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There will be no night.

Revelation 21:4

He will wipe every tear from their eyes, and there will be no more death or sorrow or crying or pain. All these things are gone forever. (New Living Translation)

Isaiah 25:8a

He will swallow up death forever! The Sovereign LORD will wipe away all tears. (New Living Translation)

Revelation 16:15

Lo, I am coming like a thief! Blessed is he who is awake, keeping his garments that he may not go naked and be seen exposed! (Revised Standard Version)

Revelation 22:5

And there will be no night there—no need for lamps or sun—for the Lord God will shine on them. And they will reign forever and ever. (New Living Translation)

I decided to talk about the Book of Revelation today for two reasons. The first is that it's poorly understood by modern Christians and therefore quite useful to

talk about. The second has to do with something kind of funny that the mother of a childhood friend of mine once shouted at him.

I'd like to start out with that childhood buddy. We'll call him Jack. We lived across the street from each other and road our bikes to Catholic grammar school together. This was during the Vietnam war. A lot of us had fathers who either had served or were serving. My father had been a Marine in the Pacific in World War II. Jack's father was a Special Forces soldier in Vietnam – or so Jack said. Jack would brag about how his father was always off on secret missions. It was very dangerous and there was always the threat that Jack would never see his father again – but Jack was very proud to have a hero for a dad.

I remember once asking my father why it was that the military never gave Jack's dad time to go home and visit his family, why he served year after year without ever getting leave. My father was sitting down at the time, in his green La-Z-Boy chair, reading the newspaper. He pulled the paper down and looked up at me. He thought for a moment before speaking, and then softly told me to never, ever question Jack about his stories of his father. I should always tell Jack that it was great what his father did and that it was too bad that his father was so badly needed that he never got to go home.

There was something else about Jack. His mother didn't know it, and in fact, neither did I, but Jack was becoming an extremely skilled shoplifter.

I'm going to get back to Jack.

PAUSE.

Let's talk about the Book of Revelation. It's very different from the rest of the New Testament. It isn't full of moral teachings and memorable stories. It's filled with violent visions. But just what is it?

It was written around 90 A.D. by a man named John who was living on the island of Patmos off the coast of what is now Turkey. When ships moved between Rome and Ephesus, the city to whom the evangelist Paul addressed the book of Ephesians, these ships moved past the island of Patmos. So, Patmos was a well-known landmark in that part of the world. John of Patmos, as we call him, was a Jewish Christian, and Rome had crushed his Jewish homeland, which included Jerusalem, about 20 years earlier. He and other Christians were well aware of the destruction of the Temple and the destruction of the city of Jerusalem. But John saw this horrific war as the validation of Jesus' prophesy that there were people alive during Jesus' life who would see the arrival of the kingdom of God; surely, the devastation of the spiritual home of God's people

was signaling the beginning of the ultimate end. Thus, the Romans, by destroying Jerusalem, were bringing about the second coming of Christ.

What John of Patmos did was use the prophetic literature of what we now call the Old Testament, writings that were intimately familiar to his audience – Jewish Christians - to denounce the oppression of the Romans, their worshipping of Roman emperors as if they were gods, and the soulless and hedonistic lifestyle of the Romans. At the same time, he was promising that the Lord Jesus would come again to end the suffering of God's people and usher in an endless age of heavenly glory. Importantly, by wrapping his words in those of ancient prophetic literature he may have been avoiding reprisals by Roman authorities; John was concealing his attack on the Romans by using metaphoric language drawn from the Old Testament. But John of Patmos was also leveraging the emotional response that Jewish followers of Jesus would have when they heard the echoes of ancient Hebrew prophetic writings in his writings. And his fellow Jews knew exactly who John was writing about – the Romans.

Here is an example of John of Patmos' use of the prophetic literature of the Old Testament.

This is Revelation, Chapter 6, verse 8 - *I looked and there was a pale green horse! Its rider's name was Death, and Hades followed with him; they were given authority over a fourth of the earth, to kill with sword, famine, and pestilence, and by the wild animals of the earth.* (NRSV 2006). Here is a very similar passage from the prophet Ezekiel, Chapter 14, verse 21 - *Now this is what the Sovereign LORD says: How terrible it will be when all four of these dreadful punishments fall upon Jerusalem—war, famine, wild animals, and disease—destroying all her people and animals.* (NLT 2012) These four ways of delivering punishment to those who deny the rule of God – war, famine, disease, and wild animals – appears repeatedly in the Old Testament, and John of Patmos referring to them leaves no doubt that God will come, and with all his fury and power, destroy his enemies.

Our first and second reading today are also examples of John's use of prophetic writings. This is what John wrote in Revelation Chapter 21, verse 4 - *He will wipe every tear from their eyes, and there will be no more death or sorrow or crying or pain. All these things are gone forever.* (NLT 2012) And here is something that was written eight or nine hundred years earlier, and attributed to arguably the most important Old Testament prophet, Isaiah, in Chapter 25, verse 8a - *He will swallow up death forever! The Sovereign LORD will wipe away all tears.* (NLT 2012) The wiping away of tears as a metaphor for ending all pain and

suffering is something that would have resonated deeply with all Jewish followers of Jesus.

