

“Every Tear” from Revelation 7: 9-17 Lection

Totenfest/ All Saints Sunday 2017 at Plymouth Congregational UCC, Fort Collins, CO
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Will you pray with me? O God, may the words of my mouth and the meditations, the artwork, the expressionism of all of our hearts in response to your Word, this Totenfest morning, be good and pleasing to you and healing for your people. Amen.

Last Sunday was Reformation Sunday when we celebrated the 500 years of the Reformation in the Church, so today it is proper and right for me to begin my sermon by quoting Martin Luther from his preface to a 1522 translation of the New Testament. In it he says of the Book of Revelation, “My spirit cannot accommodate itself to this book. For me this is reason enough not to think highly of it: Christ is neither taught nor known in it.”¹ Martin Luther’s reaction to Revelation was not unique. Zwingli, another parent of the Reformation, also sternly rejected The Book of Revelation, although neither succeeded in removing it from the cannon. There is a reason for that.

This is one of those complex texts, not a comforting or easy narrative, not a story or a letter, but a volatile and even dangerous one when misunderstood or misused, which it often is in our time. This is because it emerged from the School or Community of John, but many years after the death of the Apostles and Gospel writers. Rather, it is attributed to a later John—John the Divine. Isn’t that an awesome name! We can surmise from the context, language, and historical references that in response to persecution, death, and even hunger. It is, by every definition, an apocalypse. As such, it bears the weight, the burden, the pain, the anguish, and the torture in the face of oppression, fear, and loss. **It was written as a tableau of grief in search of hope for a community and a people in pain. An apocalypse in Biblical literature is always a response to a Totenfest of sorts.**

Rather than reading the Revelation literally, for that is always a grave mistake with Biblical apocalyptic literature, we must hold it up to the light of paradigm, metaphor, and human experience... painted in words and story fragments. **The Book of Revelation is the raw, pure, and complex experience of being human and facing death transformed into a non-linear story.** Again, this book is a painting of grief and loss.

Speaking of paintings, how many of you have ever been to a modern art museum? If you haven’t, Denver has one of the best with the Clyfford Still Museum—which I recommend. Still was an abstract expressionist artist rooted in philosophy that kept most of his work as one ensemble and offered it in its entirety to any city, upon his death, willing to build him an art museum. Guess what? Denver did it. This museum inspired my sermon.

¹ Carl R. Holladay, *A Critical Introduction to the New Testament: Interpreting the Message and Meaning of Jesus Christ* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2005), 564.

Today, in Biblical terms we are journeying into Scripture's Museum of Modern Art. We are entering together into the literary space shared by John the Divine (author of The Book of Revelation) and the Bauhaus movement, abstract expressionism, modernism, surrealism, pointillism, and post-modern artwork. **Saint John the Divine was the original abstract expressionist.** When we encounter modern art, like encountering the apocalyptic literature, we must assume a couple of things: 1. Feelings and our responses matter 2. Pay attention to the metaphors, the colors, and the big picture rather than getting lost in the details—it is the composition that counts 3. It is in response to a world that is no longer explainable, relatable, and understandable with simple story. Abstract Expressionism emerged in the speechlessness and horror of a post World War II world, much like the communities who wrote Biblical apocalypse. Pictures of flowers and stories will no longer do. **We again live in such a world where words and images have reached their limit of rational expression.**

I love this—I feel like I am teaching an art history class.

Put simply in artistic terms: When encountering The Book of Revelation, think Jackson Pollock rather than Rembrandt. While the Gospels and the letters of Paul are images we easily can relate to with story and personalities we understand (love em or hate em), learning to love the Book of Revelation is much like learning to understand modern or abstract expressionist artwork. It is not to be taken literally but symbolically and artistically. Again, think of Jackson Pollock rather than Rembrandt. Think of Salvador Dali rather than Monet. Think of Clyfford Still or Mondrian rather than Michael Angelo.

One of my professors, Dr. Carl Holladay, writes, “Counterbalancing [the] negative reactions [to it] is Revelation's influence on the church through music and art. Some of the most memorable choruses from Handel's *Messiah* are drawn from Revelation, even as it has inspired some of the most memorable works of visual art through the centuries...**Its 'Splendiferous [a great word... splendiferous] imagery'** captured the imagination of poets, artists, writers in every age and from every quarter. Any assessment of Revelation must account for this aesthetic dimension of the work and its lasting legacy.”² When we read Revelation, we are called to respond with the creative side of our souls, which I know can push our limits as Congregationalists. When we read Revelation, we are allowed [given permission] to be artists dealing in the delicate space of grief, bereavement, loss, death, and finally the light of hope.

So I am going to read the passage for today again [while emphasizing the colors and imagery that emerge for me in my reading], and I want you to pay attention to color, to metaphor, and to what makes your heart jump: words, colors, phrases, etc. I also invite you to close your eyes and visualize the painting of emotions that John the Divine is painting with words. Let us be artists:

² Carl R. Holladay, *A Critical Introduction to the New Testament: Interpreting the Message and Meaning of Jesus Christ* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2005), 564.

