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The Lamb and the Beast

Part 3: Revelation 6: The Seven Seals

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Part 1: A Dose of Reality

Last week we heard that John saw in his vision a scroll with seven seals and wept that no one could open the scroll. But there was one, the Lion of Judah which is also the little Lamb, Arnion, who was able to open the scroll. We believe the scroll is the word of God, but it is sealed with seven seals, representing the Holiest of things. We pick up at the opening of these seals, which are not ordinary seals on paper, but unleash images and events that are highly figurative. Today we look at those seven seals and what they tell us. Remember that this apocalyptic literature is not about what happens at the end of life, which many choose to believe, but that it speaks to our current life, our current circumstances.

Maybe you've heard about the four horses of the Apocalypse, probably in Sci-Fi, or fantastical literature. The common understanding is that these horses emerge from the seals and bring destruction on the earth, bringing great fear to human life, as signs of the evil that is to come in the end times. But these horses are actually symbols of what has been going on in our world for a long time, and symbols of what we are currently facing in our present day. These seals are opened by Arnion, the lamb, and the four living creatures from God's throne who call out the contents.

The first seal is opened and out comes a white horse with a rider holding a bow and wearing a crown. The bow itself is also a symbol of war and refers to the Parthians who were known for their archery skills in battle and who eventually defeated the Romans in AD 62. White is said to be the color of victory, so this rider and horse go out to bring peace to the world, but it is a peace through war, through conquest. This horse is to represent the just wars, those fought for the defense of the powerless or oppressed, wars fought in self-defense, and wars fought for the justice of the world. We have seen these kinds of fights, when powerful countries defend others to help them conquer an unjust regime. But, from our perspective today, many of these wars are not pure; they do not only come to the aid of others, or are completely defensive, but they promote a political agenda of those initiating the conflict. How many good causes have we seen corrupted as the hero comes to save the underdog? But nevertheless, this white horse emerges from the seal to bring peace by force, to rule as the favored, holy conqueror.

The second horse called from the seal is the red horse, indicating the true nature of war. Different from the white horse who pursues just war, the red horse represents the worst kind of war. The rider carries a sword implying bloodshed and slaughter and the only quench to the thirst of this horse is killing. This represents the senseless wars for power of nations that simply want to rule others and be the highest power. It represents all the senseless killing, school shootings, and extreme terrorism that only promote fear and chaos in our world. Did you know that students are trained to go into a classroom and look around for the best hiding place in case a shooter is in the building? How many random acts of terror have we seen because someone just wanted to see what would happen or wanted to prove a point that wouldn't make any difference? This is a regular happening in our world and it is horrific, like this red horse and rider.

The third horse called from the seal is the black horse, indicating famine and hunger. The rider carries a scale in his hand and announces, "a quart of wheat for a day's wages and three quarts of barley for a day's wages." Maybe you've heard of the amount that a day's wages were in the first century, a denarius. One commentator says that the price of these commodities, wheat and barley, are ten to twelve times their normal cost in ancient times. This describes a serious condition of scarcity. In present day, this horse represents the inequity that exists in our society; the wage gap, the insecurity of jobs, job benefits, or that if we work hard enough things will eventually work out. Things are not working out and many struggle to make ends meet. The new classification of those in the greatest need in our society are not the homeless anymore, while they are still in need, but it is the working poor. Those who would be ruined if they missed one paycheck. Sometimes I think about the year-end figures of those who received food from our Community Cupboard or many other agencies around Omaha and, while they celebrate the number of people served, it pains me that more and more people are in need every year. We don't want that number to grow.

The fourth horse that is called from the seal is the pale green horse, indicating death due to disease and pestilence or plague. There is disease everywhere. Who does not know someone who has died from cancer or is fighting cancer today? It is the reality of our world that nobody knows who will be next. There does not seem to be any rhyme or reason. Some people can live the healthiest lives and still develop a tumor or experience heart failure. Others can live completely unhealthy lives and never experience those things. I think this horse represents that punitive judgement of the rider to inflict death on whomever he chooses. The fact is that life is not fair, in fact, life is difficult. We live in difficult times.

The fifth seal is opened and it is not a horse. This time we see all the martyrs of history under the altar, not just Christian martyrs, but all those who were killed for their

commitment to their higher power. This does not mean that all those were killed for their beliefs, or that those who will be killed for their beliefs will have to hide for eternity under an altar, but these people are waiting for God to give them vindication. Vindication and justice are the things that we hope for when things are unfair, and we want so much for God to give us that eventually. All the things done wrong to us make us want that kind of reversal to happen in the future. But that is not necessarily the promise here.

The sixth seal is opened and John sees all kinds of natural disasters. Earthquakes, the sun turning black, the moon turning red, stars falling to earth, skies rolled up, and mountains and islands moved. This seal represents natural disaster. Have we seen some of these lately? Whose basement had water in it after the snowmelt and rain? We are seeing more and more severe weather events and it makes us feel like there is some kind of disaster of epic proportions heading our way. We have seen unprecedented natural disasters just in our lifetimes.

So do these seals describe some future way the world is going to end or do they describe just about where we are right now? Do you feel that sense of discomfort or fear? Remember that this was written almost 2,000 years ago. And, there is hope.

Part 2: Be Courageous!

So what are we going to do in the face of all these troubles, diseases, natural disasters, inequity, and wars? Maybe some of us just feel like giving up, but I'm pretty sure that's not the best idea. We need to carry on, like a pregnant mother! As Jesus describes this idea in John 16 he describes our lives like a mother feeling the pains of childbirth. They are awful but it's worth it.

When we were having babies, we prepared so much. We didn't just do Lamaze or the hospital instruction, but a 12-week course called the Bradley Method. It was a natural, no drugs, method of childbirth that included extensive information about what was going on with our babies. I don't know if you know this but we actually had two of our babies at home. I know I'm a witch, right? The goal was to work with the pain for the good of the baby, so we practiced ways to endure the pain. Focus, meditation, and other practices of relaxation were important to get through. Eventually the babies came and there was intense pain, but the presence of this tiny little baby who was so amazing made it all worth it.

But after all this preparation to have the baby, there was not a training program for how to take care of your children or how to bring them up in the best way. It was kind of

like, well here you go, good luck. So there was more pain trying to bring up kids in this tumultuous world the best that we could, but there was pain and difficulty. Was it worth it to go through that pain? For sure. There are many things in life that are worth doing that might require some difficulty to get there. That is what this imagery from Revelation 6 is all about, that in the face of every difficulty in life, it is worth it to hold tight to our faith, to endure it all for a greater cause.

One of the most often used phrases in the Bible and by Jesus is the phrase, "Be not afraid." It's as if God knows that the world is difficult and dangerous and so the instruction is to hold on because there is more to come. As we face this world and the dangers that lie within it, we have faith that the pain is worth it, as Jesus has already conquered the world with peace and love.