

Date: April 29, 2007

**SUNDAY:** Easter 4

**SERMON: Revising Our Visions**

Text(s): Rev. 7:9-17; John 10:22-30

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Let me begin with several really important questions this morning. Question #1: How many of you like to watch old movies from time to time? Question #2: How many of you like old Burt Lancaster movies? Question #3: How many of you remember an old Burt Lancaster movie called *The Hallelujah Trail*? Well, for those of you whose appreciation for cinematic art is somewhat stunted, *The Hallelujah Trail* was an inspired bit of nonsense, directed by John Sturges and included a star-heavy cast, including not only Burt Lancaster, but Lee Remick, Brian Keith, Martin Landau, and Gabby Hayes among others.

It was conceived as a spoof of the genre of the cowboy-and-Indian movies then in vogue. The plot line was pretty thin. Burt Lancaster was a cavalry officer charged with guarding a wagon train full of whiskey bound for saloons in California. As you might guess, his cargo attracted the attention of a variety of hostile and dangerous groups— gold miners, Indians, and the Temperance League, to name only a few.

One of the central characters, played by Gabby Hayes, was a grizzled old rascal who had visions. These visions were particularly vivid and predictable whenever he'd had a few belts of the rotgut the wagons were carrying west. Whenever the wagon train was facing a crisis, whether it was under attack by hostile Indians or in danger of being lost in the desert, or threatened with destruction by the ladies Temperance League, Burt Lancaster would give the old guy a few belts from the whiskey bottle. Suddenly his eyes would glaze over, a choir of angelic voices would break into the opening bars of Handel's "Hallelujah Chorus," and up in the corner of the TV screen, his visions would appear. In real time, they might be fighting off a fierce attack, but in visionary time, they were settling down in

a peaceful place and plowing the land to plant crops. In real time, they might be crossing the burning desert, and the children crying for water, but in his visionary time, he foresaw new glittering cities rising from well-watered oases. And inspired by these alcohol-induced visions, the settlers in the wagon train would somehow find the courage to confront their immediate danger and go on toward their destination.

There's something in us that is both fascinated and repelled by visions and visionaries, particularly those that seem to spring from some experience of religious ecstasy. The kind that comes from a bottle, like Gabby Hayes' visions did, or the sort that a lot of people back in the 1960's experienced while on LSD, we simply laugh at because we know the source. But let anyone who's not drunk or on drugs claim to have had a vision, especially one with religious significance, and we begin to edge away as rapidly and as politely as we can. And yet, we cannot live meaningfully without a controlling vision, either as individuals or as a church. A few months ago, our Church Council created a Vision Task Force to help us think and pray and dream together until we begin to discern some sense of the direction in which God is calling us as a congregation over the next three to five to ten years.

The Book of Revelation, the last book in our Bible, is a book full of visions. Probably no writing in the canon of sacred scripture has been more ignored, abused, detested, or beloved. It has been the source of everything from misanthropic visions of the end of the world by Christian fundamentalists like Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins in their series of bad fictionalized interpretations often referred to as the *Left Behind* series, to the sublime harmonies and thrilling choruses of Handel's *Messiah*. Who can read the passage we heard this morning without hearing that final chorus from *The Messiah*? "*Worthy is the Lamb that was slain. . . Blessing and honor and glory and power be unto him forever and ever.*" Many of us can probably sing it from memory.

This visionary book is a tract for hard times, written by a pastor named John to the congregations in seven cities of Asia Minor at the end of the first century when some local persecutions of Christians by Roman provincial governors were beginning. Because Christians refused to conform to the law requiring a pledge of allegiance to the Roman emperor, they were considered subversive, or at least, suspected of being subversive. (Relations between citizens and the state haven't changed all that much, have they?) John himself, as he tells us right at the beginning of the book, was in internal exile on the island of Patmos. He chose to use the literary convention of visions, common in many Jewish and Christian apocalyptic writings at the time, perhaps partly so that the authorities, who were pagans, would not understand them, but also for the more important reason that when people are going through a time of deep distress and painful trial, they need something to help lift their eyes and their spirits beyond the visible and painful struggles of everyday life—something that will give them hope and courage and a sense that their sacrifices have some ultimate meaning.

In our passage this morning, this visionary writer pulls aside the curtain of time and space for a moment to let his readers glimpse their own situation from a heavenly or eternal perspective. Reading these visions is a little like watching one of those picture-in-picture features on a lot of televisions, where we can watch two different channels simultaneously—one lets us see what's happening on earth; the other lets us see the same events as they are viewed in heaven.

In his visionary journey into the heavenly world, he sees a great book sealed with seven seals, a book which represents the sweep of human history and God's goals for it. Just when it seems no one can be found who is worthy to open the book, a slaughtered Lamb appears on the scene—an obvious reference to Jesus. Early Christians, drawing on the rich imagery in the Exodus story and the Passover liturgy, had

already begun to refer to Jesus as the Passover Lamb. Here, however, the seer's heavenly guide says that the Lamb will, paradoxically, also be the Shepherd of those who have been faithful through their great ordeal.

This Shepherd-Lamb is found worthy to open the sealed book. Our passage for this morning occurs after the opening of the sixth seal. And the vision which follows is one of a great multitude of people which no one can number, all clothed in white robes of purity, with palm branches of victory in their hands, standing before the Lamb and crying out

*Salvation belongs to our God who is seated on the throne, and to the Lamb.*

The seer is told by one of the elders in heaven who is acting as his guide, that this great white-robed throng from every tribe and nation and language on earth are God's people who have been faithful through their ordeal of persecution, even in the face of death.

