Let your mind fall silent, then, in faith, rest in the Mystery of God without looking at, listening to, or talking to your thoughts.

Rev 4:6-11

In the center and around the throne, there were four living creatures covered with eyes in front and in back. The first creature resembled a lion, the second was like a calf, the third had a face like that of a human being, and the fourth looked like an eagle in flight. The four living creatures, each of them with six wings, were covered with eyes inside and out. Day and night they do not stop exclaiming:

**“Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God almighty,
who was, and who is, and who is to come.”**

Whenever the living creatures give glory and honor and thanks to the one who sits on the throne, who lives forever and ever, the twenty-four elders fall down before the one who sits on the throne and worship him, who lives forever and ever. They throw down their crowns before the throne, exclaiming:

**“Worthy are you, Lord our God,
to receive glory and honor and power,
for you created all things;
because of your will they came to be and were created.”**

Reflection

The vision of worship in heaven continues. John of Patmos sees the throne, image of God's being God, and the absolute centrality of divine mystery. Around this throne, four fantastical creatures and twenty-four elders sing the praise of God perpetually. The four creatures are covered in eyes; each one has six wings. The creatures resemble animals on earth: a lion, a calf, a human, and an eagle.

Here, we encounter Revelation's world of strange imagery. But these odd and sometimes unsettling images are only symbols. The creatures represent creation. The elders are the people of God, holy and sharing in the divine life. Michael Gorman makes an excellent point: "More important than the identity and appearance of the creatures and elders, however, is their activity: ceaseless praise and worship, hymning the worthy-ness of God as the eternal one (4:8) and creator (4:11). The worship of God is the heartbeat of the cosmos, even when we humans on earth do not see it, participate in it, or value it. Only God is worthy to receive what others, especially powerful political figures, may want or demand: our total devotion, our praise, our crowns" (Gorman, *Reading Revelation Responsibly*).

The worship of God in heaven reinforces the message of Revelation: God alone and no other rules existence. Thus, no government, emperor, prime minister, or president is the king of the world. Howard-Brook and Gwyther comment, "This heavenly worship is expressed in overtly political language: worship of God precludes worship of empire" (*Unveiling Empire: Reading Revelation Then and Now*).

But what is worship? It is a crucial concept and practice of the Book of Revelation. To worship is to give loyalty, value, and glory to God. But worship becomes corrupted when we give our hearts and ultimate loyalty to the finite, the creature. It is not because creatures are bad but simply because they are not God. We are made to adore God.

Worshipping God means the soul recognizes God *as God*, which entails the letting go of everything else as central or all-consuming on one's life. It means paying attention to God and not the self or the ego. Our total and final allegiance belongs to no country but only to the Mystery of God.

The Roman empire usurped God's place. Rome sold the ancients the story that the empire was mandated by heaven and that the emperor was a god. It was sacred validation for what is just ego, egos organized intelligently to harness violence and exploitation to benefit only a few. Rome sold this story through the imperial cult. Gorman comments, "the imperial cult was an elaborate 'God and country' phenomenon, or type of 'civic' or civil religion...that in various ways attributed a sacred character to the Roman Empire and to the emperor himself. This cult was the concrete manifestation of an ideology, a political theology...consisting of three main convictions: The gods have chosen Rome. Rome and its emperor are agents of the gods' rule, will, salvation, and presence among human beings. Rome manifests the gods' blessings—security, peace, justice, faithfulness, fertility—among those who submit to Rome's rule" (Gorman, *Reading Revelation Responsibly*).

Revelation challenges the imperial cult. John's vision of the worship of God in heaven attacks the imperial story; worshipping God counters imperial propaganda. "The image of the throne is an implicit challenge to any and all imperial thrones with occupants who may think they govern the world and deserve worship or other forms of ultimate allegiance" (Gorman, Reading Revelation Responsibly). Absolute Reality, God, makes everything else relative. And when we know the REAL – through worship – it doesn't make any sense to take the world seriously. The call of Revelation, then, is not to prep for Doomsday but to turn away from the idols of empire to recognize God as God.

Praxis

This Sunday at Mass, give your heart and mind – your full inner attention – to God. Take stock of the false gods that may hold sway over you and return your loyalty to God. When you feel these idols tempting or harassing you, pray the words of the celestial worship: "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God almighty, who was, and who is, and who is to come."

Friday, December 12: The Great Upset

Lectio Divina

Read the passage four times. Allow for contemplative silence in between the readings. Let your mind fall silent, then, in faith, rest in the Mystery of God without looking at, listening to, or talking to your thoughts.

