

Resting Empire: A Group Study Guide:
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Resisting Empire

The Book of Revelation

C. Wess Daniels

Resisting Empire

Texts: Revelation (from the Bible), *Resisting Empire: The Book of Revelation as Resistance*, by C. Wess Daniels)

Week 1 – Chapter 2 and Revelation 1

John's Vision

Week 2 – Chapter 3 and Revelation 2 & 3

The Letters to the Churches

Week 3 – Chapter 4 and Revelation 4 & 5

Who Can Open the Seals?

Week 4 – Chapter 5 and Revelation 6 & 7

The Lamb that was Slain

Week 5 – Chapter 7 and Revelation 7 (with summary of Revelation 8 to 11)

The Multitude

Week 6 – Chapter 6 and Revelation 12

The Woman and the Dragon

Week 7 – Chapter 8 and Revelation 13 & 18

The Mark of the Beast

Week 8 – Chapter 9 and Revelation 21 (with summary of Revelation 13 to 20)

A New Heaven and Earth

Week 9 – Introduction, Revelation 22

The River of the Water of Life

Resisting Empire – Week 1

Chapter 2, Revelation 1

Gather – 10 minutes

Invite participants to share names, the religious tradition in which they grew up, and, if they have encountered Revelation before, an image from Revelation that stands out to them.

Background – 10 minutes

In Chapter 2, the author writes

For most of my life, and much of the last 150 or so years of Western Christianity, the book of Revelation has been taught as a book about God's judgment, the end of the world, and who is and who is not going to be harshly judged. . . .

It's a text that has been used to rally some against others and to demonstrate, whether knowingly or not, a God of violence and fury. It has also been used, sadly and ironically, as a text to justify mistreatment of creation. (p 49)

Ask: Have you heard these interpretations of Revelation before? How have you reacted to these interpretations of Revelation at different times in your life?

Over the next several weeks, we will hear a different interpretation of Revelation from Professor C. Wess Daniels. Daniels is the William R. Rogers Director of Friends Center and Quaker Studies at Guilford College in Greensboro, NC. His undergraduate degree is from Malone University in Canton, OH, a Christian university with ties to the evangelical branch of the Quaker movement. His graduate degrees (MA in Theology and PhD in Intercultural Studies) are from Fuller Theological Seminary, an Evangelical seminary in Pasadena, CA. He writes from the Quaker tradition which is focused on peacemaking, simplicity, non-violence, and community. His bio on the Guildord College website says

He is most interested in topics pertaining to faith in contemporary culture, Quaker renewal, sociology of religion, participatory culture, fandom, Rock n Roll and Hip Hop.

Wess enjoys spending time with his wife, Emily, playing with their three kids, fermenting sauerkraut, roasting coffee, biking, riding his motorcycle and listening to his record player.

We will begin discussion with Chapter 2. The Introduction and Chapter 1 provide an overview of Daniels' theories. You can read them for more background if you like. In Chapter 2, he begins looking at the text of Revelation itself.

This is what Daniels says about his interpretation of Revelation in Chapter 2.

I do not believe Revelation has anything to do with predicting the end times and has everything to do with how small, minoritized communities of faith survive the onslaught of empire. It gives them tools for how to survive in a world where everything around them is completely off-center and seeks to create an alternative moral imagination for those who wish to resist empire. (p 56)

Ask: The title of the book is *Resisting Empire*. What do you think of when you hear the word "empire"? What do empires do? How many empires have existed in world history? What was the empire when Revelation was written?

Watch and discuss – 10 minutes

Go to YouTube and search for "Reframing the Book of Revelation." In this six-minute video, the author gives a summary of his thesis about Revelation. It is okay to show this on a phone and turn up the volume. The point is to hear Daniels speak.

Ask: How does Daniels define empire?

The empire is a system, an economic system, that enslaves individuals.

Ask: Is empire only a thing of the past? In what ways is empire with us today? (Consider both the US and many cultures around the world).

Daniels mentions several tools of empire. He goes into more depth about this in the introduction.

- Scapegoating – An “Us” v “Them” mentality
- Economic division – An economic system that benefits the rich and exploits the poor
- “Liturgy” – Public rituals that unite people around the goals of the empire

Ask: Do we see any of these tools at work in our world?

Daniels says that John’s vision in Revelation turns these tools of empire upside down and invites Christians to give loyalty to Christ rather than the empire. Many of the images that seem so strange to us in Revelation are based in this critique of empire.

Lenses – 5 minutes

To re-read Revelation, Daniels invites us to examine the lenses we bring to the Bible. From chapter 2

Imagine if I were watching a movie in 3D, but I was watching it with sunglasses rather than 3D glasses. I sit and watch the film, thinking that not only do I not see what’s so great about 3D, but it’s also hard to see. Why’s it so dim? Why’s the color so bad? . . . Then, what if to my shock, my friend shows up in the middle of the film, grabs the sunglasses off my face and replaces them with a pair of 3D glasses. The film was never the problem. It was my orientation to the film, my lens, my perspective that kept me from seeing just how beautiful it really is. (p 55)

Ask: What lenses do people often bring to the Bible, or to Revelation? *Invite people to name several. Examples: inerrancy, literalism, metaphor, our own culture and time, an assumption that each part of the Bible is equally important, an American lens, a gendered lens. . .*

Daniels invites us to read the Bible and Revelation through the lens of people who are oppressed.

The intended audience were not the privileged but the oppressed, and we must learn how to read and hear others read the text from the perspective of the oppressed, from those who are victims and survivors, from those on the margins. (p 55-56)

Context of Revelation –10 minutes

Read Revelation 1:1-11. The text is printed at the end of this outline. This is from the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible.

Who was John?

He is often called John of Patmos. Early Christian tradition said he was John the Apostle (brother of James, son of Zebedee). Some early writers assumed Revelation was written by the same person who wrote the Gospel of John and the epistles of John. Most modern scholars think these were all different people. They may all have been part of an early Christian community centered around John the Apostle. John of Patmos appears to have been a pastor of churches in the late 1st century.

When did this take place?

John refers to “a persecution.” Most think this was a persecution of Christians under Emperor Domitian at the end of the 1st Century.

Where was John?

Patmos is a volcanic island in the Aegean Sea. It is about 7.5 miles long and 3 to 6 miles wide. Roman historians mention other nearby islands as prison islands but do not mention Patmos. Patmos may have been a place of banishment rather than an actual prison, but it seems clear that John was not there by choice.

Why was John writing?

John received a vision from Jesus and wrote to share it with seven churches. From the start, he was clear that Christians were to give loyalty to the reign of Christ above the rulers of the day.

Jesus Christ, the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth.

To him who loves us and freed us from our sins by his blood, and made us to be a kingdom, priests serving his God and Father, to him be glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen. (Rev. 1:5-6)

Reflect (5 minutes)

Ask: Based on this discussion so far, what do you think Revelation has to say to Christians today? What do you hope to gain from discussing Revelation over the next several weeks?

Pray (5 minutes)

Invite a member of the group to pray, or offer this prayer from the Episcopal Book of Common Prayer, from one of the Sundays when Revelation 1 is one of the lectionary readings.

Almighty and everlasting God, whose will it is to restore all things in your well-beloved Son, the King of kings and Lord of lords: Mercifully grant that the peoples of the earth, divided and enslaved by sin, may be freed and brought together under his most gracious rule; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.

Revelation 1:1-11

¹ *The revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show his servants what must soon take place; he made it known by sending his angel to his servant John, ² who testified to the word of God and to the testimony of Jesus Christ, even to all that he saw.*

³ *Blessed is the one who reads aloud the words of the prophecy, and blessed are those who hear and who keep what is written in it; for the time is near.*

⁴ *John to the seven churches that are in Asia: Grace to you and peace from him who is and who was and who is to come, and from the seven spirits who are before his throne, ⁵ and from Jesus Christ, the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth.*

To him who loves us and freed us from our sins by his blood, ⁶ and made us to be a kingdom, priests serving his God and Father, to him be glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen.

⁷ *Look! He is coming with the clouds; every eye will see him, even those who pierced him; and on his account all the tribes of the earth will wail.*

So it is to be. Amen.

