

## **A Meal And A War**

I'm looking for some place I can preach that message Sarah preached last week about the four Hallelujahs! She gets the verses about praise and worship and I get the sections about harlots and a war where birds gorge themselves on the flesh of those who die in battle. I should have looked closer at the chapters before dividing them up.

I've preached through Revelation a couple of times in my thirty eight years as your pastor and I think I've enjoyed this time the most. We've tried to read it less like a person in 2023 and more like someone hearing it read in one of the churches in the first century. Hearing the passage we are looking at today, I don't know that I would have been thinking about this as an actual, literal marriage feast or the battle as being an actual physical battle; I don't think I would have been trying to figure out the menu or locate the exact physical site for the battle or figuring out the timing. I think I would have been seeing the meal and the war as images of a spiritual reality, communicating important spiritual perspectives and truth for our present circumstances and not just about events far off in the future. Turn to Revelation 19:6.

**“Hallelujah! For our Lord God Almighty reigns. Let us rejoice and be glad and give him glory! For the wedding of the Lamb has come, and his bride has made herself ready...Then the angel said to me, ‘Write: Blessed are those who are invited to the wedding supper of the Lamb!’ And he added, ‘These are the true words of God.’ At this I fell at his feet to worship him. But he said to me, ‘Do not do it! I am a fellow servant with you and with your brothers who hold to the testimony of Jesus. Worship God! For the testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy.’”**

**“I saw heaven standing open and there before me was a white horse, whose rider is called Faithful and True. With justice he judges and makes war. His eyes are like blazing fire, and on his head are many crowns. He has a name written on him that no one knows but he himself. He is dressed in a robe dipped in blood, and his name is the Word of God. The armies of heaven were following him, riding on white horses and dressed in fine linen, white and clean. Out of his mouth comes a sharp sword with which to strike down the nations. ‘He will rule them with an iron scepter.’ He treads the winepress of the fury of the wrath of God Almighty. On his robe and on his thigh he has this name written: KING OF KINGS AND LORD OF LORDS. And I saw an angel standing in the sun, who cried in a loud voice to all the birds flying in midair, ‘Come, gather together for the great supper of**

**God, so that you may eat the flesh of kings, generals, and mighty men, of horses and their riders, and the flesh of all people, free and slave, small and great.’ Then I saw the beast and the kings of the earth and their armies gathered together to make war against the rider on the horse and his army. But the beast was captured, and with him the false prophet who had performed the miraculous signs on his behalf. With these signs he had deluded those who had received the mark of the beast and worshiped his image. The two of them were thrown alive into the fiery lake of burning sulfur. The rest of them were killed with the sword that came out of the mouth of the rider on the horse, and all the birds gorged themselves on their flesh.” Revelation 19:6-21**

From a beautiful meal at a wedding to the stuff biblical nightmares are made of. What’s this all this about? My answer would be: **It’s all about salvation! “Hallelujah! Salvation and glory and power belong to our God...” Rev. 19:1** But this battle sounds horrible! It is horrible. It’s disturbing. It’s Armageddon. The images and the debauchery of Babylon are disturbing as well, and the wedding supper is set in contrast to these disturbing, troubling images. The meal is bracketed by these two events. We have to live at the moment in Babylon, in this fallen, sinful world, but by faith we are part of the wedding party where all is bright and clean. Always keep that in mind. Judgment is coming to this world but by faith we escape this judgment through the blood of the Lamb. Salvation, from Babylon, salvation from catastrophe and the judgment that is coming. Eugene Peterson writes, “Salvation is the answer to catastrophe. The dimensions of catastrophe are understood biblically, to exceed human capacity for recovery. All parts of creation...have been jarred out of the harmonious original and are in discord.” It’s all messed up and we can’t fix it. We can’t correct Babylon’s course. We need salvation! All of this is showing how badly, how desperately we need saving!

Babylon is fallen, destroyed, burning. There is world-wide catastrophe. But in the midst of it is this wedding supper of the Lamb. Here is the contrast again. Respite and salvation. We are the bride and we’ve made ourselves ready. Fine linen white and clean has been given to us, garments made clean by the blood of the Lamb and his sacrifice. We are invited to the table but then the scene changes again. Instead of the bridegroom’s arrival, instead of sitting down at the wedding supper, we see a vision of a horse and rider and a great battle. Instead of the wedding supper of the Lamb, we get a battle and this grotesque image of the “great supper of God.”

