

Based on Revelation 22:1-2. A Vision of Paradise Found.

The Book of Revelation gets a bad rap.

This was the conclusion of our Teach the Preacher gathering this week, as we found ourselves soaking up this vision of Paradise Found in the twenty-second chapter. Literally, the last page of the Bible, the concluding vision for everything that comes before. Which is a dream of God's kin-dom come *on earth, as it is in heaven*, flowing with a river of the water of life, bright as a crystal. And a tree of life – that somehow has the capacity to criss-cross every side of that river – fruiting and leaving and healing *everyone*.

What a vision! What a dream! What a promise! Can you imagine?

Actually, we *can* imagine, right here, right now, in our own sanctuary. We have, in our own way, re-created the vision: with our own angels and our own river of the water of life flowing from the painting, through the font, across the table, down the aisle, through the doors, and into the streets. We *can* imagine, with our own trees of Radical Hospitality, Holistic Spirituality, and Engaged Compassion criss-crossing every side of that river, fruiting and leaving and healing – we hope – *everyone*.

In fact, it is the capacity to *imagine* this vision of peace and wholeness and hope that is the entire point! Not just of the Book of Revelation, but of the entire Bible. *This* is what the kin-dom of God/The Democracy of God/The Great Shalom of God looks like! Feels like! Smells like! Tastes like!

The problem is, we do not live in this vision most of the time. We live in the so-called “real world.” We live in the reality of death and destruction, of poverty and oppression, of murder and rape, of addiction and exploitation. Of lies masquerading as truth. And so did the author of the Book of Revelation, as evidenced by all of those realities appearing in the other chapters of the Book.

We in the church are left with a seemingly stark choice: suck it up in the real world or escape into the vision of the “pie in the sky one day by and by,” free from the stain of it all in the here and now. But the author of the Book of Revelation says this is a false choice. Instead, he says, we in the church are called to stand strong with one foot firmly rooted in the self-destruction of the real world and the other foot firmly rooted – like a tree – in the vision and the values of the coming reign of God. Like the prophet Jeremiah before him, the author of the Book of Revelation *speaks truth to power* and is persecuted for it. Sent into exile in order to silence his vision.

The author of the Book of Revelation refuses to be silenced!

He refuses to relinquish this vision of wholeness, this vision of HOPE, this promise we hold tight that one day *all will be well!* *On earth* as it is in heaven. So the author of the Book of Revelation writes a letter, which is what this book turns out to be: a letter to the churches. All of the churches, throughout the entire land, describing – in graphic terms, to be sure – what will happen if the land of death and destruction in which they live is allowed to consume itself. Which is why the Book of Revelation gets a bad rap.

But the author is not willing to leave reality on a path of self-destruction. He concludes, instead, with *this* vision of wholeness. This gift of grace. This dream of hope. This promise that even as we live in a land of death and destruction that is truly self-destructing, we can root our hearts and our spirits and even our bodies *in this land* of healing hope. We can root our hearts and our spirits and even our bodies along the shore of *this* river of the water of life. We can put our trust in *this* tree and its visionary values, planted by the water. Fearing nothing. Embracing everything.

That is what our beloved Youth Prophet, Jillian Dillow calls us to do today. In the spirit of Black History Month, rooted in the tree of Engaged Compassion, planted by the river of the water of life, Jillian claims the mantle of the prophet Jeremiah, calling out the powers that be in our state and our nation that want to squelch the teaching of truth in history. In doing so, Jillian invites us all to do the same.

Please welcome Jillian Dillow:

Malala Yousufzai (muh·**laa**·luh yoo·suhf·**zai**) said, “One child, one teacher, one book, one pen can change the world.”

So what happens when that book is unavailable, or that teacher can’t talk? When the pen is restrained, or the child is uneducated.

Hello my name is Jillian Dillow and I am an 8th grader in Jefferson County, WV. Today I will be talking about West Virginia’s Gag Order Bills. There are two bills in the Senate right now and two bills in the House. This is a presentation I put together with my mom to help inform other students about this issue, the impacts, and let them what they can do about it.

The church should care about this because the next generation needs to know our history so we can carry the commitment to our values into the future. We have to make a connection between the stories of the Bible and the stories in the real world playing out in front of us.

The official titles of these bills are somewhat misleading as they use words like “anti-racism, anti-sexism, and anti-stereotyping” but they restrain discussion and teaching about “concepts” related to non-discrimination, diversity, equality, inclusion, race, ethnicity, sex, or bias. And the bills are very vague so this can make teachers hesitant to talk freely about these topics.

Similar bills that have been passed into laws in other states. I have some examples of the complaints filed. These same teaching concepts or similar ones can be challenged in these states with the laws in place and teachers can face drastic consequences like being fined, fired, or losing their teaching license.

There was also a complaint about *The Story of Ruby Bridges* because it includes pictures of white people protesting and yelling at Ruby. The complaint was concerned about a prayer at the end of the book where one could make an inference that she was making a comparison about those who protested her presence at the school and those who crucified Jesus.

The next complaint was about the book, *Martin Luther King Jr and the March on Washington* because it includes pictures of segregated water fountains and white firemen attacking protestors with water hoses.

Finally, the book *Separate is Never Equal* was also part of the complaint for its historical portrayal of Sylvia Mendez's parents' fight for her inclusion in an all-white school and the bullying she endured from her peers. The parents who submitted the complaint fear second graders won't be able to differentiate between "some of the white kids and people in this story were mean" and "all white people are mean."

Teachers are nervous about breaking these laws. There was an interview on Chalkbeat where several teachers in the states where these laws are in place are in fear of losing their job. This fear restrains them from completely answering their students questions about history and in some cases they put the question on minority students to have them explain the issues about race and gender so the teachers can avoid saying something that might violate the law.

There was a 5th grade teacher who wasn't sure how much she could say when her students asked, "Where are the Native American now?" She used to be able to freely talk about the reservations and the genocide the Native Americans endured, but now worries those details might violate the law.

A library assistant in Texas was conflicted when two girls were surprised to learn that women were not always allowed to vote and a boy in the group who was Hispanic remarked that he would have been allowed to vote. And the library assistant pointed out that at one time the vote was only granted to white men. When they wanted to learn more about this she stopped explaining because she was afraid of violating the law.

The limits on teachers have also put minority students on the spot. In Iowa a student of color has a teacher call on him to elaborate on topics of racial inequality when she's not sure if she's able to go into more details because of the new laws.

Think about you and your education. How have the books you've read helped your understanding of race or gender? How would your education be impacted if truth in history was hidden from you? How would minority students be impacted if teachers had to defer to them to talk about race or gender concepts?

It is important for us to learn the truth in our history because one way we can have hope that things will get better is to learn that things were worse in the past and they got better back then.

There are a lot of things the church can do about this. You can write to your state and local representatives and school board. You can call them, too! You can speak at public meetings. You can talk to teachers and ask them to speak up. You can talk to your families and friends ask them to speak up and write letters.

Thank you for letting me share this information. I hope that this presentation makes its way to communities throughout the state who can and will write letters to protect their right to a truthful and thorough education. As Jesus says, "You shall know the truth, and the truth shall set you free."