⁸ *“I am the Alpha and the Omega,” says the Lord God, who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty.*

⁹ *I, John, your brother who share with you in Jesus the persecution and the kingdom and the patient endurance, was on the island called Patmos because of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus ¹⁰ I was in the spirit on the Lord’s day, and I heard behind me a loud voice like a trumpet ¹¹ saying, “Write in a book what you see and send it to the seven churches, to Ephesus, to Smyrna, to Pergamum, to Thyatira, to Sardis, to Philadelphia, and to Laodicea.”*

Resisting Empire – Week 2

Chapter 3, Revelation 2 & 3

Gather – 10 minutes

We will focus today on Chapter 3 of *Resisting Empire*. The chapter begins with the author's memory of the Boston Marathon bombing. He describes it as an event that made him aware of the reality of evil in the world. Invite participants to share names, if needed, and, if they are willing, an event in history that made them aware of the reality of evil in the world.

Background – 5 minutes

Last week, we read the introduction to Revelation. Revelation is a vision which a pastor named John received while in exile on Patmos, most likely in the late first century during a time when Christians were being persecuted by the Roman empire. Daniels encourages modern Christians to read Revelation through the lens of an oppressed minority trying to survive against a powerful empire.

Ask: Do any insights from last week's discussion stand out?

The Audience of Revelation: The Seven Churches – 10 minutes

As the vision began, a voice like a trumpet told John to

Write in a book what you see and send it to the seven churches, to Ephesus, to Smyrna, to Pergamum, to Thyatira, to Sardis, to Philadelphia, and to Laodicea. (Rev. 1:11)

Notice where these churches are on the map at the end of this outline. They follow a circuit. The order in which John mentioned them suggests that he intended for the letter to be sent from church to church. Some have suggested that the shape of the circuit is somewhat like a candle flame.

After naming the churches, John shared more of the vision. Read Revelation 1:12-16. This is from the NRSV.

¹² Then I turned to see whose voice it was that spoke to me, and on turning I saw seven golden lampstands, ¹³ and in the midst of the lampstands I saw one like the Son of Man, clothed with a long robe and with a golden sash across his chest. ¹⁴ His head and his hair were white as white wool, white as snow; his eyes were like a flame of fire, ¹⁵ his feet were like burnished bronze, refined as in a furnace, and his voice was like the sound of many waters. ¹⁶ In his right hand he held seven stars, and from his mouth came a sharp, two-edged sword, and his face was like the sun shining with full force. (Revelation 1:12-16, NRSV)

John then explained the vision in verse 20.

²⁰ As for the mystery of the seven stars that you saw in my right hand, and the seven golden lampstands: the seven stars are the angels of the seven churches, and the seven lampstands are the seven churches. (Revelation 1:20, NRSV)

Ask: What do the lampstands and stars represent? Who is in the midst of the lampstands? What is John trying to say to the churches?

Resisting Empire – 5 minutes

Daniels focuses on two ways the Roman Empire tried to deal with people or groups who resisted what Rome was doing.

One way was to kill them outright. Nero is an example. The first major persecution of Christians took place under Emperor Nero in the 60's. Nero scapegoated Christians for the Great Fire of Rome in year 64. Here is what Tacitus, a Roman historian wrote in his *Annals*:

Therefore, to stop the rumor [that he had set Rome on fire], he [Emperor Nero] falsely charged with guilt, and punished with the most fearful tortures, the persons commonly called Christians, who were [generally] hated for their enormities. . . . Accordingly, first those were arrested who confessed they were Christians; next on their information, a vast multitude were convicted, not so much on the charge of burning the city, as of "hating the human race."

In their very deaths they were made the subjects of sport: for they were covered with the hides of wild beasts, and worried to death by dogs, or nailed to crosses, or set fire to, and when the day waned, burned to serve for the evening lights. . . .

According to Tacitus, Nero's persecution seemed to have backfired.

For this cause a feeling of compassion arose towards the sufferers, though guilty and deserving of exemplary capital punishment, because they seemed not to be cut off for the public good, but were victims of the ferocity of one man.

Pause to let the horror of what was just described sink in. The Roman Empire could be brutal to Christians and to other minority groups.

Another way to deal with people who resisted what Rome was doing was by

Seducing all people into participation of the religion, economics, and ideology of the empire. (p 60)

John of Patmos seems to have been more concerned about this second approach than the first. He did not want Christians to be seduced.

Ask: Which approach (destruction or seduction) works more effectively to quash resistance to empire?

The Message to the Churches –15 minutes

Daniels notes a pattern in each message to the churches.

They each begin with an image or phrase from the initial vision of Jesus in chapter 1 – which suggests that there is a piece of Jesus in each community. Then, each letter gives a description of the good and the correctives in each community, offers encouragements and a motivating promise – “To the victor I will give . . .” (p 62)

Look at a few of the messages to the churches.

The Message to Ephesus – Revelation 2:1-7

¹ *“To the angel of the church in Ephesus write: These are the words of him who holds the seven stars in his right hand, who walks among the seven golden lampstands:*

² *“I know your works, your toil and your patient endurance. I know that you cannot tolerate evildoers; you have tested those who claim to be apostles but are not, and have found them to be false.*

³ *I also know that you are enduring patiently and bearing up for the sake of my name, and that you have not grown weary. ⁴But I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love you had at first. ⁵Remember then from what you have fallen; repent, and do the works you did at first. If not, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place, unless you repent. ⁶Yet this is to your credit: you hate the works of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate. ⁷Let anyone who has an ear listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches. To everyone who conquers, I will give permission to eat from the tree of life that is in the paradise of God.*

(Revelation 2:1-7, NRSV)

Ask:

- What part of Jesus is with the Church at Ephesus?
- What are their strengths? (Note – No one really knows who the Nicolaitans were. There are many theories but no consensus.)
- Where do they need correction?
- What is the promise?

The Message to Sardis – Revelation 3:1-6

¹ “And to the angel of the church in Sardis write: These are the words of him who has the seven spirits of God and the seven stars:

“I know your works; you have a name of being alive, but you are dead. ² Wake up, and strengthen what remains and is on the point of death, for I have not found your works perfect in the sight of my God. ³ Remember then what you received and heard; obey it, and repent. If you do not wake up, I will come like a thief, and you will not know at what hour I will come to you. ⁴ Yet you have still a few persons in Sardis who have not soiled their clothes; they will walk with me, dressed in white, for they are worthy. ⁵ If you conquer, you will be clothed like them in white robes, and I will not blot your name out of the book of life; I will confess your name before my Father and before his angels. ⁶ Let anyone who has an ear listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches.” (Revelation 3:1-6, NRSV)

Ask:

- What part of Jesus is with the Church at Sardis?
- What are their strengths?
- Where do they need correction?
- What is the promise?

The Message to Laodicea – Revelation 3:14-22

¹⁴ “And to the angel of the church in Laodicea write: The words of the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the origin of God’s creation:

¹⁵ “I know your works; you are neither cold nor hot. I wish that you were either cold or hot. ¹⁶ So, because you are lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I am about to spit you out of my mouth. ¹⁷ For you say, ‘I am rich, I have prospered, and I need nothing.’ You do not realize that you are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked.

¹⁸ Therefore I counsel you to buy from me gold refined by fire so that you may be rich; and white robes to clothe you and to keep the shame of your nakedness from being seen; and salve to anoint your eyes so that you may see. ¹⁹ I reprove and discipline those whom I love. Be earnest, therefore, and repent. ²⁰ Listen! I am standing at the door, knocking; if you hear my voice and open the door, I will come in to you and eat with you, and you with me. ²¹ To the one who conquers I will give a place with me on my throne, just as I myself conquered and sat down with my Father on his throne. ²² Let anyone who has an ear listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches.” (Revelation 3:14-22)

Ask:

- What part of Jesus is with the Church at Sardis?
- What are their strengths?
- Where do they need correction?
- What is the promise?

Reflect – 5 minutes

Daniels writes

While it may be true that there is darkness, the Gospel of John (John 1) reveals a counter-story about a Light that is not overcome by darkness. And in Revelation, we are told about ordinary believers in tiny, powerless communities within the Roman empire who are “lamp stands.” They are not themselves the Light, but they are the bright spots, the gathering points, light walking around in the world and a training ground for acts of love, peace, and mercy in the world. (p 64)

Ask: If John were writing to our congregation today, what message from Jesus would he share with us? Who are the lamp stands in our world today? How can we be lamp stands?

Pray – 5 minutes

Invite a member of the group to pray, or offer this prayer for the feast day of Thecla. Thecla is mentioned in the New Testament as a companion of Paul and may have been alive when John wrote to the churches and shared his vision. She was tortured many times for her faith.