After this I looked, and there was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation [rainbow], from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, robed in white, with palm branches [green] in their hands. They cried out in a loud voice, saying, "Salvation belongs to our God who is seated on the throne, and to the Lamb!" And all the angels stood around the throne [gold] and around the elders and the four living creatures, and they fell on their faces before the throne and worshiped God, singing, "Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our God forever and ever! Amen."

Then one of the elders addressed me, saying, "Who are these, robed in white, and where have they come from?" I said to him, "Sir, you are the one that knows." Then he said to me, "These are they who have come out of the great ordeal; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood [red] of the Lamb. For this reason they are before the throne [gold] of God, and worship him day and night within his temple, and the one who is seated on the throne will shelter them. They will hunger no more, and thirst no more; the sun [yellow] will not strike them, nor any scorching heat; for the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of the water [clear blue] of life, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes."

What do you see? How do you feel? We have had the beauty of The Book of Revelation, its powerful imagery, and ability to bring peace taken away from us by those in the Christian faith who want to interpret it as a literal apocalypse of the future and use it to draw fear into their followers. Rather, I believe **for today's reader** it is painting an abstract picture of what it means to face loss and death for each of us in our lives. It is a picture of all our daily deaths and mini apocalypses.

Since there isn't enough time to dig into all of the images, although I will point out the use of color in this passage for today, I want to draw your attention to just one image, one that I will point out is unique to the Book of Revelation, which might surprise us. So many of us, like Luther, say we dislike this book, but in it are some of the images we hold most dear in our faith and in healing ministry. This is an image that we know and see in popular Christianity, we have heard, but maybe we have not thought much about or located before in Scripture.

Verse 17: "For the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd and he will guide them to springs of the water of life and God will wipe away every tear from their eye." And God will wipe away every tear from their eye.

This imagery is unique to Revelation, and it is so important that it is repeated again in Revelation 21: 4, "He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away."

The word in Greek translated as "wipe away" is moreover only used to mean specifically "wipe away" in this way only two times in the whole Bible, and they are these two instances in Revelation. The Book of Revelation is unique in this motif and the intimate, kind, and lovingly familiar image of God here.

This is gut wrenchingly intimate. Have you ever wiped away someone's tear's while he or she is crying, weeping, or mourning? [Gesture to face to imitate the wiping of tears.] I mean have you ever reached over with a tissue and actually wiped away a tear. Or have you ever had someone else wiping away a tear for you? This is something that maybe some of us have never experienced. This is God at God's most intimate, familiar, gentle in a time of great mourning. Here, at the conclusion of the Bible, we have journeyed from the Book of Genesis with a God or collection of gods (depending on how you read Genesis) who punish and don't want names know or said, to here... here... a God who wipes away tears from a multitude too large to count. What a journey it has been. Here at the conclusion of the cannon, while often misinterpreted as a book of violence and misread by Evangelicals as an instruction manual for the end of the world, really it is an abstraction on the theme of loss and hope: contrasts and colors.

A God who wipes away tears is a God who is familiar with us. A God who reaches out with the comfort of touch is a God who knows and feels our pain. The tableau presented here in this abstract expressionist apocalypse is a complex image of life, death, pain and yes a glimmer of hope.

We find ourselves on this Totenfest or Death Sunday at the end of the Biblical cannon, in the midst of a confusing and complex artistic interpretation of the pain and the fear of an ancient people in a time that **could not** be explained with a story or a narrative or a letter or a poem. Only one genre will do: abstract apocalypse. We are offered something unfamiliar: colors, imagery — raw emotions of a community in free-fall. Yet, despite all of that, God comes through the dizzying array of colors, themes, metaphors and similes... and smiles, reaches out for our faces and again wipes away our tears.

I revel in being able to say this: Martin Luther was wrong, at least in this case. Today, only a week after Reformation Sunday, Martin Luther misses the point and the mark entirely. Revelation doesn't point necessarily directly to Christ, but rather it paints pictures of the deepest struggles, fears, isolation, loss, mini apocalypses, and ongoing deaths and struggles we all face. Revelation paints a picture of grace and hope with color, with art, and with God's hand reaching through the storms of the centuries past and yet to come to wipe a tear from the faces of God's beloved one: you.

We remember those we have lost (our saints) friends and beloved. We also today remember the little deaths we all face every day when we know we aren't living the lives we thought we were promised. When work is unfulfilling or political. When a child you helped raise and love, perhaps a son or daughter, turns and says something hateful. When we face loneliness and isolation. What parts of you/ yourself are you mourning the death of? Whatever the answer to these questions, God emerges in a revelation of hope in the midst of darkness to wipe away every every every every tear.

This is what I see for God's people, for you, in the abstract expressionism of our reading for today from The Book of Revelation.