Rev 5:1-6

I saw a scroll in the right hand of the one who sat on the throne. It had writing on both sides and was sealed with seven seals. Then I saw a mighty angel who proclaimed in a loud voice, “Who is worthy to open the scroll and break its seals?” But no one in heaven or on earth or under the earth was able to open the scroll or to examine it. I shed many tears because no one was found worthy to open the scroll or to examine it. One of the elders said to me, “Do not weep. The lion of the tribe of Judah, the root of David, has triumphed, enabling him to open the scroll with its seven seals.” Then I saw standing in the midst of the throne and the four living creatures and the elders a Lamb that seemed to have been slain. He had seven horns and seven eyes; these are the [seven] spirits of God sent out into the whole world.

Reflection

We are still in the thick of the bizarre symbolism of the Book of Revelation. Here, we encounter two of the main images of the entire book. The first is the scroll. The scroll is held by THE ONE on the THRONE. It plays a large and dramatic role in the story to follow. An angel wonders aloud, “Who is worthy to open the scroll and break its seals?” The scroll has seven seals (another symbol, which we will explore later).

What is this scroll? It symbolizes both the Word of God and the final plane of God to save all creation and incorporate it into the divine life fully. The scroll also represents revelation in a general sense, that is, the act by which God shows us who God is. The scroll, in other words, tells us who God is.

The second important image in this passage emerges in the tension around who will open the scroll. Who can open the scroll? Who can break all its seals? No one can. John of Patmos begins to weep. But one of the twenty-four elders says to John, “Do not weep. The

lion of the tribe of Judah, the root of David, has triumphed, enabling him to open the scroll with its seven seals.” The Lion of Judah can open the scroll!

We are ready to turn to the THRONE and see a lion! “But in ‘perhaps the most mind-wrenching “rebirth of images” in literature,’ the vision John receives and describes for us is not what anyone would expect. It is the vision of a slaughtered Lamb, not a ferocious Lion. ‘The shock of this reversal,’ writes Richard Hays, ‘discloses the central mystery of the Apocalypse: God overcomes the world not through a show of force but through the suffering and death of Jesus’” (Gorman, Reading Revelation Responsibly).

Biblical scholar Richard Bauckham comments, “recognize the contrast between what he [John] hears (5:5) and what he sees (5:6). He hears that ‘the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, had conquered’. The two messianic titles evoke a strong militaristic and nationalistic image of the Messiah of David as conqueror of the nations, destroying the enemies of God’s people...But this image is reinterpreted by what John sees: the Lamb whose sacrificial death (5:6) has redeemed people from all nations (5:9–10). By juxtaposing the two contrasting images, John has forged a new symbol of conquest by sacrificial death” (Bauckham, The Theology of the Book of Revelation).

The great reversal of the Gospel is that it is a slaughtered lamb, not a lion, who opens the scroll. And this means it is the slaughtered lamb who fully reveals God. Jesus the slaughtered lamb is worthy to open the seals of the scroll because of Jesus’ death and weakness. Jesus on the cross inaugurates the END of the world in one precise sense: Jesus focuses us on the end and goal of all life, namely, the Mystery of God. Richard Bauckham rightly comments, “When the slaughtered Lamb is seen ‘in the midst of’ the divine throne in heaven (5:6; 7:17), the meaning is that Christ’s sacrificial death *belongs to the way God rules the world*. The symbol of the Lamb is no less a divine symbol than the symbol of ‘the One who sits on the throne.’” (Bauckham, The Theology of the Book of Revelation).

We must consider the difference between the slaughtered Lamb and the slaughtering eagle, between Christ Crucified and Augustus Caesar. Gorman notes, “The rule of the gods through Rome was accomplished by and manifested in violence, domination, and ‘pacification’ that was hardly peaceful. The famous pax Romana was a sovereignty dependent on military conquest, enslavement” (Gorman, Reading Revelation Responsibly). Rome wages war, conquers, dominates, enslaves, and exploits. The so-called divine rule of Rome becomes manifest through violence.

Jesus does not accomplish anything through violence but condemns it. The slaughtered lamb represents nonviolence, mercy, sacrifice, humility, and walking what the mystics call the path of nothingness. Jesus does reveal not a mighty God but a God of

poverty, silence, weakness, and nothingness. Worshipping this God by walking the path of nonviolence, love, and nothingness is the way the Gospel resists all empires.

Praxis

Jesus reveals that God is found in poverty and weakness. What parts of your life feel weak and poor? Recall these aspects of your life, then rest in God in an interior silence.