God of liberating power, who called Thecla to proclaim the gospel and did not permit any obstacle or peril to inhibit her: Empower courageous evangelists among us, that men and women everywhere may know the freedom that you offer us in Jesus Christ, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.



Pergamum

Thyatira

Smyrna

Sardis

Philadelphia

Ephesus

Laodicea

Patmos

ANATOLIA

Resisting Empire – Week 3

Chapter 4, Revelation 4 & 5

Gather – 10 minutes

Invite participants to share names, if needed, and a part of a worship service that they find meaningful.

Heavenly Worship – 10 minutes

Revelation is the record of a vision a pastor named John received while he was in exile on the island of Patmos. He sent the vision to seven churches.

The first part of the vision he described is a vision of heavenly worship. Ask someone to read Revelation 4:1-11 aloud (printed at the end of the outline). Invite everyone else to listen and imagine what it would be like to hear these words while living through a time of persecution when your pastor is in exile far away. Try not to get bogged down in details. Focus on the awe of the vision.

After reading -

Ask:

- What does heavenly worship look like?
- What actions are part of heavenly worship?
- Who is taking part in heavenly worship? (Some say the 24 elders represent the 12 tribes of Israel and the 12 disciples of Jesus – in other words all of God’s faithful people from all time).
- Who is the one who is seated on the throne?

The Lamb That Was Slain – 15 minutes

During this vision of heavenly worship, something surprising happened. Read Revelation 5:1-5.

¹Then I saw in the right hand of the one seated on the throne a scroll written on the inside and on the back, sealed with seven seals; ²and I saw a mighty angel proclaiming with a loud voice, “Who is worthy to open the scroll and break its seals?” ³And no one in heaven or on earth or under the earth was able to open the scroll or to look into it. ⁴And I began to weep bitterly because no one was found worthy to open the scroll or to look into it. ⁵Then one of the elders said to me, “Do not weep. See, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has conquered, so that he can open the scroll and its seven seals.” (Revelation 5:1-5, NRSV)

The scroll may represent the sacred text, or the mystery of God’s work in the world, or God’s wisdom and will, or God’s word and hope. It seems to represent something associated with God and God’s ways, which had become hidden to people in John’s day. Daniels writes

It dawns on John that no one on heaven or on earth is worthy to open, to handle, or to even read the sacred story of God’s people. No human hands, no special techniques, no amount of orthodox belief, right living, power or economic status qualifies anyone to break open the scroll. (p 71)

John weeps at the powerlessness of humanity. No one on earth can save or help them – only the “Lion of the tribe of Judah”.

Ask: When John heard the elder say “Lion of the tribe of Judah” and “Root of David” and “conquered”, what do you think John expected to see?

Instead, this is what John saw. Read Revelation 5:6-10.

Revelation 5:6-10

⁶Then I saw between the throne and the four living creatures and among the elders a Lamb standing as if it had been slaughtered, having seven horns and seven eyes, which are the seven spirits of God sent out into all the earth. ⁷He went and took the scroll from the right hand of the one who was seated on the throne. ⁸When he had taken the scroll, the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders fell before the Lamb, each holding a harp and golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints. ⁹They sing a new song:

*“You are worthy to take the scroll
and to open its seals,
for you were slaughtered and by your blood you ransomed for God
saints from every tribe and language and people and nation;
¹⁰you have made them to be a kingdom and priests serving our
God, and they will reign on earth.” (Revelation 5:6-10, NRSV)*

The Lamb that was slain is an image that occurs 28 times throughout Revelation, more than any other image. Daniels and other biblical scholars say it comes from the practice of using a scapegoat in Leviticus 16. On the Day of Atonement, the sins of the people were symbolically placed on a goat who was then driven into the wilderness (not killed).

Then Aaron shall lay both his hands on the head of the live goat, and confess over it all the iniquities of the people of Israel, and all their transgressions, all their sins, putting them on the head of the goat, and sending it away into the wilderness by means of someone designated for the task. ²²The goat shall bear on itself all their iniquities to a barren region; and the goat shall be set free in the wilderness. (Leviticus 16:21-22, NRSV)

In Leviticus, scapegoating served a holy purpose. It was a way to demonstrate that God had removed the sins of the people.

Over time, many cultures took this method into their own hands and began using people as scapegoats, placing the blame for society's sins and ills on the heads of a particular individual or group of people, like Nero blaming Christians for the Fire of Rome.

Daniels writes

Revelation is revealing how this scapegoat mechanism is a pattern in the world. The religion of empire needs a scapegoat in order for it to function properly. . . Empire needs victims to create its identity and to maintain the social order. (p 74)

The Lamb that was slain was a scapegoat of the empire. In John's vision, the scapegoat turns out to be an innocent servant of God who is worthy to open the scrolls and reveal God's purposes.

Ask: What are some examples of scapegoating today? Do these scapegoats have a message to share that our culture needs to hear? Are there cases in which scapegoats are servants of God?

Two Religions – 10 minutes

At this time in history, emperors called themselves gods and demanded to be worshiped. In the vision, only the Lamb who was slain is able to open the scroll. No one else in heaven or on earth is worthy of this worship. Daniels says this vision reveals a central point in Revelation. Revelation presents the conflict between two kinds of religion – the Religion of Empire and the Religion of Creation, or the Lamb (he uses both terms). We will talk more about this conflict in future sessions. (If group members have books, you may refer to Table 1 on page 69).

Religion of Empire:

- Based on violence, coercion, suspicion, and fear
- Creates systems of oppression
- Relies on scapegoats (uniting one group of people by blaming another group of people for a social problem)
- Rooted in scarcity
- Creates victims
- Signified by the beast

Quoting Wes Howard Brook, Daniels says the Religion of Empire

is about “justify(ing) and legitimat(ing) attitudes and behaviors that provide blessing and abundance for some at the expense of others. (p 68)

Religion of Creation/Lamb:

- Based on courage, patient resistance, sacrificial love, and non-violence
- Creates a sharing economy
- Incorporates those who are marginalized into the center of community
- Rooted in abundance, practices sharing
- Creates neighbors
- Signified by the Lamb that was slain

Quoting Wes Howard Brook again, the Religion of Creation is

“grounded in the experience of and the ongoing relationship with Creator God...that leads to blessing and abundance of all people and creation.” (p 68)

Daniels writes

The religion of the lamb knows that it cannot force victory, and it cannot predetermine outcomes. Instead, it exercises patient endurance – a constant refrain throughout Revelation, that first-century Christians are called to be patient in faithfulness rather than effective at all costs. (p 76)

Reflect – 5 minutes

In the last session, we talked about two ways Rome tried to defeat the early Christian movement. One was destruction – killing Christians and turning them into martyrs. The other was seduction – assimilating Christians into the values and practices of Rome.

Ask: What does it look like to follow the Religion of Empire today? What does it look like to follow the Religion of the Lamb?

Pray – 5 minutes

Invite a member of the group to pray, or pray together The Lord's Prayer, which invites God's reign to be fulfilled on earth as it is in heaven.

Revelation 4:1-11

¹ After this I looked, and there in heaven a door stood open! And the first voice, which I had heard speaking to me like a trumpet, said, "Come up here, and I will show you what must take place after this."² At once I was in the spirit, and there in heaven stood a throne, with one seated on the throne!³ And the one seated there looks like jasper and carnelian, and around the throne is a rainbow that looks like an emerald.⁴ Around the throne are twenty-four thrones, and seated on the thrones are twenty-four elders, dressed in white robes, with golden crowns on their heads.⁵ Coming from the throne are flashes of lightning, and rumblings and peals of thunder, and in front of the throne burn seven flaming torches, which are the seven spirits of God;⁶ and in front of the throne there is something like a sea of glass, like crystal.

Around the throne, and on each side of the throne, are four living creatures, full of eyes in front and behind:⁷ the first living creature like a lion, the second living creature like an ox, the third living creature with a face like a human face, and the fourth living creature like a flying eagle.⁸ And the four living creatures, each of them with six wings, are full of eyes all around and inside. Day and night without ceasing they sing,

"Holy, holy, holy, the Lord God the Almighty,
who was and is and is to come."

⁹ And whenever the living creatures give glory and honor and thanks to the one who is seated on the throne, who lives forever and ever,¹⁰ the twenty-four elders fall before the one who is seated on the throne and worship the one who lives forever and ever; they cast their crowns before the throne, singing,

¹¹ "You are worthy, our Lord and God,
to receive glory and honor and power,
for you created all things,
and by your will they existed and were created." (Revelation 4:1-
11, NRSV)

Resisting Empire – Week 4

Chapter 5, Revelation 6 & 7:1-11

Gather – 10 minutes

Invite participants to share names, if needed, and a favorite hymn.

