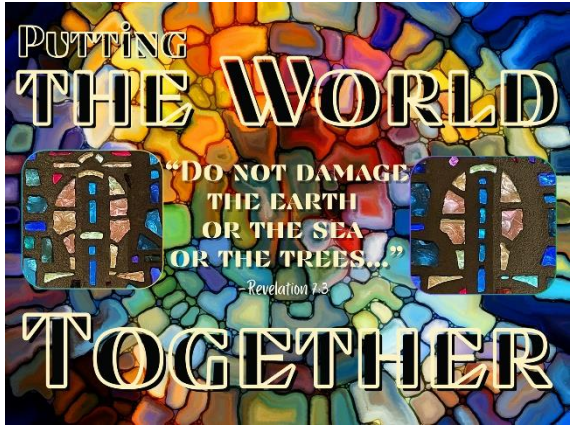




A SERMON

by Rev. Marcella Auld Glass: July 20, 2025



IN TALKING WITH MANY OF YOU, I know that the news of the world is bringing anxiety and worry to our hearts. And I want to offer a corrective to that, not because I think we should see the world through rose colored glasses, but because it matters that we see the world as it is, and then respond with a vision of how God sees possibility for the world.

And so in my moments when I worry, "who are you to be having fun with friends at a basketball game when people are dying in Gaza and being disappeared on the streets of our city by the government?"—and I do have those moments, I'm reminded that if I want to change the world, I have to remember what I want the world to become.

The poet Andrea Gibson died this past week. They were an amazing spoken word poet. I saw a movie about their life at the SF Film Festival this spring that will be on streaming channels this fall. I highly recommend the film. Here's what

Andrea said about this tension we live in: "...And for every day you paint the war, take a week and paint the beauty, the color, the shape of the landscape you're marching towards. Everyone knows what you're against; show them what you're for."

That's a good challenge. A week to notice the beauty we're marching towards for each day we paint the struggles we see. As we enter worship this day, hear this prayer by Kate Bowler:

God, this season has been such a slog
that it is hard to remember what it was like
to be surprise by wonder.
I no longer notice the little things
that used to stop me in my tracks.
Like the bird's song.
Or the redbud's blossom.
Or the twinkling sky.
Or the sound of his laugh.
Or their crinkly nosed smile.
They have become white noise,
a blur of details in my daily grind.
Refresh me, oh God.
Remind me of the loveliness found in today.
Surprise me with the details I have lost
the eyes to see.
Blessed are we, awakening from the
boredom of routine,
desiring to drink in from the beauty
around us once again,
full of the love you have given us,
the joy that is hidden among
the reeds of the ordinary.
Blessed are we who desire to feel our hearts soar
with the glory set in the heavens,
the moon and the stars,
with awe at the people right in front of us,
with the beauty of the lily in its elegant purity,
and the mystery and power of the tiniest seed,
bursting to life as it was always destined to do.
This world you made. It is irreducibly sublime.
Blessed are we who ask,
for hearts that are soft,
for eyes that are awake,
for ears that are open,
for hands to hold
the wonder that is here,
now.¹

In this sermon series, we've been jumping around in the Book of Revelation. Victor preached from chapter 5 a while back, with the scroll, sealed with all the seals, and the lamb of God on the throne.

In Chapter 6, the seals on the scrolls start to be opened, causing the arrival of the 4 horsemen of the apocalypse. And also the martyrs, people killed for their faith, demanding justice for their deaths. And also an earthquake, and the stars fall from the sky

¹ Kate Bowler, *The Lives We Actually Have*, page 46-7

while the sun turns black and the moon becomes like blood. And also the sky itself vanishes, rolling itself up like a scroll. That's a lot we missed in one chapter!

In chapter 6, the world comes undone.

With that in mind, let us hear from chapter 7, found on page 998 of your pew bibles if you'd like to follow along.

Revelation 7:1-17

After this I saw four angels standing at the four corners of the earth, holding back the four winds of the earth so that no wind could blow on earth or sea or against any tree. I saw another angel ascending from the rising of the sun, having the seal of the living God, and he called with a loud voice to the four angels who had been given power to damage earth and sea, saying, 'Do not damage the earth or the sea or the trees, until we have marked the servants of our God with a seal on their foreheads.'
And I heard the number of those who were sealed, one hundred and forty-four thousand, sealed out of every tribe of the people of Israel:

*From the tribe of Judah twelve thousand sealed,
from the tribe of Reuben twelve thousand,
from the tribe of Gad twelve thousand,*

*from the tribe of Asher twelve thousand,
from the tribe of Naphtali twelve thousand,
from the tribe of Manasseh twelve thousand,*

*from the tribe of Simeon twelve thousand,
from the tribe of Levi twelve thousand,
from the tribe of Issachar twelve thousand,*

*from the tribe of Zebulun twelve thousand,
from the tribe of Joseph twelve thousand,
from the tribe of Benjamin twelve thousand sealed.*

*After this I looked, and there was a great multitude that **no one could count**, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, robed in white, with palm branches in their hands. They cried out in a loud voice, saying,
'Salvation belongs to our God who is seated on the throne, and to the Lamb!'*

And all the angels stood around the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures, and they fell on their faces before the throne and worshipped God, singing,

**'Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom
and thanksgiving and honor
and power and might
be to our God for ever and ever! Amen.'**

Then one of the elders addressed me, saying, 'Who are these, robed in white, and where have they come from?' I said to him, 'Sir, you are the one that knows.' Then he said to me, 'These are they who have come out of the great ordeal; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.'

