

Stain Sticks and Scooting Closer

Following our text for last Sunday, John turns to watch the Lamb open the seals on the scroll. What unfolds next includes four horses with their riders sent out into the earth. The horses represent real and present danger, all-too-familiar threats to humanity—war, turmoil, famine, and death. One scholar points out that these threats are the very things that call into question where we find our security and how quickly the life we know can—and often does—shift in the blink of an eye. All the money and all the power in the world are unable to save us. John paints a picture of a world where even “kings and generals” beg to be hidden from the wrath that the Lamb unleashes from the scroll. All creation trembles. Humanity cries out in one voice, “Who is able to stand?”¹ John then sees four angels holding the seas and the winds at bay while the servants of God are marked with a seal of their own. After John hears a roll call of the 144,000 from the tribes of Israel, he turns and describes the scene before him. As I read from Revelation, chapter 7, let us hear what the Spirit is saying to the church. [Read Revelation 7:9-17]

Almost exactly 35 years ago I loaded almost all my earthy belongings into my mom’s still-shiny copper Jeep Cherokee and drove with my parents to Davidson for me to begin my freshman year. My roommate and I knew each other from summer camp so we bought matching gray Laura Ashley comforters at an outlet and purchased a rose pink remnant at a local carpet store. We thought our room was lovely. To this day my close friends still tease me mercilessly about it. They also tease me about one thing my mother insisted that I bring with me—a stain stick. Looking back I realize my mom had a thing about being clean and getting clothes clean.

¹ Revelation 6:17, NRSV

She was a wiz when it came to getting out stains, mainly because she would Biz just about anything. She would fill a wash tub or even the washing machine with water and Biz and soak the shirt or the skirt or whatever within an inch of its life. The discovery of the stain stick was huge for her. Smear the stain with this magic goo, and it could stay on the shirt or the skirt or the jeans or the napkin for a week working its magic while the stained item waited to be washed. It was the perfect solution for a college student who might not be all that careful about what she spilled or all that conscientious about getting around to doing the laundry. It was a handy trick, but on a deeper level, it underscored how badly my mom wanted to shield me from the messiness of the world. Since that wasn't possible or even wise, the magic stain stick was one small way for her to try and help me deal with the mess she knew I would inevitably face.

As John's vision continues, he paints a picture of the scene before the throne. He sees a gathering of people too numerous to count, people from every tribe and nation worshiping God, waving palm branches, and proclaiming that "Salvation belongs to our God who is seated on the throne and to the Lamb!"² Like a heavenly Palm Sunday, those gathered around the throne celebrate the Savior, the only God who can bring life and wholeness, the only One who can save us, the only One who saves them. They sing because they know that no emperor can offer abundant life, that no earthly power can save us. They sing because they know the One who can, the One who does. One of the elders then asks John who these worshipers are. When John turns the question back to the elder, the elder declares:

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.³

² Revelation 7:10, NRSV, updated edition

³ Revelation 7:14

Various contemporary voices lift out the language of “the great ordeal” to point to a specific cosmic event, one that is still on the horizon. These voices are tempted to declare who exactly will get a free pass and who will not when the great ordeal comes to pass. Such understandings are too narrow and too easy. They almost always point to someone else who is getting it wrong, and the ones doing the pointing conveniently tend to cast themselves as the ones getting things right. Such interpretations miss the message John hopes to share. Revelation is not intended to be tea leaves, nor is scripture ever intended to be wielded as a weapon.

Another pastor, Martha Greene points out that the word for *ordeal* is translated elsewhere as *tribulation*:

[Tribulation] means literally ‘grinding’—derived from the Latin [word for] a threshing sledge for beating the stems and husks of grains. [John is speaking to] those who strive to be faithful, but who are ground down by life.⁴

The characters on stage in the text have been ground down, cut down even for their faithfulness to Jesus Christ, but they are by no means the only ones who know what it is to face hardship in the midst of being faithful, are they? We, too, know what it is to be ground down. Maybe the grind comes in caring for a loved one living with dementia, depression, or addiction. Maybe the grind comes from staring down these struggles ourselves. Maybe the grind comes in the loss of a job, a relationship, a home. Maybe the grind comes in the wrestling with debt or anger or pain or fear or loneliness or grief. With this understanding, we can begin to see ourselves in these saints gathered around the throne who have come through the great ordeal just as John’s first hearers did. We and they are reminded that the struggle is not the final word. The ordeal, the tribulation,

⁴ Martha Greene, “Whitewash,” *Christian Century*, October 9, 2002, p.19.

the grinding does not define them—or us—in any ultimate way. God’s seal on their foreheads, God’s claim on them—on us—does.