Opening the Seals – 15 minutes

In Revelation 5, John saw that only the Lamb who was slain had the power to open the sacred scroll held in the hand of the one who sits upon the throne.

In Revelation 6, the seals were opened. Four horses came out, like the horses of a Roman army, all carrying some kind of catastrophe. These are sometimes called the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse. Read Revelation 6:1-8, pausing briefly after each horse to talk about what it could represent.

¹I watched as the Lamb opened the first of the seven seals. Then I heard one of the four living creatures say in a voice like thunder, “Come!” ²I looked, and there before me was a white horse! Its rider held a bow, and he was given a crown, and he rode out as a conqueror bent on conquest. (Revelation 6:1-2, NRSV)

Ask: What could this represent? Empire, conquest, territorial expansion . . . The Roman empire operated this way.

³When the Lamb opened the second seal, I heard the second living creature say, “Come!” ⁴Then another horse came out, a fiery red one. Its rider was given power to take peace from the earth and to make people kill each other. To him was given a large sword. (Revelation 6:3-4, NRSV)

Ask: What could this represent? War, violence . . . Rome claimed to create peace (Pax Romana) but actually perpetuated war.

⁵ When the Lamb opened the third seal, I heard the third living creature say, "Come!" I looked, and there before me was a black horse! Its rider was holding a pair of scales in his hand. ⁶ Then I heard what sounded like a voice among the four living creatures, saying, "Two pounds of wheat for a day's wages, and six pounds of barley for a day's wages, and do not damage the oil and the wine!"
(Revelation 6:5-6, NRSV)

Ask: What could this represent? High prices for food, inflation, hunger . . . This was happening in the Roman empire at the time.

⁷ When the Lamb opened the fourth seal, I heard the voice of the fourth living creature say, "Come!" I looked, and there before me was a pale horse! Its rider was named Death, and Hades was following close behind him. They were given power over a fourth of the earth to kill by sword, famine and plague, and by the wild beasts of the earth. (Revelation 6:7-8, NRSV)

Ask: What could this represent? Death by war, famine, plague. . . The Roman empire was thought to include 20-25% of the world's population at the time.

When the first four seals were opened, John saw chaos on earth that looked like the chaos of his time. Some people have tried to see these images as predictions of the future, but they are better understood as descriptions of what was happening in John's day.

When the fifth seal was opened, John saw how this chaos affected people in his community. Read Revelation 6:9-11.

⁹ When he opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slain because of the word of God and the testimony they had maintained. ¹⁰ They called out in a loud voice, "How long, Sovereign Lord, holy and true, until you judge the inhabitants of the earth and avenge our blood?" ¹¹ Then each of them was given a white robe, and they were told to wait a little longer, until the full number of their fellow servants, their brothers and sisters, were killed just as they had been. (Rev. 6:9-11, NRSV)

Ask: What is the community being asked to do?

When the sixth seal was opened, there was an earthquake and a great cosmic disturbance that frightened even the rulers on earth. Read Revelation 6:12-15.

¹² I watched as he opened the sixth seal. There was a great earthquake. The sun turned black like sackcloth made of goat hair, the whole moon turned blood red, ¹³ and the stars in the sky fell to earth, as figs drop from a fig tree when shaken by a strong wind. ¹⁴ The heavens receded like a scroll being rolled up, and every mountain and island was removed from its place.

*¹⁵ Then the kings of the earth, the princes, the generals, the rich, the mighty, and everyone else, both slave and free, hid in caves.
(Revelation 6:12-15, NRSV)*

The Community is Sealed and Expanded – 10 minutes

As the vision continued, God sent angels to pause the chaos. Read Revelation 7:1-4.

*¹ After this I saw four angels standing at the four corners of the earth, holding back the four winds of the earth to prevent any wind from blowing on the land or on the sea or on any tree. ² Then I saw another angel coming up from the east, having the seal of the living God. He called out in a loud voice to the four angels who had been given power to harm the land and the sea: ³ “Do not harm the land or the sea or the trees until we put a seal on the foreheads of the servants of our God.” ⁴ Then I heard the number of those who were sealed: 144,000 from all the tribes of Israel.
(Revelation 7:1-4, NRSV)*

Sealing represents ownership. In the vision, the Christian community was marked as God’s own.

Note that 144,000 is not meant as a literal number. It is 12 x 12 x 1000 (the largest Roman numeral). 144,000 represents the vast multitude of God’s faithful people of Israel, the Church and every nation. Read Revelation 7:9-11.

After this I looked, and there was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, robed in white, with palm branches in their hands. ¹⁰ They cried out in a loud voice, saying,

“Salvation belongs to our God who is seated on the throne and to the Lamb!”

¹¹ And all the angels stood around the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures, and they fell on their faces before the throne and worshiped God. (Revelation 7:9-11, NRSV)

Ask: Who is worshipping? Who is being worshiped?

The Community Sings – 10 minutes

In the last session, we talked about the Religion of Empire and the Religion of Creation/Lamb. Daniels writes

Each religion has its ways of responding to strangers, enemies and neighbors alike; each shapes response to “the other.” Each of these religions also has its own liturgy, and with it comes hymns – songs of oppression or songs of liberation. (p 83)

The emperor’s song is like the Siren’s song in Greek mythology. It sounds like the four horses who brought destruction. Odysseus’s crew had to put beeswax in their ears to avoid hearing the Siren’s song. The emperor’s song is everywhere.

In John’s vision, the community gathered around God’s throne sings a new song:

*“Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom
and thanksgiving and honor
and power and might
be to our God forever and ever! Amen.”
(Revelation 7:12, NRSV)*

The Song of the Lamb is a song of praise to the God of Creation, not the gods of empire. In the vision, John saw others joining the song, singing a song of liberation and not oppression.

Daniels writes

Those who have made the break, who have learned to sing what is truly in their hearts, are the participants in a new community, singing a new song alongside the lamb of God who is their shepherd. (p 85)

Reflect - 5 minutes

Ask: What songs or messages or values of empire surround us today? What song or message in our hearts do we long to sing?

Pray - 5 minutes

Invite a member of the group to pray, or pray the Collect *For Guidance* from the Book of Common Prayer.

O God, by whom the meek are guided in judgment, and light riseth up in darkness for the godly: Grant us, in all our doubts and uncertainties, the grace to ask what thou wouldest have us to do, that the Spirit of wisdom may save us from all false choices, and that in thy light we may see light, and in thy straight path may not stumble; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen. (BCP 832)

Resisting Empire – Week 5

Chapter 7, Revelation 7, summary of Revelation 8 through 11

Gather – 10 minutes

Invite participants to share names, if needed, and, if they can think of it, the largest crowd they have ever experienced in person.

Review – 10 minutes

Last week, we talked about Chapter 5 in the book and Chapters 6 and 7 in Revelation. Chapter 6 in the book skips ahead to Revelation 12, so we will go back and talk about Chapter 6 next week. Chapter 7 comes back to Revelation 7. We will talk about Chapter 7 this week so that we encounter John's vision in chronological order.

Here is what has happened in Revelation so far, from biblesummary.info, which summarizes every chapter of the Bible in 140 characters or less. Remember that we are reading Revelation not as a prediction of the end of the world but as a message of encouragement for people who are trying to be faithful to Jesus in the midst of empire.

1 The revelation of Jesus Christ to John. A voice said, "Write to the churches." I saw one like a son of man, his face was like the sun.

2 "Ephesus, renew your first love. Smyrna, be faithful until death. Pergamum, some hold false teaching. Thyatira, you tolerate Jezebel."

3 "Sardis, you are not alive but dead. Philadelphia, you have endured in my word. Laodicea, you are lukewarm so I will spit you out."

4 I saw one seated on the throne in heaven. The four living creatures say, "Holy, holy, holy." The elders say, "You created all things."

5 A Lamb standing as though slain took the scroll with seven seals. The creatures, elders and myriad angels sang, "Worthy is the Lamb!"

*6 The Lamb opened four seals and the horsemen went out to destroy.
With the fifth seal I saw the martyrs. With the sixth the stars fell.*

*7 The 144,000 were sealed from the tribes. A multitude cried,
"Salvation belongs to our God." An elder said, "God will wipe every
tear."*

Ask: What are some of the images or messages of Revelation that have stood out to you so far?

