



LIVING WORD EPISCOPAL CHURCH

Evangelical • Reformed • Catholic

Before the Throne Revelation 20:7-15

Fr. William Klock

August 7, 2022

Last year we planted some daylilies that someone down the street was kind enough to be giving away. I've spent the last two months trying to destroy these deceptively beautiful, but noxious weeds. I'm beginning to suspect they've sunk roots all the way to the abyss. The devil may be bound there, but he's keeping himself occupied fertilizing my daylilies! We planted one little clump and it promptly took over the entire flowerbed, choking out everything else. Then it put out shoots and daylilies started popping up in the lawn. Then some of them went to seed and more daylilies started appearing in the lawn forty and fifty feet away. At first the outliers were easy enough to snap off at the ground, but that didn't stop them at all. I tried mowing them down with the lawnmower blade set right to ground level. I think I actually heard them laughing at me even as I scalped them. They came back and taunted me, so I dug down a bit, yanked them out, and buried them. Surely smothering them would do the trick. I could hear their cackles rising through the earth until they broke through again. It finally came to digging up the whole flowerbed. I dug and dug and dug—half a metre down—to get those wicked roots. They even entwined around my perimeter drain pipe. As I was packing them into my yard waste bin someone walked by on the path behind our house. “You aren't putting daylilies in your yard waste?” he asked in horror. “Of course I am,” I said. But, no, apparently you can't do that. The seeds survive the composting process and my problem will become who knows how many

other people's problem. “Burn 'em,” he said. “Don't let the seeds get anywhere. Sift the soil. Gather up every last scrap of root and tuber. And burn them with fire!” Well, in the City of Courtenay, burning my yard waste isn't an option, but point taken. It's been about three weeks. I keep checking. Yesterday I went out to water and found half a dozen little shoots just breaking through the ground.

I've been thinking about those daylilies as I've been studying Revelation 20. There was that little blurb in verse 6 at the end of our passage two weeks ago where John wrote that at the end of the millennium, the satan must be released for a little while. What's with that? Why? It goes right along with all those other questions we ask about how God deals with evil. “If God is good, why does he permit evil.” “Why me?” we ask when bad things happen to us. God could spare us from evil, he could spare us from so much pain and suffering—he's God, he can do anything. So why doesn't he? Why, when John has shown us Jesus chaining up the devil and confining him to the abyss, when he's shown us the church riding out triumphantly into the world, conquering the nations by the proclamation of the gospel, when we know that our mission will be successful, because it's backed by the power and authority of both God's word and God's Spirit, why in the world would he let the satan go just when it seems the victory has been won?

Because, like the daylilies, to be dealt with once and for all, evil has to expose itself. If it were up to us, evil would be like those daylilies. I plucked them off and they grew back. I mowed them down and they grew back. I even dug them up—but not deep enough—and they grew back. I was careless with the seeds, and they spread. God's got a better strategy—one that not only ends evil forever, but sees the redemptive work of Jesus

making all things new in the process. Let's look at the rest of Revelation 20, beginning with verse 7.

And when the thousand years are ended, Satan will be released from his prison...

The first decisive blow the Lord delivered to the devil was that first Easter morning when Jesus rose victorious over death. And it only worked, because God had permitted evil to rise to its full height, to be concentrated all in one place, and to do its absolute worst at the cross. And it's like we see ripples of that victory again: first as we saw God's judgement on rebellious Jerusalem. Forty years he gave the Jews to repent and to turn to Jesus the Messiah—and, at the same time, forty years for them to make their rebellion clear and obvious, so that when the Lord's judgement fell on them, there would be no question about the justness of it. Then again, another ripple, as we saw judgement fall on the pagan world of the Greeks and Romans. And now, here at the end, another ripple of God's justice against evil—the last. This time it'll be the end of evil, once and for all.