Saturday, December 13: The Slaughtered Lamb

Lectio Divina

Read the passage four times. Allow for contemplative silence in between the readings. Let your mind fall silent, then, in faith, rest in the Mystery of God without looking at, listening to, or talking to your thoughts.

Rev 5:7-14

[The Lamb] came and received the scroll from the right hand of the one who sat on the throne. When he took it, the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders fell down before the Lamb. Each of the elders held a harp and gold bowls filled with incense, which are the prayers of the holy ones. They sang a new hymn:

“Worthy are you to receive the scroll

and to break open its seals,

for you were slain and with your blood you purchased for God

those from every tribe and tongue, people and nation.

You made them a kingdom and priests for our God,

and they will reign on earth.”

I looked again and heard the voices of many angels who surrounded the throne and the living creatures and the elders. They were countless in number, and they cried out in a loud voice:

“Worthy is the Lamb that was slain

to receive power and riches, wisdom and strength,

honor and glory and blessing.”

Then I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea, everything in the universe, cry out:

“To the one who sits on the throne and to the Lamb

be blessing and honor, glory and might,

forever and ever.”

The four living creatures answered, “Amen,” and the elders fell down and worshiped.

Reflection

The slaughtered Lamb is the revelation of the Mystery of God. The Lamb shows us the weakness and poverty of God. Yes! God is not what we think God is. Still, what we think of God has a tremendous impact on our lives. We become the god we worship. Liberation theologian Segundo Galilea writes, “What kind of God do we have? What kind of God do we adore and follow? Is our God the authentic God of Christianity, the God of the Bible, the God who is the Father of Jesus Christ, or is he, rather, the God whom we have consciously or unconsciously manipulated in order to accommodate him to our interests, ideology or culture?” He says the powerful, those upholding conventional society and whose wealth derives from this society, “substitute a God drawn from [their] imagination, according to the measure of [their] own cravings.” They do not worship God but an idol. They manipulate God to their own purposes and the detriment of the poor. Jon Sobrino, another liberation theologian, writes, “Jesus sees the de facto evil use of power rooted in the will to power—specifically in the power that tries to manipulate God. Insofar as human beings do not let God be God, they themselves cease to be human. And when these nonhumans hold power, they use it against the kingdom.”

A punishing god makes us punishing; a love God makes us loving, for instance. At the root of all injustice is a spiritual problem: whom do we worship? Is it God or a culturally authorized image of God? A conventional god gives religious sanction to a conventional society with its exclusive focus on the market. Such a society propagates myths like redemptive violence, uninhibited greed, and patriarchal white privilege.

Our worship matters. The dangerous memory of Jesus Crucified shows us a different way of worship and reveals a God wholly different from the one presented by conventional American culture. This God is downright petrifying to the Imperial Ego. If we worship this God, the God revealed in Jesus, then we become dangerous. That God does not abide injustice, greed, patriarchal white privilege, or violence. That God is revealed through the nativity and the cross, which the ego, conventional society, and even conventional religion resist with all their might.

Theologian John Caputo writes, “The weak force of God is embodied in the broken body on the cross, which has thereby been broken loose from being and broken out upon the open plane of the powerlessness of God. The power of God is not pagan violence, brute power, or vulgar magic; it is the power of powerlessness...God pitches his tent among

beings by identifying with everything the world casts out and leaves behind...God settles into the recesses formed in the world by the little ones, the nothings and nobodies of the world” (The Weakness of God). God is with us in our weakness, failure, and poverty – even in our sins. Rather than heroic strength, God appears in our world as weakness.

As the lamb, Christ is defenseless love. How could he, the revelation of the God of love, be anything else? The divine must offer itself in vulnerability. It can only be received likewise. God comes to us as the divine weakness of love and only that. The divine is present in our world, in our lives without the showiness of worldly power. Rather, God divests the divine self of itself and approaches as pure gift without attaching any conditions to its reception other than accepting one’s own weakness and need for the gift.

The divine is not to be found in the best and brightest but in the lowest, the reviled, and the nobodies. If this is how God is, then it is how we must be. For, holiness means enjoying and knowing God as God is with the result that we become God as God is. God is born in the poverty of a stable and wants to meet us in the poverty of our miseries. “Christianity is the imitation of God’s nature,” says St. Gregory of Nyssa. God who descends into the lowest depths of poverty. To worship this God, we must also descend into poverty.

Praxis

Today, three times throughout your day, pray the hymns of glory found in this passage:

“Worthy is the Lamb that was slain
to receive power and riches, wisdom and strength,
honor and glory and blessing.”

AND

“To the one who sits on the throne and to the Lamb
be blessing and honor, glory and might,
forever and ever.”