Sorting – 5 minutes

Daniels begins Chapter 7 by talking about news coverage in 2016. He describes watching the “sorting” of the American people into different polarized groups.

Ask: What are some examples of “sorting” that we encounter?

Daniels says “sorting” is a tool of empire.

Revelation reveals that the religion of empire thrives on separation. It believes some people are superior, and in order to remain superior, those who are subject must know and keep their place. (p 98)

The Multitude – 10 minutes

In contrast, John sees a vision of a vast multitude. We read about the multitude from Revelation 7 last week. Read Revelation 7:9-10.

⁹After this I looked, and there was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, robed in white, with palm branches in their hands. ¹⁰They cried out in a loud voice, saying, “Salvation belongs to our God who is seated on the throne and to the Lamb!” (Revelation 7:9-10, NRSV)

Revelation goes on to describe some of those who make up the multitude. Read Revelation 7:13-14.

¹³Then one of the elders addressed me, saying, "Who are these, robed in white, and where have they come from?" ¹⁴I said to him, "Sir, you are the one who 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 of the Lamb. (Revelation 7:13-14, NRSV)

Daniels writes:

The multitude is a beautiful tapestry woven together of all of humanity, with the oppressed and minoritized at the center with the lamb. (p 99)

Ask: In John's vision, who had gone through a great ordeal? Who is going through a great ordeal today? What does it mean to see those who are going through a great ordeal as part of the multitude of God's faithful people?

John's vision continues with a vision of hope for those who have endured a great ordeal. Read Revelation 7:15-17.

¹⁵For this reason they are before the throne of God and worship him day and night within his temple, and the one who is seated on the throne will shelter them.

¹⁶They will hunger no more and thirst no more; the sun will not strike them, nor any scorching heat,

¹⁷for 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 eyes." (Revelation 7:15-17, NRSV)

Daniels writes:

Here we have a first century vision of the beloved community, a picture of radical hospitality where the victims are actually centered in their communities and diversity of nationality, language, tribe, and people is seen as a gift to the community. (p 100)

Ask: Martin Luther King, Jr. often spoke of the Beloved Community to describe his vision of a racially inclusive and peaceful world. When you think about Beloved Community today, what does the Beloved Community look like?

Looking Ahead – 10 minutes

The book skips Revelation 8 to 11, but here is a brief summary from biblesummary.info.

8 With the seventh seal there was silence. I saw seven angels. Four angels blew their trumpets and a third of the earth was destroyed.

9 At the fifth trumpet, locusts from the pit tormented the earth. At the sixth trumpet, four angels killed a third of humankind with fire.

10 I saw an angel with a scroll. He cried out and seven thunders sounded. A voice said, "Eat the scroll." It was sweet and then bitter.

11 The two witnesses will prophesy until the beast kills them. At the seventh trumpet, loud voices said, "Our God shall reign forever."

Ask: What do you hear in these summaries?

Chapters 8 through 11 in Revelation are a vision of the destruction taking place on earth. In John's vision, the source of the destruction is the altar that is before the throne of God. People who see Revelation as a prediction of the end of the world often seize on images from these chapters as a warning of God's wrath that is to come. The image of the beast first shows up in Revelation 11. We will talk more about the beast in a few weeks.

Here is another way to understand these images of destruction. They describe not a future conflict but the ongoing conflict between the kingdoms of this world and the kingdom of God. The destruction emerges from the altar before the throne of God because God's reign is more enduring than the reign of any empire. God was before the empire and God will still be around after the empire. The empire leads to destruction on earth, which the faithful will have to endure with patience.

Revelation 11 ends with hope that God's reign will overpower the destructive empires on earth. Read Revelation 11:15-18.

*¹⁵Then the seventh angel blew his trumpet, and there were loud voices
in heaven, saying,*

*“The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord
and of his Messiah,
and he will reign forever and ever.”*

*¹⁶Then the twenty-four elders who sit on their thrones before God fell
on their faces and worshiped God, ¹⁷singing,*

*“We give you thanks, Lord God Almighty,
who are and who were,
for you have taken your great power
and begun to reign.*

*¹⁸The nations raged,
but your wrath has come,
and the time for judging the dead,
for rewarding your servants, the prophets
and saints and all who fear your name,
both small and great,
and for destroying those who destroy the earth.”*

(Revelation 11:15-18, NRSV)

Ask: Do any of these phrases sound familiar? (Handel’s *Hallelujah Chorus* may come to mind).

The early church understood that the resurrection of Jesus had opened the way to the reign of God in this world, in opposition to the reign of the emperor. John’s vision was about the beginning of the triumph of God’s reign in this world.

Reflect - 5 minutes

Ask: How did John’s vision encourage Christians in his day? How can it encourage – rather than frighten – Christians in our day?

Pray - 5 minutes

Invite a member of the group to pray, or pray this Collect for Easter from the Book of Common Prayer.

O God, who for our redemption gave your only-begotten Son to the death of the cross, and by his glorious resurrection delivered us from the power of our enemy: Grant us so to die daily to sin, that we may evermore live with him in the joy of his resurrection; through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen. (BCP 222)

Resisting Empire – Week 6

Chapter 6, Revelation 12

Gather – 10 minutes

Invite participants to share names, if needed, and, if willing, a part of the Sunday liturgy that sometimes feels boring to them.

Background – 5 minutes

Two weeks ago, we talked about Chapter 5 in the book and Chapters 6 and 7 in Revelation. We focused on the Song of the Religion of Empire v. the Song of Religion of Creation (or the Lamb). We skipped Chapter 6 in the book and talked last week about Chapter 7 and the multitude gathered around the throne in John's vision. We also summarized Revelation 8-11.

Today we turn to Chapter 6 in the book and Revelation 12.

Ask: What images or ideas from our discussion so far have stayed with you?

The Woman and the Dragon – 10 minutes

In Revelation 12, John saw images of life and death. Here is a summary of Revelation 12. If you prefer, you may read the passage aloud (printed at the end of this outline).

A woman about to give birth appeared and a terrifying dragon with seven heads appeared. The dragon positioned itself to devour the woman's child as soon as it was born. Instead, her son was snatched away and safely taken to God and to God's throne.

Then war broke out in heaven – Michael and his angels v. the dragon and his angels. The dragon – now identified as the devil and Satan – was thrown down to the earth, along with his angels. A loud voice from heaven rejoiced that the “accuser of our brothers and sisters has been thrown down.” The dragon

then pursued the woman who had delivered the child. The woman miraculously escaped. The dragon grew more angry and waged war on the rest of the woman's children on earth, defined as "those who keep the commandments of God and hold the testimony of Jesus."

Ask: Based on this vision –

- Who is ultimately more powerful – Michael and his angels or Satan and his angels? (Keep in mind – angel in Greek simply means messenger. Focus on the symbolism in the vision, not on ideas about particular types of angels.)
- Who are the women's children?
- The dragon is described as a beast with 7 heads, 10 horns, and 7 diadems. Rome famously had 7 hills. Some interpreters see the 7 heads as a succession of 7 emperors. Revelation 17 will refer to the 7 heads as 7 historical empires. How is an empire in any era like a dragon?
- Where is the sphere of the dragon's activity? Is this idea comforting or frightening?

Two Liturgies – 15 minutes

Ask: The Roman empire engaged in large, often horrific, public spectacles. Can you name some of these spectacles? *Gladiator contests, throwing enemies of the state to the lions, crucifixions, setting people on fire, temples and temple rituals, building large statues, dramas and executions in the Colosseum, etc.*

Daniels says that all of these practices were a kind of liturgy. He defines liturgy as

a practice that is meant to form the worshiping community in a particular way. (p 90)

Ask: How would the liturgy (public spectacles and rituals) of the Roman empire form the people of the empire?

Daniels writes

The empire's religion of temples, statues, decrees, ordinances, and symbols are, for John, a kind of liturgy that dulls the hearts and minds of its subjects. (p 90)

In John's vision, the struggle between the woman and the dragon takes place in a vision of worship. Daniels thinks this is important. Worship is where we act out our resistance to the liturgies of the world around us. Daniels writes

Christian worship is meant to be a counter-narrative to the liturgy of empire. (p 92)

Daniels identifies some ways Christian worship can offer this counter-narrative. He uses the term political, but he does not mean political parties or partisan politics. Christian worship shapes us to live faithfully in the midst of the politics of empire in the following ways:

A group of people gathering together to tell thousand-year-old stories about goodness and evil, peace and war, God and wickedness is a practice meant to shape hearts, minds, and moral actions. (p 91)

Ask: How does Christian worship do this?