So for a thousand years the Church will proclaim the good news about Jesus to the nations. It's not literally a thousand years—it's already been almost two thousand already. As I said before, it's a symbolic number. It's a long time and it's just long enough for Jesus, the word, and for the Spirit to do their work through the Church. The satan is bound—Jesus bound him in his ministry and the proclamation of the gospel keeps him bound wherever it goes. It doesn't mean he has no power. It means he cannot and will not prevail. Jesus and the gospel will win because they already have, and the whole world will increasingly know what new creation is like, even if it hasn't fully happened. But as much as the gospel will bring the nations to Jesus and will transform the world, not everyone will believe. How many will refuse the

gospel we don't know. But there will be some. Sin and death will still be present. I trust that by the time this happens, whether that's a thousand years from now or a hundred thousand years from now, the Church will be much refined, but still not perfect. Sin and death are the last enemies to be put under Jesus' feet. And so, when the time is right, evil incarnate will be released from his chains. Continuing with verse 8:

[He] will come out to deceive the nations that are at the four corners of the earth, Gog and Magog, to gather them for battle; their number is like the sand of the sea. And they marched up over the broad plain of the earth and surrounded the camp of the saints and the beloved city, but fire came down from heaven and consumed them, and the 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. (Revelation 20:8-10)

John is looking back here to Ezekiel as he so often does in Revelation. You'll remember that famous vision of Ezekiel about the valley of dry bones—the knee bone connected to the leg bone and all of that as the song goes. Ezekiel saw dry bones—Israel, dead in her sins—restored to life by the proclamation of God's word. Israel cleansed from her sins and brought home from her exile. You'd think everything would be fine from there on out, but it's not. Because Ezekiel then sees Gog, the king of the land of Magog, descending on the newly restored Israel. Magog was a semi-mythical land to the north—somewhere almost off the map. By the First Century, Gog and Magog had become two nations in Jewish thought. They represented the nations of which the Psalmist asks in Psalm 2, "Why do the nations rage?" And yet, in Ezekiel, this raging nation descend on Israel not as punishment or judgement

for her sins, but *after* peace and justice have been restored. And the point for John, as I think it was for Ezekiel, is that Gog and Magog remind us of the problem of evil. No matter what humans may accomplish, no matter how far the gospel reaches, until Jesus finally and fully consummates his work of new creation, evil will be present. Like my daylilies, evil has deep roots. Its seeds spread. Stamp it out here and it pops up over there. Gog and Magog remind us that even as the gospel transforms the world, we still await the day when Jesus will really and truly make all things new—when we and all of creation will know for ourselves the power of resurrection.

So, when the time is right the satan will be released. He will marshal his forces. I can't say how literally John intends for us to take this. He gives us a picture of forces literally staged for an actual war. On the opposing side is the "camp of the saints" and "the beloved city". It's a two-fold image of the Church. We are a camp—an image drawn from Exodus. No matter how far the gospel progresses, no matter how it transforms this world, the Church remains a people on a pilgrimage through the wilderness. But, too, John compares us to the beloved city. This is really interesting, because the only city Jewish believers would think of as "beloved" is Jerusalem. And in the next chapter—to get ahead of ourselves—we see the New Jerusalem—an amazing city that is, at the same time, not just a city, but a temple, and John says, also the bride. It's both a city and a people. And while it doesn't descend in all its glory until the next chapter, it's already present here and now in the present age. This was the inspiration for St. Augustine's famous book, *The City of God*. The Church is God's city, the New Jerusalem, but not just some day in the future when that amazing city of gold and jewels descends from heaven. Brothers and Sisters, the Church—you and I and all the other

saints—are that city here and now. In Augustine's language, we are, even now, the heavenly city confronting the earthly city of Caesar and the satan with the good news that Jesus is Lord. We are the people who pray, "On earth as in heaven," and who live in such a way as to witness and to manifest God's kingdom here and now.

So John sees the Church—both the city of God and a pilgrim people in the wilderness—surrounded finally by evil. Once again, evil gathers itself together all in one place to rise to its full height. It looks bad. And yet the last battle took place in Chapter 19. Jesus rode out on his white horse, the sword of the gospel coming from his mouth, and his bride rode out with him to conquer the nations. The devil will, finally muster his forces, but there will be no battle, because the battle was already won. In a vision that reminds us of Elijah, fire falls from heaven and consumes the enemies of Jesus' people. Finally, the satan himself is cast into the lake of fire—that place of final destruction—never to return, never again to exert his influence. The daylilies have been rooted up and every last bit of root and seed burned with fire. Gone forever.

With the forces that corrupted his creation gone forever, the Lord can now deal with Creation itself. Look at verse 11:

Then I saw a great white throne and him who was seated on it. From his presence earth and sky fled away, and no place was found for them.