The elder then tells John that they have washed their robes in the blood of the Lamb—and made them white. Presbyterians do not talk blood very often. We like things neat and tidy, and blood is messy. In trying to distinguish and distance ourselves from the fire-and-brimstone types, it is tempting to sanitize our faith and “Biz” away the messy parts. John reminds us that redemption is messy. God does not save us by waving a magic wand but by giving us his Son. Jesus is “born of woman” as one of our affirmations reminds us. He eats with sinners and gets his feet dirty. He spits in his hand and heals a blind man by placing mud on the man’s eyes. He hungers and thirsts. He gets angry. He cries real tears and bleeds from real wounds. Redemption is messy. The Lamb has been through the grind and the mess. The saints—the saved ones—have been through the grind and the mess. They have washed their robes in the blood of the Lamb. Blood is messy and sticky. Blood is spilled at great cost and is not easily washed away. And yet it is in and through Christ’s blood that these saved ones have found new life, abundant life. Jesus sheds his blood and sacrifices his life for us to redeem us and all of creation—the pretty parts and the messy parts—to the glory of God.

We live in a messy moment, to say the least. Families struggle to put food on the table and make ends meet. Friends, relatives, and co-workers struggle to have civil conversations about things that matter. People of color are fearful and weary from centuries of being ground down by systems of oppression. Young people are anxious. Communities are divided. The hurt is palpable. The pain is raw. The grind is real.

A few years ago, Rachel Macy Stafford wrote about her daughter and her daughter’s best friend. The two girls met at a lemonade stand and went on to discuss the important matters like

opinions on new eyeglasses and where to go to basketball camp. On the school bus one day, when the girls were ten and eleven, Stafford's daughter heard someone launch a racial slur at her friend. Stafford asked her daughter how she responded:

“I asked her if she was okay,” [she] said tearfully. ‘She didn’t say anything, so I just scooted closer.’ Reluctantly, she admitted, ‘I didn’t know what to do, Mama, so I just hurt with her.’”⁵

I just hurt with her...

This morning we have prayed for students and teachers and bus drivers and cafeteria workers and administrators as the new school year begins. We have handed out backpack tags as a tangible reminder of God's love for us as the school year begins. As parents and grandparents, as neighbors and friends, we want to protect children, to wrap them in bubble wrap and arm them with a full lunch box, a thick skin, and maybe even a stain stick—anything and everything to protect them from the awful messiness the world insists on throwing at us and at others. And yet, more often than not the messiness cannot be avoided, so it must be weathered and endured. Weathering and enduring are more bearable if we do not have to go it alone. So sometimes we are called to wade into the mess and the pain and the hurt, to scoot a bit closer and hurt alongside one another, just like Jesus did. Just like Jesus does.

Faith does not give us a Teflon coating. Faithfulness does not shield us from the mess or the meanness of the world any more than it shields John or the churches to whom he writes. It may even draw us further into the mess, calling us to scoot closer to those who are beat down by the grind of life, to hurt with the hurting. And through the blessed work of the Spirit and the witness of the community, we see before us the Lamb who does not shy away from the mess

⁵ <http://www.scarymommy.com/rachel-macy-stafford-racial-slur-empathy>

himself. This One who reigns in power for us is also the One who gets in the mess with us. The Lamb of God himself scoots closer to us when we are hurting, offers us shade when the sun beats down, gives us living water when the well runs dry, and promises to wipe away every last tear from our crying eyes.

Thanks be to God. Amen.