Proclaiming the lamb that was slain and is the victor and the one true God, over every other idol and power in society, is a claim that not only shapes allegiances but is about survival for those living under oppression. (p 91)

Ask: How does Christian worship do this?

Worship unveils the illusions of empire. (p 91)

Ask: How does Christian worship do this?

Worship seeks to build a movement that brings about the kind of world that God intended, "heaven on earth." (p 91)

Ask: How does our worship in our congregation create a counter-narrative to the messages of empire that may be around us?

Boring and Exciting – 5 minutes

On the one hand, Daniels says, Christian worship is supposed to be somewhat boring. He quotes James Alison:

When people tell me they find Mass boring, I want to say to them: it's supposed to be boring, or at least seriously under-whelming. It's a long-term education in becoming un-excited, since only that will enable us to dwell in a quiet bliss which doesn't abstract from our present or our surroundings or our neighbor, but which increases our attention, our presence and our appreciation for what is around us. (p 92)

In other words, worship is supposed to calm us down so we can reflect on the world around us and our response to it.

On the other hand, worship is also very exciting because God works through our worship to create and anticipate God's dream for the world around us. Daniels writes

When we worship, something happens because when we worship we are creating something entirely new – we are, in fact, the woman who symbolizes the church, giving birth to the Christ-child in the world. (p 94)

Ask: What do we create through our worship? What does God create among us?

Reflect – 5 minutes

Daniels writes,

This is John's message:

Church, if you are to survive, if you are to see through the incessant demands of the empire, then you must worship, you must be formed by the liturgy of the lamb. (p 93)

Ask: What would John say to us about worship today?

Pray – 5 minutes

Invite someone to pray, or pray the Collect for Purity from the Book of Common Prayer, often prayed at the beginning of Sunday worship in Episcopal churches.

*Almighty God, to you all hearts are open, all desires known,
and from you no secrets are hid: Cleanse the thoughts of our
hearts by the inspiration of your Holy Spirit, that we may
perfectly love you, and worthily magnify your holy Name;
through Christ our Lord. Amen. (BCP 355)*

Revelation 12

¹ A great portent appeared in heaven: a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars. ² She was pregnant and was crying out in birth pangs, in the agony of giving birth. ³ Then another portent appeared in heaven: a great red dragon, with seven heads and ten horns and seven diadems on his heads. ⁴ His tail swept down a third of the stars of heaven and threw them to the earth. Then the dragon stood before the woman who was about to deliver a child, so that he might devour her child as soon as it was born. ⁵ And she gave birth to a son, a male child, who is to rule all the nations with a scepter of iron. But her child was snatched away and taken to God and to his throne, ⁶ and the woman fled into the wilderness, where she has a place prepared by God, so that there she can be nourished for one thousand two hundred sixty days.

⁷ And war broke out in heaven; Michael and his angels fought against the dragon. The dragon and his angels fought back, ⁸ but they were defeated, and there was no longer any place for them in heaven. ⁹ The great dragon was thrown down, that ancient serpent, who is called the devil and Satan, the deceiver of the whole world—he was thrown down to the earth, and his angels were thrown down with him.

¹⁰ Then I heard a loud voice in heaven proclaiming,

“Now have come the salvation and the power and the kingdom of our God and the authority of his Messiah, for the accuser of our brothers and sisters has been thrown down, who accuses them day and night before our God.

¹¹ But they have conquered him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony, for they did not cling to life even in the face of death.

¹² Rejoice then, you heavens and those who dwell in them! But woe to the earth and the sea,

*for the devil has come down to you with great wrath
because he knows that his time is short!”*

¹³ So when the dragon saw that he had been thrown down to the earth, he pursued the woman who had delivered the male child.

¹⁴ But the woman was given the two wings of the great eagle, so that she could fly from the serpent into the wilderness, to her place where she is nourished for a time, and times, and half a time. ¹⁵ Then from his mouth the serpent poured water like a river after the woman, to sweep her away with the flood. ¹⁶ But the earth came to the help of the woman; it opened its mouth and swallowed the river that the dragon had poured from his mouth.

¹⁷ Then the dragon was angry with the woman and went off to wage war on the rest of her children, those who keep the commandments of God and hold the testimony of Jesus.

¹⁸ Then the dragon took his stand on the sand of the seashore.

(Revelation 12, NRSV)

Resisting Empire – Week 7

Chapter 8, Revelation 13 & part of 18

Gather – 5 minutes

Invite participants to share names, if needed, and any explanations they have encountered in their lives for “the mark of the beast” in Revelation.

Background – 2 minutes

In Revelation 12, Michael defeated the dragon in heaven, and the dragon (aka Satan) fell back to earth. The dragon then tormented the woman and went on to wage war against her children (aka the Church). At the end of Revelation 12,

*Then the dragon took his stand on the sand of the seashore.
(Revelation 12:18, NRSV)*

and prepared for a confrontation. All of this brings us to a very familiar image from Revelation – the beast.

The Beast – 10 minutes

Revelation 13 describes two beasts. Below is a summary of Revelation 13. Feel free to read Revelation 13 if you prefer (printed at the end of this outline).

- *A beast rose from the sea. The dragon (Satan) gave the beast its power and throne and great authority.*
- *One of the seven heads of the beast had received a death blow, but the wound had been healed.*
- *In amazement, the whole earth followed and worshiped the beast, saying “Who is like the beast, and who can fight against it?”*
- *The beast spoke arrogant and blasphemous words. It was allowed to wage war on the saints.*
- *John encouraged submission, probably to save the lives of the people to whom he was writing. “If you are to be taken captive, into captivity you go.”*

- *Then a second beast rose from the earth. It made the inhabitants of earth worship the beast with the wound that had been healed.*
- *This beast performed great signs and spectacles.*
- *The beast required a brand to be placed on the right hand or forehead in order to buy and sell.*
- *The name of the beast and the number for its name was 666.*

Daniels reminds us that John did not explain what any of this means. It was most likely something that would have been obvious to John's readers but is less obvious to us.

When President Donald Trump was wounded in the ear in an assassination attempt, some referred to the image from Revelation of a beast with a wound to the head that had been healed. Some who opposed President Trump used it as evidence that he is like the beast in Revelation (later known in Revelation as the Antichrist). Some who supported President Trump, and who see Revelation as a prediction of the future, saw the wound to the ear as a sign that prophecies of Revelation were about to come true.

Another way some interpret the beast in Revelation 13 is as a reference to Emperor Nero who persecuted many Christians before Revelation was written.

- Nero waged war on the saints (Rev. 13:7), blaming and killing Christians for the fire of Rome (Rev. 13:13).
- The fire of Rome began in July 64. Nearly 2/3 of Rome burned. Nero accused Christians of starting the fire. The persecution of Christians under Nero continued for the next three and a half years or so, which is approximately 42 months (Rev. 13:5).
- Tertullian, an early church writer, called Nero "the first emperor who dyed his sword in Christian blood, when our religion was but just arising at Rome" (*Apology, V*).
- Like many Roman emperors, Nero referred to himself as a god, which was considered blasphemous (Rev. 13:6).
- Nero orchestrated the murder of his mother and two of his wives (like the dragon who devours women).

- Nero died in June of 68. After his death, many believed he somehow would return. Eventually, Rome rose again. Some see this as a reference to the rising of the second beast and the wound that was healed (Rev. 13:11-12). The empire suffered a head wound but lived.
- In ancient Hebrew, numbers were often assigned to letters based on the order of the alphabet. There are ways to add up the numbers of Nero's name to get 666.
- Several 1st Century writers outside of Revelation refer to Nero as an Antichrist.

Ask: Does it matter whether John intended the beast to refer to Nero in particular or to emperors in general?

The Mark of the Beast – 10 minutes

John wrote this vision for a particular group of Christians who were trying to be faithful during a particular time. Daniels reminds

Trying to find things that correlate . . . unfortunately leads us down a rabbit hole of totally missing the point. But if we read it as a letter meant for a particular community about surviving and subverting the empire in their time, the emphasis changes dramatically. (p 106)

Daniels believes that John's vision unveiled three sins of empire:

- The scapegoating violence of empire in contrast to the Lamb that was Slain.
- The song of empire which lulls people into unquestioned participation in the ways of the empire.
- And here, the mark of the beast, signifying the empire's abusive economic practices.

