

Empire Unveiled

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Revelation 5:1-10 & 6:1-10

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It was late in the afternoon of October 11th—what we in the United Church of Christ commemorate as Indigenous Peoples Day but most of North America knows as Columbus Day. We had just finished touring Washington, D.C.'s National Museum of the American Indian. Strolling out of its beautifully engraved doors, we entered a scene of chaos—sirens blaring; cops congregating; tourists, actors, and camera-toting film crew members milling about, with the question floating everywhere: “Was that supposed to happen?”

I admit that I have never seen a Transformers movie, but I gather from those who have that the genre reflects the classic American myth—a supreme showdown between good and evil, with lots of violence, and good predictably triumphing in the end. But on the street outside the museum that day, something had gone terribly wrong. A real-life D.C. police officer, responding to a bomb threat on Capitol Hill, had cut through the Transformers 3 movie set, where his racing SUV was rammed by the famous (so I'm told) Bumblebee—a car that “transforms” into a gigantic yellow robot that defeats America's enemies. And, no, that wasn't supposed to happen.

The fourteen of us from the Southeast Conference of the United Church of Christ who were in Washington for an immersion experience called “Empire Unveiled” couldn't have asked for a better introduction to our week. If there's one thing we learned in our nation's capital, it's that things aren't always what they appear to be. And the struggle of good to overcome evil is a lot more complicated, messy, and surprising than Hollywood wants to make it.

I served the Southeast Conference as an Associate Conference Minister for nine years, and last spring two of my former colleagues invited me to be the Bible study leader for the week. I said yes before I knew that the chosen text was the Book of Revelation. I did a lot of learning in the last six months. And I actually came to have deep respect, maybe even a little love, for this book that many Christians tend either to loathe or avoid. It is arguably the most controversial book in the Bible, with its confusing, often violent and grotesque, images.

Revelation has been wildly misinterpreted, particularly by millennialists and “Rapture” theorists—who imagine an endtime that includes the beaming up to heaven of Christians and the total destruction of Earth. This view was popularized in the *Left Behind* series of books by Tim LaHaye.

Because Revelation was written from exile on the Greek island of Patmos by a man named John—not the author of the Gospel by that name—biblical scholars generally believed for some time that it was written during a time of great persecution of Christians. But most now seem to agree that it was written toward the end of the first century, during the reign of the Roman emperor Domitian. The danger to Christians then was not persecution—which actually history has shown over and over has a way of strengthening faith—as I witnessed in Central America and South Africa, and as we saw when “Fill the Jails” became a rallying cry of the Civil Rights Movement here.

No, the chief danger to Christians at that moment in the history of the Roman Empire was not persecution, but seduction. Many perks and comforts were available through Rome's patronage system to those who showed loyalty to the imperial cult through their work, taxes, and worship.

The emperor was viewed as one imbued with divine authority, and sanctions such as exile, and the threat or use of violence, were occasionally used at that time against those who refused to bow down to him, as in John's case. But seduction largely worked. If you wanted to buy, sell, borrow, or lend—in other words, if you wanted to maintain a certain standard of living—you had to “go along to get along.” This meant turning a blind eye to the ways of empire.

I suppose the most chilling part for me of marinating in Revelation for a few months was seeing the unmistakable parallels between the Roman Empire of the first century and the American empire of today. For a frightening glimpse of the ways of empire, we need only consult the sixth chapter of Revelation, beginning with the first verse:

Then I saw the Lamb open one of the seven seals, and I heard one of the four living creatures call out, as with a voice of thunder, “Come!” I looked, and there was a white horse! Its rider had a bow; a crown was given to him, and he came out conquering and to conquer. (vs. 1-2)

White is the symbolic color of victory. The first element of any empire is that it desires to conquer the world, and world domination requires massive military might. The military budget of the United States

is now larger than the military budgets of all the other nations of the world combined. According to Chalmers Johnson, author of a disturbing book titled *Dismantling the Empire*, we maintain 761 military bases in 130 countries, and 6,000 more military installations in the U.S. and our territories. The cost comes home to us not only in neglected infrastructure here (roads, schools, and hospitals), but also in the resentment and rage our rampant military presence fuels around the globe.

