

The Lamb and the Beast, Part 4: Love Wins

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Scripture: John 1:1-14; Revelation 7:1-17

1. Pitching Tent

In 1949 – exactly 70 years ago – a young New England minister named Roger Manners was called to gather a church in the Loveland area of West Omaha. Though the land immediately west of us was little more than cornfields, surveys indicated that the area would soon become populated. I guess they were right!

Soon, a parsonage was built for Rev. Manners and his new wife, Betsy, in what is now the Westside parking lot. Worship was first held in Loveland School, and later in the basement of the new parsonage. Countryside's official first building was a small chapel (not our present one), built in 1951. That year, Countryside's Women's Fellowship held a carnival that raised \$372 to outfit the chapel kitchen, according to a church newsletter.

That same newsletter contained a letter from Howard Buffett – Warren Buffett's father – who was serving in Congress. While his son, Warren Buffett, is known as the Oracle of Omaha, I think Howard deserves the title, *Oracle of Countryside*. For, in his letter he writes, "I believe that the future of Protestantism depends upon the achievement of the kind of unity that is the goal of community churches." Then, he closes his letter with a prediction that would have seemed totally counterintuitive for a tiny congregation meeting in a chapel at the edge of a cornfield: **"It seems to me that the Countryside Community Church probably has ahead of it the greatest future of any Protestant church in Omaha, and I want to wish you well with that great responsibility."**

A couple of years later, Countryside added an education wing to the chapel. Then, in 1966, the sanctuary was completed. At the dedication, our members raised enough money to help build a sister church in the Philippines. You see, from our earliest beginnings, we had our eyes on doing wonderful things locally, but also for the world.

As Rev. Bob Alward (after whom our new chapel will be named) explained, "We wanted to do something significant – dedicate *ourselves and our organizations* as

well as our physical structure.” (Emphasis mine.) As you can tell from the “Days of Our Lives” interviews we showed in worship a few minutes ago, this same vision continues today. It’s a vision of the church being more than a physical structure. A church is primarily a *spiritual* structure. It is about people in relationship with the Holy Spirit, each other, and the wider world.

Of course, this vision didn’t begin with Rev. Alward. The vision finds its origin in our Bible.

In the book of Exodus, we find the first example of an Israelite sanctuary. It was a tent, or tabernacle, erected in the wilderness, that could be set up and taken down again on their journey to the Promised Land. While the tabernacle was quite fancy – by tent standards – containing finely crafted furnishings and objects made of precious metals, the tabernacle’s primary purpose was to house the “*Shekhinah*” of God, or God’s “Indwelling Presence.” According to Israelite belief, God sat invisibly enthroned above the Ark of the Covenant in the back of the tabernacle, known as the Holy of Holies. While no one was allowed in the Holy of Holies except Moses and a handful of priests, the tabernacle was, in essence, the meeting-place between God and God’s people. When God decided it was time to move on, a pillar of fire would appear and move in a certain direction, indicating it was now time to dismantle the tabernacle and move it to wherever the fire rested next.

The story of the tabernacle and pillar of fire is part of Israel’s deep mythological imagination, meaning it is not meant so much to tell us what happened thousands of years ago, but what happens over and over again up to our very day.

One of the things that the story is trying to tell us is that the physical structure of any place of worship is important, but it is not what is ultimately important. Constructing the tabernacle was not an end in itself. Rather, its purpose was to facilitate a *relationship* with God and with God’s people. Therefore, the tabernacle was erected, then taken down and re-erected in the place to which God was calling them to go.

Can you see how this story remains true up to our very day? For what are we doing but relocating our tabernacle from one place to another in response to where God is calling us to go?

Curiously, in our Scripture this morning from the first chapter of John's Gospel, Jesus is seen as a new form of tabernacle. God's "Word became flesh and dwelt among us." (John 1:14) The Greek word that we translate as "dwelt," literally means "pitch tent" – as in God's "Word became flesh and pitched-tent among us." What does that remind you of?

If you guessed the Israelite tabernacle, then you have noticed what the gospel writer hopes you will notice. He's comparing Jesus to the Israelite tabernacle. In other words, Jesus is not God. Jesus is a *living tabernacle* in which God's Word chooses to dwell.

Like the physical tabernacle, Jesus's physical body was not what was ultimately important, but the Presence of God people experienced through their relationship with Jesus. When his physical body died, God's Presence didn't disappear with it. We know this from the Resurrection. But we know this all-the-more with the story of Pentecost.

The Pentecost story is about how God's Spirit relocated after Jesus was gone – relocated in a radical way. Instead of relocating to a new living tabernacle in the form of a new man or woman of God, God's Spirit chose to "pitch tent" inside anyone who would allow God's Spirit entrance. Just as God's Spirit "pitched tent" in with the Israelite people through the tabernacle, and "pitched tent" in Jesus, the Living Tabernacle, and in Jesus's disciples at Pentecost, so God's Spirit "pitches tent" in you and me.