I think we need to be careful not to over-interpret the details here. John sees "earth and heaven" flee away. The ESV, I think reading in too much and trying to avoid a difficult reading, translates it "sky" instead of the more natural reading, "heaven". Earth and heaven flee away. Is this the destruction of the old order of

creation? Maybe, but I don't think so. If Jesus' resurrection is the model for our own and for the renewal of creation itself, then there's continuity between the old and the new. Jesus wasn't given a completely new body while his old body lay in the tomb forever. His old body was raised and made new. We expect the same for our own bodies. And I think that model fits what will happen with heaven and earth. The old creation, corrupted by sin, will be made new. John's purpose here is to show us literally everything fading into the background so that our attention is put on the one thing—and the one person left: God seated on his throne. The heavenly court, the angels, the elders, the four living creatures, even the martyrs who were already resurrected to reign beside Jesus for the thousand years—they and everything else fades out of view as the supreme judge now takes his throne. In the full light of his glory, everything else become irrelevant. He commands our full attention. John goes on in verses 12 and 13:

And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Then another book was opened, which is the book of life. And the dead were judged by what was written in the books, according to what they had done. And the sea gave up the dead who were in it, Death and Hades gave up the dead who were in them, and they were judged, each one of them, according to what they had done.

And now John sees the dead assembled before the judge. Again, I think we have to be careful how literally we take this, lest we turn this scene into a heavenly DMV with a line billions of people long, waiting an eternity to stand before a sort of heavenly bureaucratic magistrate to be assigned our final destination. John's attention is on the judge—and on his glory—as he deals with evil and sets his corrupted creation to rights. The

ultimate source of evil has been cast from creation for good, but each of us, every human that has ever lived, has taken part in some way in that evil. Every one of us has had a hand—great or small—in creation's corruption and human misery. And so the books are opened and, the judge prepared, death and hades and the sea give up their dead. Where are the living? They're not the focus of this scene. The enemies of the people of God in the satan's last putsch were consumed by fire—so they're presumably amongst this crowd. The rest were the saints, alive at the end—maybe they'll be judged here too, but they may be passed over, because their faithfulness to Jesus has already been vindicated.

So, again, the Lord casts no man or woman into oblivion without it being clear that his judgement is just. Death and hades give up their dead. Greek-speaking Jews borrowed *hades*, the Greek's mythical abode of the dead, to translate the Hebrew word *sheol*—the grave. The graves of history are turned out and their occupants stand before the Judge. The sea, too, gives up all those lost to it. And by the books we each condemn ourselves. If God is to set his creation to rights, not a single one of us deserves to be a part of it. The satan—the root of the problem of evil—may be gone, but each of us would carry that evil into the new creation and make a mess of it all over again. Praise God that the book containing our sins is not the only one that will be opened on that day. The second book is the book of life—an image that goes all the way back to Moses—the book containing the names of the Lord's covenant people.

John first wrote of this book of life in his exhortation to the Church in Sardis: “Yet you have still a few names in Sardis, people who have not soiled their garments, and they will walk with me in white, for they are worthy. The one who conquers will be clothed in white garments, and I

will never blot his name out of the book of life. I will confess his name before my Father and before his angels” (Revelation 3:4-6). Repeatedly, throughout Revelation, John writes of those who stand firm for Jesus, those who refuse to submit to the beast, those who overcome—their names are written in this book of life that belongs to the lamb. These are the names of those who are in Jesus. They are the ones who have recognized that in his resurrection he has begun the work of new creation—of restoring this broken world and setting it to rights. They are the ones who have not only acknowledge him as Lord, but who have given their allegiance to him and to his kingdom. They're the ones who, despite continuing sometimes to sin and to fall short of the mark, are nevertheless committed to him. They have forsaken Caesar. And they have forsaken the false gods of this world: Aphrodite, Mars, Mammon, and all the rest. They're the people who have pulled up their stakes in the systems of the old kings and gods and have planted them firmly in the kingdom of Jesus. These are the “on earth as in heaven” people. And that means that, because of their faith and their union with Jesus, these are the people in whom God's work of recreation has already begun. These are the people who have been filled with his own Spirit and have their hearts and their hopes set on the age to come. These are the ones ready to follow their king into his kingdom—ready to be renewed as he was—to finally be an Easter people in all the fullness of what that means. They—we—just like everyone else—stand condemned by the other books, the record of our sins, the record of our wrongs against God and against each other. But by his merciful grace, Jesus has also written our names in his book, he claims us as his own, he covers our sins by the sacrifice of his own blood, and when our deeds condemn us, he confesses us before his Father: “These belong to me. These are the ones I've

made new. These are they whom I've prepared to take up Adam's vocation: to my priests, the stewards of my temple."

