

A Theologic Reflection on the Tsunami

(Matthew 2: 1-12; Revelation 6: 1-8; Romans 8: 18-25)

As I said earlier on this morning to the children we are celebrating the Feast of the Epiphany. Jesus appearing to the world is the theme of Epiphany. God present in the world and to the world. That is our theme. But I want you to notice something about this story. It is not the only theme. The Epiphany story is told within the framework of another story. This is the story of Herod. We are told in verse 1 that these events took place during the time of King Herod. King Herod was not a name associated with good news. No, he was a bad piece of work. Whenever the reporters submitted a story about King Herod the editors would have headlines reading:

“Herod executes 45 Sadducees and confiscates their property.”

“Herod executes his wife, mother-in-law, and brother-in-law.”

Herod destroyed practically everybody who was any threat to his power. No one was immune from his lust for complete power. Matthew tells us a little later in this second chapter:

“When Herod saw that he had been tricked by the wise men, he was infuriated, and he sent and killed all the children in and around Bethlehem who were two years old or under, according to the time that he had learned from the wise men.”

So while the wise men were encountering the young Jesus, the dominant news story of that day would have focused on Herod's fury.

Epiphany is about two stories. Jesus' appearing is the one story Matthew tells. Herod's killing of the innocent is the other.

Just think about it. Doesn't this story resonate with what we have heard about in the past week? No, the fury has not been that of an evil King who kills indiscriminately, but of an evil Tsunami that unleashed such violence that the destruction it wrought is unprecedented within a generation.

A natural disaster so great that twelve countries have been caught in the wake of its rage. At least 125,000 people dead, millions homeless and the threat of disease, starvation and further death pressing.

How do we make sense of such a disaster?

Nowhere in the Bible is there an attempt to answer the question “Why does a good God permit evil. The book of Job is a detailed study of the question of evil. It and the rest of the Bible declares that evil is a fact. What the Bible does do is spend a good deal of space insisting that certain facts are evil and not minor blemishes on the surface of existence. No, the Bible does not provide an explanation of evil but defines a context. Evil happens in a world where God/Jesus are also made known and present. This is why on these days immediately after Christmas we bring these dual themes of Jesus’ presence and Herod’s presence into focus. Both exist at the same time.

But to some the dominance of evil leads them to conclude that either God is absent or does not exist. If there is a God, he seems inconsequential in the face of evil’s potency. They conclude “God may be in heaven but the devil runs history. Ivan, the atheist brother in Dostoevsky’s Karamazov family, kept a notebook in which he entered every horrible atrocity he learned or heard of: the notebook was his laboratory for proving the nonexistence of God. Ivan’s notebook is a perennial best seller.

And yet the Bible would have us recognize that things are not as they so often appear. There is a perspective other than that recorded by Ivan. As I thought of this other perspective two passages came to mind that that highlight this for us. Revelation 6 and Romans 8.

In Revelation Chapter 6 we have John describing for us the opening of the six seals. Back in chapter five reference is made to these seals in a doxology that is sung to Jesus by the multitude who are in heaven. They sing:

You are worthy to take the scroll, And to open its seals; For You were slain, And have redeemed us to God by Your blood out of every tribe and tongue and people and nation, (Revelation 5:9)

This hymn says that Jesus is the one who can open these seals because he alone has redeemed by his blood people out of every nation.

But what are these seals? To answer that question we have to turn to chapter 6. There we read of the first four seals:

First Seal: The Conqueror

1 Now I saw when the Lamb opened one of the seals;^[a] and I heard one of the four living creatures saying with a voice like thunder, "Come and see." 2 And I looked, and behold, a white horse. He who sat on it had a bow; and a crown was given to him, and he went out conquering and to conquer.

Second Seal: Conflict on Earth

3 When He opened the second seal, I heard the second living creature saying, "Come and see."^[b] 4 Another horse, fiery red, went out. And it was granted to the one who sat on it to take peace from the earth, and that people should kill one another; and there was given to him a great sword.

Third Seal: Scarcity on Earth

5 When He opened the third seal, I heard the third living creature say, "Come and see." So I looked, and behold, a black horse, and he who sat on it had a pair of scales in his hand. 6 And I heard a voice in the midst of the four living creatures saying, "A quart^[c] of wheat for a denarius,^[d] and three quarts of barley for a denarius; and do not harm the oil and the wine."

Fourth Seal: Widespread Death on Earth

7 When He opened the fourth seal, I heard the voice of the fourth living creature saying, "Come and see." 8 So I looked, and behold, a pale horse. And the name of him who sat on it was Death, and Hades followed with him. And power was given to them over a fourth of the earth, to kill with sword, with hunger, with death, and by the beasts of the earth.