There's a reason why the church isn't about the physical structure, but the people – because it is within the people that God has chosen to dwell. Countryside members have known this for a long, long time. This notion is articulated quite well, in fact, in a song written by Countryside's former Music Director, John Miller, called "There Will I Be":

*Where ye are gathered together in my name,
there will I be, there will I be.
Listen and hear the voice of the Master,
speaking to you, speaking to me:
"There will I be," said He, "there will I be."
Where ye are gathered together in my name,
there will I be.*

2. Love Wins

Our passage from the Book of Revelation – written by John of Patmos just a handful of years after the Gospel of John (different John) appeared, takes this radical concept of God’s Spirit “pitching tent” inside the people of God and makes it even more radical. The seventh chapter of Revelation is really the focal-point of the entire book. The remaining 15 chapters are simply a reiteration of themes John has already established, only from different angles.

The main thing to understand about John’s vision in Revelation 7 is that it is a fulfillment of Psalm 22 – the psalm Jesus quotes from on the Cross. Do you remember his last words? “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” That’s the first line of Psalm 22. In it, the author of the Psalm tells of himself being despised and rejected, of being tortured and having divided his clothes among people who cast lots for them (Sound familiar?). The psalm doesn’t end there but rather takes a sudden turn. God comes to the rescue – not just any rescue. God rescues the psalmist and the *entire world* from bondage.

Writes the psalmist:

*For God did not despise or abhor the affliction of the afflicted ...
All the ends of the earth shall remember and turn to the LORD;
and **all the families of the nations** shall worship before him.
For dominion belongs to the LORD, and God rules over the nations.
To God, indeed, shall **all who sleep in the earth** bow down;
before God shall bow **all who go down to the dust**, and I shall live for God.
Posterity will serve God; future generations will be told about the Lord,
and proclaim God’s **deliverance to a people yet unborn**,
saying that God has done it.
(Psalm 22:24, 27-31)*

This is exactly what John of Patmos envisions happening when God’s will is finally accomplished for Creation. Psalm 22 predicts that God will dwell within all human hearts such that “*all the ends of the earth*” will turn to God, “and *all the families of the nations* will worship before God,” *including* those “who sleep in the earth” and “people yet unborn.” This is precisely what John sees. God dwells within everyone, and everyone dwells within the holy sanctuary of God.

“But wait!” you say. “John only sees 144,000 standing before God’s throne.”

The 7th chapter of Revelation is, of course, where the Jehovah's Witnesses get their idea that only 144,000 will be saved in the end. But the Jehovah's Witnesses seem not to be aware of the fact that, in the Bible, the number 12 represents totality. There are twelve tribes of Israel, twelve disciples, and so forth. What John is trying to say is that the number of those standing before God's throne is 12 (totality) times 12,000! In other words, Psalm 22 is right. In the end, love wins. Everyone has been transformed. Everyone is there.

In case you miss the point, John writes, "I looked again. I saw a huge crowd, *too huge to count.*" This is no mere 144,000!

Then John continues:

Everyone was there—all nations and tribes, all races and languages. And they were standing, dressed in white robes and waving palm branches, standing before the Throne and the Lamb and heartily singing:

*Salvation to our God on his Throne!
Salvation to the Lamb!*

All who were standing around the Throne—Angels, Elders, Animals—fell on their faces before the Throne and worshiped God, singing:

*Oh, Yes!
The blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving,
The honor and power and strength,
To our God forever and ever and ever!
Oh, Yes!*

Yes, the Book of Revelation is neither about 144,000 people being saved, nor is it even about all Christians being saved. It's about all of humanity being saved – including those who had opposed God. All people eventually will be standing "in white" – a symbol of purity and transformation – before God's throne.

John relates that one of the Elders asked him, "Who are these dressed in white robes, and where did they come from?"

Apparently, up to that time John himself had missed the point, so the Elder reveals who they are: "These are those who come from the great tribulation, and

they've washed their robes, scrubbed them clean in the blood of the Lamb." Do you remember who experiences the tribulation in Revelation? It's those who opposed God! Now they're scrubbed clean by the blood of the Lamb – not *atoning* blood, as if God needed to kill the lamb in order to get over some anger management issue with us – but *purifying* blood. *Transforming* blood.

"That's why they're standing before God's Throne," says the Elder. "They serve him day and night in his Temple. **The One on the Throne will pitch-tent** there with them: no more hunger, no more thirst, no more scorching heat. The Lamb on the Throne will shepherd them, will lead them to spring waters of Life. And God will wipe every last tear from their eyes." (Rev. 7:15-17 *The Message*)

Pitch tent? Where have we heard that before? Only in Exodus as God "pitches tent" with the Israelite people; and in the gospels, where God "pitches tent" in Jesus; and at Pentecost where God "pitches tent" among those who welcome in God's Spirit ... and now in Revelation where God "pitches tent" with everyone who ever lived.

Apparently, God has a pretty big tent!

This is the very intuition that is moving us from the "tent" we built here in 1951 to the one we have built on the Tri-Faith Commons. We're moving into a bigger, more inclusive tent! A tent that includes not only Christians, but Jews and Muslims. A tent that we, like John of Patmos, believe is much bigger even than this.

How appropriate, therefore, that on this particular Sunday – our very last at 8787 Pacific – we would end with John's vision of God "pitching tent" with all people, we would welcome into membership a few more who have come to join us here in the tent God has pitched with us.