From Revelation 13:16-17

¹⁶It (the beast) causes all, both small and great, both rich and poor, both free and slave, to be given a brand on the right hand or the forehead, ¹⁷so that no one can buy or sell who does not have the brand . . . (Revelation 13:16-17, NRSV)

Daniels links the “mark of the beast” with the beastly empire in which people were living. Some estimates say that 80% of people in the Roman Empire lived in poverty. The majority of the land of the empire was concentrated in the hands of a few people. Wealthy people who gave gifts to people who were poor often did so to elevate themselves rather than out of genuine concern for their neighbor. The word for “mark” is the word used for imprinting a coin with an image of the Roman emperor. No one could participate in the economy (buy or sell) without accepting the brand or mark of the emperor, so there was no way to avoid dealing with Rome (the beast). In a very real sense, the mark of the beast was everywhere.

Jewish and Christian traditions believed that God intended a different kind of economy.

- God created a world of abundance and breathed life into humanity.
- In the Wilderness, people were told to take only the manna they needed each day, trusting there would be enough for the next day.
- The law required a Sabbath, allowing people and the land to rest.
- Every 49 years (seven sabbaths of years), debts were to be cancelled, and land returned to the original owners. There would be no landless people.
- Jesus demonstrated radical hospitality and sharing.

God’s economy has always stood in contrast to the economy of empire throughout history – from Egypt to Israel (which became an empire) to the Babylonian Empire to the Roman Empire to today.

Ask: In what ways are our current economic systems like a beast?

Poverty – 15 minutes

Daniels reflects on the economic systems of our day by sharing four ways Americans tend to think about how people become poor. These are from a lecture by Dr. Colleen Wessel-McCoy (p 107-108).

- **Poverty as accident** – The system is generally good. Sometimes bad things happen which lead to poverty. Solutions: short-term assistance, fill the gaps.

- **Poverty as pathological** – Poverty is caused by bad choices people make. Solutions: make poverty so undesirable, people will be forced to find a way out of it.
- **Poverty as fate** – Poverty is inescapable. It will always be with us. Solutions: Accept it. Don't fight it.
- **Poverty as structural** – Poverty is part of an economic system which intentionally rewards some people and impoverishes others. Solutions: Empower people to change it.

All of these can be true to a certain extent.

Possible activity:

If time permits, invite the group to talk about these different understandings of poverty using this exercise. Ask them to rank these ideas about causes of poverty in order from most to least – which one causes the most poverty and which causes the least poverty. If time allows, add percentages to equal 100. Here's an example:

- *Pathological – 40%*
- *Structural – 30%*
- *Accident – 20%*
- *Fate – 10%*

If they need to write down responses, invite them to take out their phones and send a text to themselves to help them remember their responses. Briefly discuss what people think.

Daniels sees in John's vision an understanding of poverty that is structural.

Inequity is not about accident, pathology or fate – it is a demonic spirit at work within the structures of society that created it. It is the result of the spirit of empire. (p 109)

Later in John's vision, in Revelation 18, Babylon (a symbol of empire) finally fell. When this happened in the vision, the merchants of the world wept because of economic losses. Read Revelation 18:11-13.

*¹¹And the merchants of the earth weep and mourn for her, since no one buys their cargo any more, ¹²cargo of gold, silver, jewels and pearls, fine linen, purple, silk and scarlet, all kinds of scented wood, all articles of ivory, all articles of costly wood, bronze, iron, and marble, ¹³cinnamon, spice, incense, myrrh, frankincense, wine, olive oil, choice flour and wheat, cattle and sheep, horses and chariots, slaves—**and human lives.** (Revelation 18:11-13, NRSV)*

Daniels writes

The empire of Rome is trading in human bodies, and God damns such a practice. (p 113).

Reflect – 5 minutes

Ask: Where do we see the mark of the beast today? How can we resist it?

Pray – 3 minutes

Invite someone to pray, or pray the Collect *For the Oppressed* from the Book of Common Prayer.

Look with pity, O heavenly Father, upon the people in this land who live with injustice, terror, disease, and death as their constant companions. Have mercy upon us. Help us to eliminate our cruelty to these our neighbors. Strengthen those who spend their lives establishing equal protection of the law and equal opportunities for all. And grant that every one of us may enjoy a fair portion of the riches of this land; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen. (BCP 826)

Revelation 13

¹ And I saw a beast rising out of the sea, with ten horns and seven heads, and on its horns were ten diadems, and on its heads were blasphemous names.

² And the beast that I saw was like a leopard, its feet were like a bear's, and its mouth was like a lion's mouth. And the dragon gave it his power and his throne and great authority. ³ One of its heads seemed to have received a death blow, but its fatal wound had been healed. In amazement the whole earth followed the beast. ⁴ They worshiped the dragon, for he had given his authority to the beast, and they worshiped the beast, saying, "Who is like the beast, and who can fight against it?"

⁵ The beast was given a mouth speaking arrogant and blasphemous words, and it was allowed to exercise authority for forty-two months. ⁶ It opened its mouth to speak blasphemies against God, blaspheming his name and his dwelling, that is, those who dwell in heaven. ⁷ Also, it was allowed to wage war on the saints and to conquer them. It was given authority over every tribe and people and language and nation, ⁸ and all the inhabitants of the earth will worship it, everyone whose name has not been written from the foundation of the world in the book of life of the Lamb that was slaughtered.

⁹ Let anyone who has an ear listen:

¹⁰ If you are to be taken captive, into captivity you go;
if you kill with the sword,
with the sword you must be killed.

Here is a call for the endurance and faith of the saints.

¹¹ Then I saw another beast that rose out of the earth; it had two horns like a lamb, and it spoke like a dragon. ¹² It exercises all the authority of the first beast on its behalf, and it makes the earth and its inhabitants worship the first beast, whose fatal wound had been healed. ¹³ It performs great signs, even making fire come down from heaven to earth in the sight of all, ¹⁴ and by the signs that it is allowed to perform on behalf of the beast it deceives the inhabitants of earth, telling them to make an image for the beast that had been wounded by the sword and yet lived, ¹⁵ and it was allowed to give breath to the image of the beast so that the image of the beast could even speak and cause those who would not worship the image of the beast to be killed.

¹⁶ Also, it causes all, both small and great, both rich and poor, both free and slave, to be given a brand on the right hand or the forehead, ¹⁷ so that no one can buy or sell who does not have the brand, that is, the name of the beast or the number for its name. ¹⁸ This calls for wisdom: let anyone with understanding calculate the number of the beast, for it is the number for a person. Its number is six hundred sixty-six.

Resisting Empire – Week 8

Chapter 9, Revelation 21

Gather – 10 minutes

In Chapter 9, Daniels compares the Revelation of John to a remix album – in which an artist produces new versions of old songs. Revelation is a remix of ideas and images from earlier scriptures. Invite participants to share names, if needed, and a favorite remix album (if they can think of one), or any other example of a remix that they appreciate.

Daniels writes:

Someone who makes a good remix is a person who is able to enter into the story that is already there but then finds ways to make it their own. It is about starting out with the pre-existing material but then being willing to adapt it in appropriate ways to keep it fresh and relevant. When we talk about “authentic faith,” we might be talking about good remix – the faithful are not simply a cover band, nor are they unhooked from history, tradition, and community. (p 119)

Ask: In what ways might it be helpful to think of the life of faith as a remix?

Background – 10 minutes

Last week, we discussed Revelation 13 in depth and part of Revelation 18. This week, we turn to the end of the vision, Revelation 21 and 22. Here is a summary of Revelation 13 to 20 from biblesummary.info.

13 I saw a beast rising out of the sea. It spoke blasphemy against God. Another beast rose and gave everyone a mark. Its number is 666.

14 I saw the Lamb in Zion with the 144,000. Angels said, "The hour of judgment has come." The earth was reaped with a sharp sickle.

15 I saw angels with seven plagues. Those who conquered sang, "Just are your ways, Lord!" The angels were given seven bowls of wrath.

16 The bowls of wrath were poured out. The seas turned to blood, darkness fell, the kings gathered at Armageddon and the earth quaked.

17 I saw a prostitute on a beast with seven heads and ten horns. An angel said, "The heads and horns are kings. The Lamb will conquer."

18 An angel cried, "Fallen, fallen is Babylon!" The kings and merchants will weep. An angel said, "The great city will be thrown down."