Much could be said about these verses but time limits a detailed explanation. What I want you to consider is that Revelation is the last book of the Bible. In this book a great deal of attention is given to the presence of evil in this world. Much of the material that we find in chapters 6-18 deals with the reality of evil. And yet notice that it is only the sixth chapter that evil is described in any detail. Already 20 percent of the book has passed before the scrolls are

opened. Chapter one of Revelation gives us this vivid picture of the glorified Jesus, ascended to the right hand of the Father. Chapters two and three zero in on the place of the church in the world. In chapters four and five the curtain is opened so that we are given insight into the worship of heaven. Only then do we see evil's wave crash onto the pages of Revelation.

As we do you will notice that each of the four seals describes in sequence a horse. A white, a fiery red, a black and a pale horse. Why is this? The horse is an animal for battle. As Revelation shows us and as history has documented, life in this world is a long sequence of battles. The forces of good and evil are pitched in conflict. As these verses in Revelation make clear this is a war that has different faces.

Who is the rider on the white horse. No this is not Shadow Fax and the rider is not Gandalf, the White Wizard of Middle Earth. Although Tolkein may very well have had this passage in mind as he created the epic battle at the centre of **The Lord of the Rings**. This is Jesus. And not only does he appear here in chapter 6. Turn over to chapter 19 and verse 11. There we read: Then I saw heaven opened, and there was a white horse! Its rider is called Faithful and True, and in righteousness he judges and makes war.”

If we are going to understand evil biblically we need to recognize that it is bracketed and contained by Jesus. He is the rider who has gone out conquering and to conquer. But his victory, although assured, will not be easily won. This is because there are other riders on other horses who will do everything in their power to defeat the rider on the white horse. They do this by creating conflict, scarcity and widespread death on the earth. As we think of these three horsemen we can see how the world is shot through with the evil these riders unleash on the earth. As we consider what happened this past week we are aware of how these seals have opened a flood gate of suffering that we cannot comprehend.

And so were are left with the tension these riders present to us. Jesus has the first word and will have a last word in the epic battle. But in the course of the war the casualties are countless. And so we at times cry out with the Psalmist David:

How long, O LORD? Will you forget me forever?

How long will you hide your face from me?
²How long must I bear pain in my soul,
and have sorrow in my heart all day long?
How long shall my enemy be exalted over me?

My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?
Why are you so far from helping me, from the words of my groaning?

When we live by faith we can ask the why and how long questions, while at the same time trusting in what Revelation teaches us. The world we live in is a battlefield. The battlefield is found in the soul of each person, it is fought out in family circles, it is contested between nations, and envelops people when they are overtaken by environmental disasters.

Yet it is only from the perspective of Christian belief that we can affirm that this all has meaning even if it is at present hidden from us. Paul knew of the white horse and his rider. Because of this he was able to say with such confidence in Romans 8:

18For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us. 19For the earnest expectation of the creation eagerly waits for the revealing of the sons of God. 20For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of Him who subjected it in hope; 21because the creation itself also will be delivered from the bondage of corruption into the glorious liberty of the children of God. 22For we know that the whole creation groans and labors with birth pangs together until now. 23Not only that, but we also who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, even we ourselves groan within ourselves, eagerly waiting for the adoption, the redemption of our body. 24For we were saved in this hope, but hope that is seen is not hope; for why does one still hope for what he sees? 25But if we hope for what we do not see, we eagerly wait for it with perseverance.

Here is another great text that I cannot do justice to this morning. But it needs to be mentioned because it can only be rightly understood if we have an understanding of the battle as portrayed in Revelation 6. Paul understands that our present life as being made up primarily of suffering. This is what he

says in verse 18. This is further elaborated on by what he says in the verses that follow:

Verse 20: The creation was subjected to futility

Verse 21: The creation itself will be delivered from the bondage of corruption

Verse 22 The Whole of creation groans and labours with birth pangs

Verse 23 Even we who have the first fruits of the Spirit groan within ourselves.

And what is it that creation and we who are in Christ are waiting for? Redemption. The end of the war. The defeat of those other riders by Jesus. The words Paul uses to describe the victory are littered throughout these verses.

The glory which will be revealed in us,

The revealing of the sons of God,

Creation set free from its futility

The glorious liberty of the children of God.

Because we understand evil not from the perspective of Ivan's notebook but from St. John's Revelation we can say Amen to what Paul writes in verses 24 and 25:

For we were saved in this hope, but hope that is seen is not hope; for why does one still hope for what he sees? 25 But if we hope for what we do not see, we eagerly wait for it with perseverance.

To persevere means that we will continue to live believing and trusting in God even when life seems absurd. To persevere means that we will assist those who are suffering by sacrificial giving. To persevere means that we will cultivate a biblical perspective of life by as the Epiphany stories brings into focus Jesus' benevolence and Herod's malevolence.

As Christians we declare that although evil rides to destroy life, there is one who rides out to conquering and to conquer. The Lord Jesus Christ.