Hear these words from Johnson:

Nothing has done more to undercut the reputation of the United States than the CIA's "clandestine" (only in terms of the American people) murders of the presidents of South Vietnam and the Congo, its ravishing of the governments of Iran, Indonesia (three times), South Korea (twice), all of the Indochinese states, virtually every government in Latin America, and Lebanon, Afghanistan, and Iraq. The deaths from these armed assaults run into the millions. After 9/11, President Bush asked, "Why do they hate us?" From Iran (1953) to Iraq (2003), the better question would be, "Why would they not?" (p. 78)

Johnson also wrote three books known as the Blowback Trilogy. *Blowback* is the term used by the CIA for reaction to U.S. interference and arrogance, of which 9/11 is only the most blatant example.

Back now to Revelation, picking up with the third verse of chapter 6:

When he opened the second seal, I heard the second living creature call out, "Come!" And out came another horse, bright red; its rider was permitted to take peace from the earth, so that people would slaughter one another; and he was given a sword. (3-4)

Red represents the blood of war. If you want to rule the world, it helps to keep people always at each other's throats, viewing those who aren't like themselves as enemies and rivals. Sow some racial hatred, scapegoat the immigrants, and it'll be easier to keep people in line. Distract them with lots of internal conflict and civil wars and they'll never know that you're the real enemy.

When he opened the third seal, I heard the third living creature call out, "Come!" I looked, and there was a black horse! Its rider held a pair of scales in his hand, and I heard what seemed to be a voice in the midst of the four living creatures saying, "A quart of wheat for a day's pay, and three quarts of barley for a day's pay, but do not damage the olive oil and the wine!" (5-6)

Black is the color of famine. Pay an unlivable wage, so that laborers must work a whole day to afford a loaf of bread. Flood other nations' economies with cheap corn from the U.S. and undermine livelihoods. Keep the people hungry, but don't mess with the luxury crops, the ones that generate huge profits for the landowners and rulers. In ancient Asia Minor, those were olive oil and wine. Today, it's sugar, and bananas, and coca grown on land stolen from peasants around the globe to feed our addictive appetites in the U.S.

Hear again Chalmers Johnson:

The purpose of our overseas bases is to maintain U.S. dominance in the world, and to reinforce...our "empire of consumption." The United States possesses less than 5 percent of global population but consumes about one-quarter of all global resources, including petroleum. Our empire exists so we can exploit a much greater share of the world's wealth than we are entitled to, and so we can prevent other nations from combining against us to take their rightful share. (p. 122)

When he opened the fourth seal, I heard the voice of the fourth living creature call out, "Come!" 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. (7-8)

And what is the result of war and economic exploitation, with the hunger, ecological devastation, and disease that accompany them? Death. Massive death. Nineteen thousand children die every day on this globe as a result of malnutrition, war, and the debt and trade policies that keep their families impoverished. Pale green is the color of death.

In ancient Rome, being seduced by the empire meant refusing to see the consolidation of land that consigned the masses to extreme poverty; the siphoning of resources from all over the vast empire to Rome; and the wars that were necessary to expand its reach and keep restless victims of its exploitation in line—necessary, in other words, to keep a lid on blowback.

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When he opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slaughtered, for the word of God and for the testimony they had given; they cried out with a loud voice, "Sovereign Lord, holy and true, how long will it be before you judge and avenge our blood on the inhabitants of the earth?"

Chapter 5 of the Book of Revelation provides the context for the opening of the seals, the emergence of the horses, and this cry for justice. It begins like this:

Then 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; and I saw a mighty angel proclaiming with a loud voice, "Who is worthy to open the scroll and break its seals?" And no one in heaven or on earth or under the earth was able to open the scroll or to look into it. Then 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."