The rest have no share in God's new creation. John goes on in verses 14 and 15:

Then Death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. This is the second death, the lake of fire. And if anyone's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire.

Finally, the end of sin and death. Death and the grave are cast into the lake of fire—that place of ultimate destruction. Jesus has conquered it and those written in his book have been delivered from it forever. And those not written in the book of life, those whose sins and lack of allegiance to Jesus—in contrast to the redeemed, these are the “my will on earth” people—those who would only carry the curse of sin into the new creation. Like Adam and Eve, they cannot live in the presence of God or share in the life he gives, and so having been condemned by the record of their own deeds against God, they too are cast into the lake of fire. I think it's worth noting that whereas John writes that the lake of fire is a place of eternal torment for the satan and his angels, he does not say the same of these men and women. The same goes for the beast and his prophet. And I think the reason for that is that the satan and his angels are eternal beings. Humans are not. In Genesis we read that we were created from dust. Whether that's meant literally or not, the point is that we are, by our nature, mortal. Adam and Eve could have lived forever had they remained in the presence of God. The tree of life there and as we'll see in the next chapter of Revelation is symbolic of that life of God. But away from his presence we die and eventually return to the dust. As St. Paul writes in Romans 6, “The wages of sin is

death.” Because apart from the presence of God we are simply dust graciously animated by his breath until we die and his breath returns to him and we return to the dust of which we were made. I know that's a minority opinion in Evangelical theology, but the more I study and try to read Scripture in context and apart from the tendency we've had for many centuries to read it through the lens of pagan Greek philosophy, that's the conclusion I keep coming to. That said, John doesn't seem overly concerned with whether the unredeemed are consigned to oblivion or eternal torment. The real point here is that God is about to consummate the work of new creation begun in the resurrection of Jesus. The world will be set to rights, tears will be wiped away, all things will be made new and the only people for whom there is a place in this new world are those who have already committed themselves to Jesus and to this new world and in whom he and the Spirit have already begun this work of new creation. God's majesty and glory are revealed at the throne as every last bit of evil is exposed, rooted out, gathered up, and cast into the fire never to trouble his creation again. And his glory shines forth in Jesus, the lamb who was slain, who stands before him with his own books, calling out the names of those who have known his amazing grace by faith.

Brothers and Sisters, the end follows naturally from the rest of the story of God and his people. Even if Jesus hadn't revealed these visions to John, we know that the God who reveals himself in the Scriptures—whose holy fire burns against sin, but who is also patient and loving, full of grace and mercy—he will not let evil go unchecked forever. He will restore that which he so lovingly made. He so loved the world that he gave his son so that all those who believe—who trust in him, who acknowledge his lordship over all, who give their allegiance to him and to his kingdom—might know

the life of the age to come. In light of all that—even without John—we could be sure that what God has begun in Jesus he will surely finish. He will deal with sin and death and he will consummate his project of new creation. But, again, we see his graciousness towards us here. Like Paul did, we could figure this all out for ourselves, but Jesus knew that his people, beleaguered by the forces of unbelieving Jerusalem and pagan Rome, with persecution and martyrdom around the corner, needed and exhortation to persevere in the face of tribulation. And so in his grace, he lovingly gave them this vision of the kingdom—and with it assurance. God is king. Jesus is lord. The gospel will win. The church will be vindicated and reunited with her lord. All things will be made new. Every tear will be wiped away.

Those persecuted Christians rejoiced at the words of Jesus and we know they did, indeed, persevere. Those who survived—and even the pagan historians—wrote of their faithful courage. May we, too, be exhorted to faithful courage by John's vision—giving our allegiance to Jesus and to his kingdom—sure and certain of his faithfulness to us. Christ has died. Christ is risen. Christ will come again.

Let's pray: Heavenly Father, strengthen us we pray that we might always be faithful to you and to your kingdom. As we struggle with evil in this world, hold the cross before us that we might always remember that you are dealing with it. As we face opposition, hold the cross before us that we might always remember you will finish what you have begun. And as we see the cross before us, may we be faithful in proclaiming the gospel that the nations might have a share in your kingdom. Through Jesus we pray. Amen.