Stay with me. Remember the plot is about salvation. Spiritual images of salvation set in a meal and a war. The image of the marriage supper is a picture celebrating the union we have with Christ. It's a celebration of salvation and the primary way we remember and proclaim all that salvation is to us, his crucifixion, his death, the shedding of his blood for us and for our salvation, is through communion, a meal, the Lord's Supper we call it. Salvation is reduced down to this image, this action. Every time we partake of communion, we testify of salvation, we proclaim the Lord's death until he comes. Every time we eat the bread and drink the cup, we testify this is how we overcome, by the blood of the Lamb that was shed for us, by the word of our testimony. This meal we eat together, the Lord's supper says salvation has come to us by grace through faith in Christ Jesus. This meal says we belong to him, we are one with him, he lives within us. We are saved not by righteous things we have done but by his mercy. Every time we take communion we are proclaiming, "We've been invited to the supper of the Lamb!" Quoting Eugene Peterson once again, **"The many dimensioned reality of salvation is preserved not by a truth that we must figure out, or by an ethical behavior that we must carry out, but in a meal to eat. Not everyone can comprehend a doctrine; not everyone can obey a precept; but everyone can eat a piece of bread, drink a cup of wine, and understand a simple statement – my body, my blood. I maintain continuity with the killed and raised Jesus who is salvation, not by learning something or by performing something, but by eating a meal."** ...Eugene Peterson Come to the table and eat this salvation celebrating meal! It's about salvation so it's about the Savior. It's about Jesus! And we eat this meal between Babylon and Armageddon. We eat this meal in a war zone knowing by faith we are saved!

And here is a little reminder to help keep us on track. John is told, **"The testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy."** Rev. 19:10 I can't help but think of all the messages we heard from so called prophets over the past three years and I have to tell you, I didn't hear much about Jesus in most of them. If the focus is on salvation then the focus must be on Jesus! The heart of Revelation is the testimony of Jesus. Keep your eye on the Lamb.

A meal and a war. The image changes from a meal where we fellowship with Jesus and we are aware of his life-giving and life sustaining power and presence to this image of a war where we realize we are engaging an enemy that wants to deceive us and destroy us. Remember our victory is through the blood of the Lamb.

John sees a white horse with a rider who is called **“Faithful and True”**. We know this is Jesus and what a word to the early church, to the church through the centuries, facing opposition, persecution, martyrdom. The head of the church, the one who comes to save us is Faithful and True. You can rely on Him every time, in every season, every circumstance.

**“With justice he judges and makes war.”** His motives are just and pure. There is no lust for power or conquest, no vindictiveness; it is out of pure justice that he judges and makes war, defending the powerless and hopeless.

**“His eyes are like blazing fire”** (from Rev. 1) indicating he searches all things and nothing can be hidden from him and **“on his head are many crowns”** suggesting his dominion over everything! The beast and the kings and generals of the earth come against him and his armies (that’s us) but not all of them together are a match for Jesus, the one who is Faithful and True.

**“He has a name written on him that no one knows but he himself.”** It’s a reminder that we don’t know all there is to know about him. There is a depth to his nature and character that we have not yet discovered or experienced. There is power and authority in his name that no one else knows of, so no one else can access all the power and authority of his name. We do know these other names, King of Kings, Lord of Lords, the Word of God.

**“He is dressed in a robe dipped in blood and his name is the Word of God.”** It is important that we understand how different this is. We expect the blood on a warrior’s clothes to be the blood of his enemies, but Jesus is not your regular warrior and king. His victory occurs not through the shedding of his enemies’ blood but through the shedding of his own blood. The blood on his robe is his own blood, offered for us and for our salvation.