19 A multitude cried, "Hallelujah! The Lord reigns." The Word of God led the armies of heaven. The beast was cast into the lake of fire.

20 Satan was bound and the martyrs reigned with Christ for 1,000 years. Then Satan was cast into the lake of fire. The dead were judged.

As you can tell, in John's vision, the world was judged by God and Babylon (the empire) was destroyed. The images throughout Revelation come from other parts of the Bible and the history of Israel. These images would have made sense to the people reading Revelation at the time.

Here is the final image at the end of Revelation 20.

¹⁰The devil who had deceived them was thrown into the lake of fire and sulfur, where the beast and the false prophet were, and they will be tormented day and night forever and ever.

¹¹ Then I saw a great white throne and the one who sat on it; the earth and the heaven fled from his presence, and no place was found for them. ¹² And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Also another book was opened, the book of life. And the dead were judged according to their works, as recorded in the books. ¹³ And the sea gave up the dead who were in it, Death and Hades gave up the dead who were in them, and all were judged according to what they had done. ¹⁴ Then Death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. This is the second death, the lake of fire, ¹⁵ and anyone whose name was not found written in the book of life was thrown into the lake of fire. (Revelation 20:11-15)

This is one of many passages in Revelation that has led people to think John's vision is all about personal judgment and whether our names are in the book of life. However, another way to read it is as a vision of cosmic justice. The beast and the false prophets finally got their due. Even Death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire, never to torment the faithful again.

Ask: Why might some people want to use Revelation to reinforce ideas of personal judgment? Why might some want to see in Revelation a message of cosmic justice?

A New Heaven and Earth – 20 minutes

After everything John had seen, after the message to the churches, the heavenly worship, the seals, the beast, the bowls, wars and calamity, a final judgment – John saw this.

Read Revelation 21:1-7.

¹Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. ²And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. ³And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying,

*“See, the home of God is among mortals.
He will dwell with them; they will be his peoples,
and God himself will be with them and be their God;
⁴he will wipe every tear from their eyes.
Death will be no more;
mourning and crying and pain will be no more,
for the first things have passed away.”*

⁵And the one who was seated on the throne said, “See, I am making all things new.” Also he said, “Write this, for these words are trustworthy and true.” ⁶Then he said to me, “It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End. To the thirsty I will give water as a gift from the spring of the water of life. ⁷Those who conquer will inherit these things, and I will be their God, and they will be my children.

(Revelation 21:1-7, NRSV)

Ask: Imagine that you are part of one of the seven churches to whom Revelation was addressed. You are hearing John’s vision being read aloud to the community. What do you feel when you finally hear the words, “Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth”?

Ask: What images or messages in this vision sound like earlier messages from God in scripture, through the prophets, or in the ministry of Jesus?

Many have read Revelation with an eye toward what Daniels calls “evacuation theology”. Revelation has encouraged some to think “Why work to care for this planet or care for people, since it will all be destroyed?”. In reality, John’s ultimate vision is not about people escaping this earth to go to heaven. John sees heaven coming to earth and making earth new.

Ask: How do the new heaven and the new earth come about? Is it God’s work, our work, a combination? Is it a specific event that will happen someday or more of a vision board to guide us?

Daniels says that John’s vision was a remix with a purpose.

Their tradition actually gives them direction on not just how to survive, but how to understand and subvert the empire. John is claiming that all of the weight of their tradition comes to bear on this moment, that they can be faithful. (p 122)

John’s vision continues. Read Revelation 21:22-27.

²² I saw no temple in the city, for its temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb. ²³ And the city has no need of sun or moon to shine on it, for the glory of God is its light, and its lamp is the Lamb. ²⁴ The nations will walk by its light, and the kings of the earth will bring their glory into it. ²⁵ Its gates will never be shut by day—and there will be no night there. ²⁶ People will bring into it the glory and the honor of the nations. ²⁷ But nothing unclean will enter it, nor anyone who practices abomination or falsehood, but only those who are written in the Lamb’s book of life. (Revelation 21:22-27)

Ask: What images from this vision stand out to you? What images are most appealing and hopeful to you?

Daniel’s writes

John shows that their tradition is alive, relevant, and able to help them understand the times. . . . John tells his people living under the Roman empire in the first century that God’s holy city is coming down right in the middle of that Roman city. God is dwelling with you in the midst of all that pain, suffering, and oppression. You are called to be faithful even when you are being crushed. Be that holy city and a light to the nations. . . .

Be that alternative community – the multitude – that rejects the beastly economics of the empire and follow that lamb that was slain. He will lead you to life and victory. (p 124)

Reflect – 10 minutes

People often do not like to be reminded of the past, but the past helps us live faithfully in the present. Sometimes the past gives us an example to follow. Sometimes it gives us an example from which to learn. John's vision in Revelation mixes images and lessons from the past with John's current moment to create new horizons of faithfulness.

Ask: How does our Christian tradition or denominational tradition help us resist empire today? What examples from our history do we want to follow? What examples from our history do we not want to follow? What is God's call to us in our day – the new thing God is doing in our midst?

Pray – 5 minutes

Invite someone to pray or pray the Collect *Of a Saint* from the Book of Common Prayer.

Almighty God, you have surrounded us with a great cloud of witnesses: Grant that we, encouraged by the good examples of your servants, may persevere in running the race that is set before us, until at last we may with them attain to your eternal joy; through Jesus Christ, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen. (BCP 250)

Resisting Empire – Week 9

Introduction and Chapter 1, Revelation 22

Gather – 10 minutes

This is the final gathering. Invite group members to share their biggest “Ah-ha” moment in this journey with Revelation.

Reading the Bible – 10 minutes

Our discussions of the book *Resisting Empire* began with Chapter 2 because that is where the first discussion of the text of Revelation began. Now we go back to the beginning to consider some of the central points the author said he intended to make with this book.

The author begins the book by talking in the Introduction about the lenses we bring to scripture. He identifies several:

- Personal lenses – our experiences and cultures
- Biblical lenses – experiences and cultures of the people in the Bible
- A Holy Spirit lens – trusting the Spirit to help us apply the scriptures in our own day

Ask: What lenses are you aware that you bring to the Bible?

Themes of Revelation – 10 minutes

In the Introduction, Daniels identified four themes of Revelation that he explored in more depth in later chapters.

- Revelation reveals how scapegoating functions within empires throughout history.
- Revelation critiques the economic systems of empires.
- Revelation demonstrates the importance of liturgy that forms people either in the likeness of the empire or the likeness of the lamb.
- Revelation reveals the possibility of an alternative community – the multitude.

Ask: Did you notice these themes in our journey through Revelation? What do these themes say to you about living faithfully today?

The End of Revelation – 10 minutes

Last week, we looked at Revelation 21 and the promise of a new heaven and a new earth. The images of war and destruction in Revelation led some to assume John's vision was about the destruction of earth and an escape to heaven. Daniels sees John's vision as an understanding that empires lead to destruction, but God works to bring about a new community on earth.

Revelation 22 continues the vision of a renewed earth. Read Revelation 22:1-7.

¹Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb ²through the middle of the street of the city. On either side of the river is the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, producing its fruit each month; and the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations. ³Nothing accursed will be found there anymore. But the throne of God and of the Lamb will be in it, and his servants will worship him; ⁴they will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads. ⁵And there will be no more night; they need no light of lamp or sun, for the Lord God will be their light, and they will reign forever and ever.

⁶And he said to me, "These words are trustworthy and true, for the Lord, the God of the spirits of the prophets, has sent his angel to show his servants what must soon take place."

⁷"See, I am coming soon! Blessed is the one who keeps the words of the prophecy of this book." (Revelation 22:1-7, NRSV)

Ask: What kind of city does John see? What is in the city? What is not in the city? What does this vision say about the kind of world John believed God is bringing into being?

Reflect – 10 minutes

The title of Chapter 2, the first chapter we discussed, is “From Bafflement to Wonder.”

Ask: What in Revelation still baffles you? What in Revelation fills you with awe and wonder?

Pray – 5 minutes

Thank everyone for being part of this journey together. Invite someone to pray, or pray the Collect *Of a Pastor*, from the Book of Common Prayer, remembering John of Patmos.

Heavenly God, Shepherd of your people, we thank you for your servant John of Patmos, who was faithful in the care and nurture of your flock; and we pray that, following his example and the teaching of his holy life, we may by your grace grow into the stature of the fullness of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen. (BCP 248)