*For this reason they are before the throne of God,
and worship him day and night within his temple,
and the one who is seated on the throne will shelter them.*

*They will hunger no more, and thirst no more;
the sun will not strike them,
nor any scorching heat;*

*for the Lamb at the centre of the throne will be their shepherd,
and he will guide them to springs of the water of life,
and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.'*

THERE IS A LOT OF IMAGERY IN THIS SECTION OF REVELATION that evokes passages from the Hebrew Bible. We don't have the same familiarity with these passages that John's audience would have had. But he's connecting what is happening right now for his community to what earlier generations have experienced.

I find comfort in history to help make sense of the present and that is part of how John is using the Hebrew Bible here. He's also connecting their story to God's story, tying a thread that shows God's faithfulness in difficult days all the way back to the beginning of time.

You may have thought of the creation story in Genesis, when the spirit, or wind, of God sweeps across the face of the earth to bring life as I read about angels holding back the winds from the face of the earth.

Or there is imagery from Isaiah 41, where God comes in from the rising of the sun, as the "victor from the east" who "delivers the nation's to him and tramples kings under foot", who is "the first and will be with the last."

There is also imagery from Zechariah and Ezekiel and Daniel.

In this passage, people are marked with God's name on their foreheads to save them, which evokes the story of the Exodus, when the lintels of the Hebrew homes were marked with blood to save them from the destruction God wrought on Egypt.

And then the tribes of Israel are listed. In scripture, the 12 tribes are often used as a sign of completeness. Historically, they were not all the same size, yet here there is an egalitarianism in their representation.

Over the years, Christians have gotten hung up on the numbers listed here, as if there is a scarcity to who is in and who is out.

That's not a faithful reading of this passage. It is a way to use this passage to manipulate people. The listing of the tribes, as I mentioned, is a listing of completeness. The numbers listed—12,000 from each of the 12 tribes—is an exponential representation of that completeness.

By the time John is writing, some of the tribes aren't even around anymore. It's not how people would have been referring to themselves. He includes them as a reminder that no matter how we break down our tribal identities to separate us from each other, God is including all of the tribes in the classification of people God loves and wants to save.

We've said it before and we will say it again. **You will never meet a person God doesn't love.** Every single person on this planet is loved by God, was created by God, and is worthy of salvation. Immigrants and oligarchs. Democrats and Republicans. Tech billionaires and unhoused neighbors. Trans kids. Dodgers fans.

God created all of us in this complicated and divided world. God loves all of us. God wants to save all of us.

There is also a sense that how we live our lives matters in that saving. Do we want to have God's name written across our foreheads? Or, do we want to be marked by the beast?

Joann preached about the beast back in June, from chapter 13. There, we're told "In amazement the whole earth followed the beast." And that the beast marked everyone who wanted to participate in the economy of the beast. *"Also it causes all, both small and great, both rich and poor, both free and slave, to be marked on the right hand or the forehead, so that no one can buy or sell who does not have the mark, that is, the name of the beast or the number of its name."*

If you wanted to buy or sell in the market, you needed the mark of the beast. We see that playing out today too. If you didn't want to have your late night comedy show canceled because you made fun of the beast, you should have shown allegiance to the beast. If you didn't want your law firm to lose its federal contracts, you should have shown allegiance to the beast. If you don't want your state to lose access to federal emergency disaster funds, you have to show allegiance to the beast. If you don't want your university to be defunded, you have to show allegiance to the beast.

In Revelation, as in life, you show allegiance. Everyone does. You either show it to the beast, to Caesar. Or you show it to God, the Lamb on the throne.

How do we want to be marked?

As in the illustrations above, there are costs to our allegiance. The Book of Revelation does not pretend that it is easy to resist the empire. There is talk about martyrs and the costs people pay because they show their allegiance to God and not to the emperor.

According to Revelation, and what I see on the news today, evil has a grip on the earth. In order to break that grip, things need to be undone. The world has been constructed in a way that benefits the empire. It has to be undone so God's justice and salvation can rebuild.

We use the word salvation theologically. But Roman emperors used it politically, to describe themselves. They claimed they were the ones who saved the people and were worthy of allegiance and worship. They were the ones who brought the peace, or pax romana. To call the pax romana peace is a reminder of how empires tell their own story. It wasn't a period of peace. It was a period of subjugation when the enemies of Rome had been defeated so soundly they could no longer mount a rebellion.