John of Patmos had complex, combined spiritual and political reasons for writing Revelation. He believed the biblical prediction of global devastation followed by glorious end-times for the faithful. But he also took a risky, overt stand against Roman control of most of John's known world. Yet many people, perhaps the bulk of Christians over the centuries, have viewed the book strictly as an inspired, historical document consisting of a series of largely literal predictions. There is disagreement as to whether these prophecies have already occurred or whether they have yet to come about, or if Revelation consists of a mixture of partly met and partly unmet predictions. But there is also something called the idealist approach, whereby, as Steve Gregg, a well-known Christian writer puts it, believers take *"... Revelation to be a great drama depicting transcendent spiritual realities, such as the perennial conflict between Christ and Satan."* (Gregg 2013) This is essentially how I see the lesson of Revelation: the world is full of corruption and pain, but in the end, God always wins.

That's what we get from Revelation: hope against human corruption and hope for a magnificent future under the total control of God.

I don't see Revelation as ancient psychedelic, ridiculous literature written by someone who was on acid long before acid existed, as many modern people view it. Rather, I see it as a deliberate reference to ancient prophetic writings in the Old Testament, and as a door to the world of God, the door to a world where God is always at work, wiping away sorrow, tears, pain, and death.

PAUSE.

So, I'd like to get back to the pain of my friend Jack. He felt a deep sadness that his father had abandoned him and his mother. He acted out in a big way.

One day, I was across the street from my home, in my best friend's apartment. With curious fanfare, Jack ushered me into his room. He stood there with a big grin on his face as I gazed around his room. I was blown away.

I saw a miniature safe, a baseball bat, a few paperback books, a Beatles album, and a handful of other brand-new items – items Jack did not own. He had stolen them. He proceeded to show me how he had done it. A large book he had carved out so he could stuff items in it. His school bag, with a hidden compartment he had rigged. And a tremendous amount of boldness added to his extreme cleverness.

Now, his mother followed us into his room. She too looked at the new items in his room. She stood there with her hands on her hips, her eyes filling with tears.

Jack is why I chose Revelation for today. You see, his mother dug into her bag of biblical knowledge and pulled out a very scary bullet. She belted out a passage. It's our third quote today: *Lo, I am coming like a thief! Blessed is he who is awake, keeping his garments that he may not go naked and be seen exposed!*

Now, the truth is that I didn't know at the time that this quote was from Revelation. I just knew that it had to be from the Bible. I don't remember ever hearing it again until maybe a year ago when I was in the seminary.

Jack's mother sent Christ, as a thief, against her son, the thief.

That shouted Bible passage, along with his mother's overall response to his thievery, scared the crap out of Jack. Jack's mother and I went with Jack from store to store. At each place, he admitted what he had done and returned what he had stolen. None of the store owners or managers called the cops on him. None of them. God was taking care of him, showing him mercy, forgiveness, and love.

To the best of my knowledge Jack never saw his father again. But I'm also pretty sure he never stole again.

Even as adults, we can be a lot like Jack. We have things inside of us that hurt. We lose a job that we've had for years, or our path upward is blocked seemingly by the unreasonable actions of others. A spouse or a sibling or a child leaves us or dies. We develop a chronic medical condition. Whatever it is, it causes a deep sense of loss, of emptiness, of abandonment.

It can be hard to live with something or to even admit that it's real. It can cause us to act out in other ways. We think we're more mature because we don't go out and shoplift or do anything blatantly criminal. But we can be disagreeable with other people, isolate ourselves, be hard on someone we have authority over, or be callous when we see someone else suffering.

But God is there. And God isn't a far-away, cosmic being up there in the vacuum of outer space. God is real. God is vigilant. As the Book of Revelation tells us, God is astonishing and powerful. God can crush sorrow, dry away our tears, and ease our pain. And death is a border that God can cross over with ease. God is there with us when we cross that border, making it nothing at all to fear.

That's what Revelation is about. Through a series of symbolic and often violent visions, John, while exiled on the island of Patmos gives us a vision of the end of time. He tells us of a great cataclysm, when evil forces are once and for all destroyed, when a new Heaven and Earth are born. No matter what happens in our lives, no matter what happens on this planet, God is always going to triumph. But just like the Book of Revelation is highly symbolic, the lesson of the Book is also highly symbolic. We don't have to wait for the end times for God to win. John of Patmos knew that the Romans would be crushed – and their empire did indeed collapse. It didn't take until the end of time. And God will win for us, right here and right now. Revelation is the ultimate story of hope. God will forgive us, heal us, regenerate us. God will end our sorrow, our pain. God will wipe away our tears and keep our faith from ever dying.

Finally, today is a special Sunday in the United Methodist calendar. We are celebrating the Saints who have come before us. John of Patmos was exiled on the island of Patmos in the era after the destruction of Jerusalem. But one day, as the Book of Revelation promises, all Saints, past, present, and future will be reunited in the New Jerusalem. And then, as John of Patmos teaches us in our last Bible quote today: *"...there will be no night there—no need for lamps or sun—for the Lord God will shine on them. And they will reign forever and ever."*

I'd like to end with a brief prayer.

God, we thank you for those who guide us through life. We thank you for the tough lessons we often must face as children – and as adults. We thank you for the gracious ways you deal with our mistakes.

We also thank you for the way you watch over this world. At times, we are overwhelmed with corruption, with wars, with natural disasters, with sickness, and with crime. But we know that you are always there with your healing grace. We know that you will heal us – and that it does not have to wait until the end of time. Your healing can come right now.

And we know that someday, you will wipe away all that gives us sorrow, causes us pain, or makes us cry. Someday, you will wipe away death.

Finally, we thank you for this church family, for the way that our sisters and brothers in Christ give to you and your church, so that you and your church can give to us. During this time of Fall stewardship we ask that you continue to build this church so that it may reach out to other people in our community, and so they, too, can come to grow in this warm environment and grow closer to you.