**“The armies of heaven were following him, riding on white horses and dressed in fine linen, white and clean.”** These are the saints of God. Notice how the army is dressed, not in military uniforms, not in fatigues, not armed with assault weapons to mow down the godless, they are dressed in fine linen, the white and clean garments Jesus gave them to wear, the garments cleansed by his blood, garments of salvation! (“They have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.” Rev. 7:14)

**“Out of his mouth comes a sharp sword with which to strike down the nations. He will rule them with an iron scepter...On his robe and on his thigh he has this name written: KING OF KINGS AND LORD OF LORDS.”**

We've got the armies of heaven in white linen garments, made white by washing them in the blood of the Lamb. We've got the one who is Faithful and True with a name written both on his robe and on his thigh. The thigh is the place where his sword should be hanging, but look: Instead of a sword, it's his name. It's not through military might, in spite of the image, it's not at the edge of a sword but at the name of Jesus that every knee bows and every tongue confesses he is Lord. He is victorious by his blood and his name. (His name is Jesus because he will save his people from their sins.)

And what do the armies of heaven do? Nothing! We are dressed in fine linen which verse 8 says "stands for the righteous acts of the saints." We are called to take a stand against sin and evil, against the greed and influence of Babylon; we are called to live holy and righteous lives by his sustaining grace but ultimately in this battle of the ages, we aren't fighting a Christian holy war. Save your ammo because all the action belongs to Jesus! He judges and makes war, from his mouth comes the sword with which to strike down the nations, he will rule them (shepherd them with an iron staff), he treads the winepress of the fury of the wrath of God." He secured the victory for us through his death and resurrection and he comes again to implement that victory through the authority of his name and the power of his word! At his word and through his blood salvation comes. At his word and through his blood all sin and evil and violence and injustice are forever defeated. **"Hallelujah! Salvation and glory and power belong to our God..."**

Two contrasting images, a meal and a war. I get it, we overcome through Christ and that communion meal celebrates and testifies to that union we have with Christ by grace. But why the war? I get it, Jesus wins the war, provides an end to sin and the devil and we have complete salvation. But there is something else John wants us to see. He wants us to recognize the battle, the spiritual opposition, to see the war and to see that we are in it. Eugene Peterson writes, **"St. Paul, preaching salvation, did not organize ethical societies around the Mediterranean basin; he fought battles and developed an extensive vocabulary to name the evil opposition: powers, rulers, thrones, dominions. He didn't seem to be in the least bit intimidated by these ominous forces. He was always working from a stance of accomplished victory since Jesus on the cross 'disarmed the principalities and powers and made a public example of them, triumphing over them in him'. There is apparently, nothing to fear in the act of fighting. Danger here is all in the not fighting. The safest place is on the battlefield for it is**

**there that Christ is active, riding the white horse.”...Eugene Peterson** John wants us to be aware we are in a battle with a real enemy. We move from the meal, from communion with Jesus where we are fortified by his life/presence into the battlefield, into the war, but he wants us to know that the enemy is no match for Christ our Savior, the King of Kings and Lord of Lords!

We read this passage and it is disturbing – the talk of vultures eating flesh and the defeat and death of all those who gathered to make war against the rider on the white horse. It’s supposed to be disturbing. The image is meant to wake people from their complacency, from their easy acceptance of sin. It’s about salvation, remember? Jesus hasn’t come to negotiate with the devil or the beast or with sin and wickedness, he has come to save us from our sins, to liberate us from a kingdom of sin and darkness and bring us into his kingdom of freedom and light. The images are disturbing because they are to serve as a warning. They are meant to wake us up and that means they have to be alarming. There is an end coming to all who refuse to repent. These enemies of God in Rev. 19 have been given repeated opportunity to repent and have refused every opportunity! Warning, for mature audiences, judgment and death and fiery lakes and vultures are ahead. Wake up before it’s too late!

A meal and a war. There is a promise and there is a warning. The warning is meant to disturb us and the meal is meant to assure us. In his commentary on Revelation, Craig Koester writes, **“Both visions of the future stand before the readers, warning that there is judgment for all and promising that there is hope for all. Readers can best respond to the contrasting visions by heeding the warning and by trusting the promises. Those who fall into despair because the warnings are so severe need to hear again the promises of life through the power of the Lamb, while those who fall into complacency because the promises seem so assuring are rightly startled by the warnings concerning God’s judgments on sin and evil. Faith, which is the alternative to despair and to complacency, is the shape that life takes in anticipation of the End.” ...Craig Koester**

A meal and a war, a promise and a warning. You can accept his invitation and find life or you can ignore his warning, reject his call and find death and judgment and hell. What will you choose? That’s the message we need to be concerned with from Rev. 19 today -- not details about Armageddon or the final battle, but how will I respond today? Everyone has to choose.