At least, that's what we see on the heavenly channel. If we were to look at the other channel that's up in the corner of our screen at the moment, we would see this scene through the eyes of the people who are actually living through it on earth. We would see a family being hounded out of a village by their neighbors because they had refused to participate in the ceremonies of pledging allegiance to the emperor. We might see a Christian family being turned away by a shopkeepers refusing to sell them food or Christian shopkeepers having their businesses boycotted.

It's that grubby, painful, and sometimes fearful human reality which in John's vision, we see transfigured into its true light. In the eyes of the world, they may be victims, but in God's eyes, they are victors because of their faithfulness in following Christ. And even in the midst of their danger and hunger and fear, they are, in reality, being tenderly cared for and protected from ultimate harm by the Lamb who is also their

Shepherd. And so they may take hope and courage in the midst of their trials.

Our Gospel writer also uses the metaphor of a divine shepherd who defends his flock from those who would harm them. Whatever hardships they may suffer, they can be confident that nothing will snatch them out of the shepherd's hand. But they can only have that confidence if they follow the shepherd in complete trust. If there is one thing that is made crystal clear in both the visions of the Book of Revelation and in our gospel lesson, it is that being a follower of Jesus means just that—following Jesus. It means being faithful to Jesus, even during, and perhaps especially during, those times when faithfulness is difficult or painful. The difficulty may not be actual persecution as it was for those early Christians of Asia Minor. It may be some other sort of ordeal, but our faithfulness must be every bit as specific for our own tough times, as theirs was for their time. It means living our life here on the basis of a vision we carry in our mind's eye and in our hearts, a vision of the divine purpose for our lives that is more real and true for us than the visions offered to us every day by Wall Street or Washington or Hollywood. We might say that we have to undergo a *revision* of our vision of reality as we normally conceive it, and live our life on the basis of that new vision.

David Bartlett, professor emeritus of preaching at Yale Divinity School puts it this way, “the Gospels. . . present not only a man who did not conform to the world's standards, but a Lord who continually calls us to his cause.” He's exactly right. When the religious leaders asked Jesus for evidence that he was the Messiah, he replied, “*You do not believe me because you do not belong to my sheep.*” In other words, if we want to know who Jesus is—that is know him not just as an historical figure around whom a religion grew up a long time ago or someone who is still the object of pious religious sentimentality, but as a Lord who is worthy to

command our allegiance, a Lord whose cause we can give our life to, then we have to belong to his sheep. It is in committing ourselves to following Jesus that we discover him as the Risen One who offers us the only life that has ultimate meaning—eternal life. Jesus said, “*My sheep hear my voice, and I give them eternal life. And no one will snatch them out of my hand.*” Or as the seer's heavenly guide puts it, “*The Lamb himself will be their Shepherd, and he will wipe away every tear from their eyes.*”

I remember very well when that truth became real for me personally. We were several years into our service as missionaries in Sarawak, E. Malaysia back in the 70's. Like many young people in those years, I was full of idealism, ready to go out and save the world, only to learn that I probably needed at least as much saving as the world did.

About three years into our time there, I discovered within myself a desert of loneliness and spiritual dryness, and I wasn't sure whether I had anything at all to say to my congregation or to the large youth and young adult group we had that was worth their hearing. I think if things had gone on like that for another six months, I might well have left the ministry and gone into some other line of work.

But just about the time when I felt that I was all alone at the bottom of an extremely dry well, three things happened that convinced me that I did have a Shepherd who cared for me. The first sign showed up in the mail. My youngest brother, who was in seminary himself at the time, sent me a copy of Henri Nouwen's book on pastoral ministry, *Living Reminders: Prayer and Service in Memory of Jesus Christ*. It was like a drink of pure spring water on a hot day. Not long after that, I began reading Thomas Merton's *Seven Storey Mountain*, and began to realize that perhaps I had more company at the bottom of that dry well than I knew, and that gave me enough hope to hang in there a bit longer.

The third sign showed up in person.

Another missionary with the Anglican Church told me that there was a priest from London coming out for three days to hold a series of talks on prayer, and he invited me to come. The visiting priest's name was Father Harold Parks, and he was rector of a parish in Finchley in North London. I discovered that he was a leader in the charismatic renewal movement that was strong within the Anglican church at that time. I was a bit skeptical, since my own spirituality doesn't run in the charismatic direction, but I went to hear him anyway. I don't know that it was anything in particular he said that got to me—certainly there was nothing new or original in what he had to say about prayer or the life of the spirit. He was not a powerful speaker, but there was something about him as a person; he just seemed to radiate the love of Christ from every pore. I sensed that here was a man who had a well of living water springing up in him that might slake my own parched soul.

So I found myself going up to him afterward and asking him if I could make an appointment to talk with him privately during his three days there. He very graciously said yes, and the next morning, I found myself sitting with him in his room in the guest house. I don't even remember what we talked about, other than that I must have told him something of how difficult a time I was having. All I really remember was that as I rode my motorbike back home that day, I was convinced that God had sent Father Harold Parks all the way out to Borneo just for me. I'm sure he never knew how much those few moments together did for a young sheep of the Good Shepherd's flock, but I knew he had found me when I was lost in the wilderness and helped me find my way home again. Or to say it another way, he helped me regain my sight—to revise my vision of what my life was about.

A controlling vision for our lives, whether as individuals or our life together as a congregation is essential if we are to make a real difference in our community and in the world.

Seeing that vision is only possible when we commit ourselves to follow Jesus faithfully, even when such following is difficult. But it's the only way I know that we can live in hope, and offer that hope to others who are like sheep without a Shepherd.