

A CLOUD OF COVID WITNESSES

Rev. Gusti Linnea Newquist

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Shepherdstown Presbyterian Church

Based on Revelation 7:9, 13-17. The other side of "the great ordeal."

We can be forgiven, I think, if we viewed the full blue blood-orange Halloween moon last night, rising with the recent surge of the global pandemic, on the eve of an election that has driven armed extremists to build bunkers in West Virginia and Colorado (in order to ride out a pending social breakdown), as a scene straight out of a horror film based on the book of Revelation.

According to the *Washington Post*, the International Crisis Group has issued a warning - to the *United States*, of all places - that we are in danger of falling into violent conflict. They cite, as evidence, "the country's sharp political polarization, the growing presence of armed extremists, the possibility of prolonged uncertainty about the outcome of the vote, and a president who deploys martial rhetoric and refuses to guarantee a peaceful transfer of power if he loses."

A survey from Louisiana State University confirms this warning. According to this survey, "15 percent of Republicans and 20 percent of Democrats say the country would be better off if large numbers of people on the other side 'just died.'"

In that same survey, 18 percent of Democrats and 13 percent of Republicans "said that violence could be an acceptable response" if their party loses this election.

Friends, we are in trouble.

We are in full blue blood-orange Halloween apocalyptic moon from the book of Revelation kind of trouble. And it is going to get worse, no matter who wins this election. Just like it gets worse in the chapters that follow our Scripture lesson for today.

It seems so beautiful, this chapter from Revelation. Where a great multitude gathers from all tribes and peoples and languages. The people of God in all our diversity! United in worship of the God who made us *good!*

It seems so beautiful, this chapter from Revelation. Where those who have suffered "the great ordeal": poverty, injustice, ethnic violence, police brutality. It seems so beautiful to envision them cleansed by the springs of the water of life. With the God who created them wiping away every tear from their eye.

Would it not be wonderful if the Book of Revelation - if the week of this election - could end right here? With this vision. With this *goodness!*

Oh, I wish it did.

Oh, I *really* wish it did!

It does not.

In the Book of Revelation - in the week of this election, and beyond, I fear - it only gets worse. Yes, the present suffering is intense. The suffering to come will be more-so.

The truth is, as the ancient apocalyptic vision insists, the violence and the fear and the persecution (perceived or real) that the people of God endure today is *revealing*. It is lifting the veil on the horrifying truth at the heart of the human condition: that we have fallen so far from the vision of goodness God created us to be.

Yes, we were created *good*. In the very image of God! But our failure to see the image of God in one another - and in ourselves - leads exactly to *this*. The spiral of violence, *that has always been with us*, imploding upon itself. Threatening death to the very planet entrusted to our care.

But, as the poet says, "there may well be good in our misfortune if we can find it. Hidden in the darkness of our fear ... is the gift of opportunity."

We find that opportunity in the verses just before today's Scripture lesson from Revelation. God offers a baptism of repentance to *all factions* of the nation. In the deepest meaning of that word "repent," which is "to change our hearts and minds." To change our way of life. A baptism of repentance requires us to renounce evil and its power in the world. Including - and perhaps most importantly - in ourselves. To love our enemies, as Jesus said, and to pray for those who persecute us. To pray, as Abraham Lincoln did, in the midst of true civil war, not for God to be on *our* side - and believe me, I, too, have a side and have been praying for God to be on it - but to pray that we may be on *God's* side.

Hidden in the darkness of our fear is the gift of opportunity: a baptism of repentance. Defined in the Book of Revelation as a change of heart and mind among *all* the factions of our nation. Including us. Which will, Revelation promises, *seal* us in God's protective grace. Not in a seal of protection from contracting COVID. Or a seal of protection from becoming the victim of a violent uprising. Revelation promises our baptism of repentance will become a great seal of protection to keep *us* from becoming the very plague of violence we say we renounce.

Only then, in the vision of Revelation, only when we truly change our hearts and minds, only when we truly change our violent way of life, can we see the sacred truth. From the perspective of eternity, on the other side of an even greater ordeal, fourteen chapters long, we find "a resolution for world renewal," as the poet says. That stands in stark contrast to the seeming truths of life as we witness today.

A new heaven. And a new earth. The Beloved Community we keep saying we want to become. Where mourning and crying and pain will be no more. Where the river of the water of life flows from the throne of God. And a tree of life grows on either side of the river. And the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations.

So here is our invitation, friends. From the multitude that has suffered before us. And the multitude that has suffered among us. Who now surround us as a great cloud of witnesses, clothed with white, with palm branches in their hands. Saying, Come. Join us at the river of the water of life. With a baptismal seal that will change your hearts and minds. So that goodness may finally overcome evil. And love may finally overcome hate. And light may finally overcome darkness. And life may finally overcome death.

Amen.