The emperors of Rome claimed they brought salvation. But here in Revelation, salvation does not come from Caesar. It can only come from God, the lamb on the throne.

The lamb in this passage is also described as the shepherd, leading the people to the psalm 23 kind of water. Power structures are on their head with a lamb shepherding humans. We are the flock. The lamb is taking care of us.

As we've been spending time with Revelation this past month, it has helped me see the role of Jesus, the lamb of God, in a different context. What was unleashed into the world when God chose to be born as a human child was no less than a cosmic declaration of God's power. And God's power is still at work in our world, even now today.

You may have noticed I had Rachel print a William Butler Yeats poem in the bulletin today. It's one of his more famous poems, called the Second Coming.

Yeats wrote this poem in 1919, as his wife was convalescing from a dangerous bout of the Spanish Flu while pregnant with their daughter. He wrote it as the world was coming out of the terror of the Great War, as the Russian revolution was unfolding. And he wrote it in his homeland of Ireland, as its war for independence was becoming more violent and dangerous. He wrote it in a Book of Revelation time.

Irish journalist Fintan O'Toole writes, "The more quotable Yeats seems to commentators and politicians, the worse things are."

In his poem, he speaks of how things fall apart and the center cannot hold. As anarchy is loosed upon the world, we feel the consequences as the best lack all conviction and the worst are full of passionate intensity.

Far more intelligent people than I have wrestled with this poem over the last century. Maybe one of my English professors will reduce one of my grades retroactively for this. But in this poem, this is what I hear.

I hear a reminder that the birth of Jesus, who we can imagine being rocked in a cradle, was such a pivotal moment in history that it challenged the beasts who thought they had won with their violence, their might, and their power. Jesus vexed them to

nightmare. And some new beast is slouching toward modern Bethlehems now, trying to be born, trying to convince the world they are the savior we have been looking for.

But there is only one savior. And he doesn't slouch. Whose name do we want to have on our foreheads?

Progress is fragile and comes undone. We see that in the world around us, as Yeats saw it in his world too.

As the world comes undone, much of that feels beyond our control. But John reminds us not to fall into despair in despairing times. God is ruler of the earth, and the only one worthy of our worship. There are emperors and other rulers who claim to be worthy. But they are not. This a call to Christians in John's time and in ours, to look for real salvation, and true power and might, **and be committed to that**, even as it looks very different from worldly power and might. **Whose name do we want to have written across our foreheads?**

For whom do we want to be marked in this world—as agents of empire or as followers of the lamb?

Even as things fall apart, we still get to choose whom we serve, who we worship, and choose who directs our actions, our hearts, and our minds.

In Revelation, after all the tribes of Israel have been named and counted for inclusion, did you notice what it said next?

*After this I looked, and there was a great multitude that **no one could count**, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, robed in white, with palm branches in their hands. They cried out in a loud voice, saying, 'Salvation belongs to our God who is seated on the throne, and to the Lamb!'*

Across history, all of the people who got hung up on only 144,000 people being counted among the saved did not read far enough in the story.

Because the number gathered around the throne was a great multitude that **no one could count**. And we trust that God, the lamb on the throne, and the angels are good at math. The great multitude from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages was singing praise to God by speaking a truth into the universe that we need to hear again and again.

Salvation belongs to our God.

Not to us. Not to a strongman dictator. Not to Roman emperors. Not to the almighty dollar. Not to youth. Not to team, tribe, nation, or language.

So when the news is bad, and it seems like the great multitude is celebrating the badness of it, taking selfies outside concentration camps, remember that it isn't the whole story. Listen for the refrain of the great multitude who are still singing that Salvation belongs to our God.

They will hunger no more, and thirst no more;

the sun will not strike them,

nor any scorching heat;

for the Lamb at the centre of the throne will be their shepherd,

and he will guide them to springs of the water of life,

and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.'

As things fall apart and it seems the center cannot hold, let us listen for the voices from heaven who will help us rebuild in ways that care for each person, reflect God's justice. Let us remember that the great multitude around the throne of God has room for us, and room for all. We can live in abundance and trust, creating a world of love and joy.

The Second Coming, by William Butler Yeats

Turning and turning in the widening gyre

The falcon cannot hear the falconer;

Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;

Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,

The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere

The ceremony of innocence is drowned;

The best lack all conviction, while the worst

Are full of passionate intensity.

Surely some revelation is at hand;

Surely the Second Coming is at hand.

The Second Coming! Hardly are those words out

When a vast image out of *Spiritus Mundi*

Troubles my sight: somewhere in sands of the desert

A shape with lion body and the head of a man,

A gaze blank and pitiless as the sun,

Is moving its slow thighs, while all about it

Reel shadows of the indignant desert birds.

The darkness drops again; but now I know

That twenty centuries of stony sleep

Were vexed to nightmare by a rocking cradle,

And what rough beast, its hour come round at last,

Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born?