Then I saw between the throne and the four living creatures and among the elders a Lamb standing as if it had been slaughtered...He went and took the scroll from the right hand of the one who was seated on the throne. When 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. They 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; you have made them to be a realm and priests serving our God, and they will reign on earth." (1-10)

The Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has conquered. These are images of strength, royalty, Messiahship; of kingly rule and power. The Promised One has triumphed. But there's a shocking twist. The one who has conquered is a slaughtered Lamb. Not a roaring lion, but a lamb willing to give up its life. Jesus' commitment to the way of peace, and his sacrifice, are what make him worthy to open the seals, to expose the truth, and to tame the warriors of violence and exploitation.

Theologian Walter Brueggemann states in his book *The Prophetic Imagination* that we are all children of the "royal consciousness"—his term for the ways of empire. He writes, "Imperial economics is designed to keep people satiated so that they do not notice. Its politics is intended to block out the cries of the denied ones. Its religion is to be an opiate so that no one discerns misery alive in the heart of God...Passion as the capacity and readiness to care, to suffer, to die, and to feel is the enemy of the imperial reality." (p. 41)

Theologian Walter Wink uses the term Domination System to speak of empire. He describes it in his book *The Powers that Be* as characterized by "unjust economic relations, oppressive political relations, biased race relations, patriarchal gender relations, hierarchical power relations, and the use of violence to maintain them all." (p. 39) And he states, "Almost every sentence Jesus uttered was an indictment of the Domination System or the disclosure of an alternative to it." (p. 64)

Wink calls the Myth of Redemptive Violence the "dominant religion of our society today." Glorification of violence is everywhere: in our movies, our videogames, our sports, our rhetoric about war. According to Wink, the average child in the U.S. will spend 36,000 hours watching TV by age 18, and will have witnessed 15,000 murders. (p. 54) We are addicted not only to consumption but also to violence.

Wink speaks of Jesus' Third Way—neither fight nor flight when confronted with enemies, but active love for enemies and a commitment to nonviolence. A willingness to empty oneself out, as Jesus did, for truth. As we are living with and pondering what it means for Circle of Mercy to be a Peace Church, it has occurred to me that declaring ourselves such is one act of confronting the ways of empire and trying to withdraw ourselves from its grip.

Our mid-October week in Washington was packed with resource people, including peace activists Liz McAlister and Frida Berrigan, David Hilfiker of the Church of the Saviour, and others who taught us about the military, economic, and spiritual aspects of empire. Each day, armed with prayer, psalms, and new facts about the depressing truth of our national situation, we visited a corresponding site of empire. Circled in a small downtown park, surrounded by the towering World Bank and International Monetary Fund buildings, we prayed from Psalm 82: "Give justice to the weak and the orphan; maintain the right of the lowly and the destitute. Rescue the weak and the needy." We prayed in the rain outside the gates of the CIA, and at the headquarters of Northrop-Grumman, a major defense contractor. Military officials hurried by, and a security officer with a machine gun and pistol circled us, as we read these words from Psalm 46 at the Pentagon: "God makes wars cease to the end of the earth; God breaks the bow, shatters the spear, and burns the shields with fire."

The week might have felt completely overwhelming if we had not also included visits with intentional Christian communities offering resistance to the violent and consuming ways of empire. The members of Assisi Community, located in a struggling inner-city neighborhood, warmly welcomed us with a rice-and-beans supper and hope-filled stories of their longtime work on behalf of victims of U.S. policy in Latin America. We ate a joyful lunch on Thursday at the Potter's House, a coffeehouse and bookstore ministry of the Church of the Saviour.

At nearby Joseph's House, Church of the Saviour's hospice residence for homeless men and women, a candle burned in honor of Michelle. She had died the day before at the age of 21 of AIDS, which she had contracted as a child. In that place where death is a regular visitor, life and laughter, compassion and hope abound as the residents seek to serve one another as they would serve Jesus.

We made a visit to the Cuban Interests Section (the name given to the diplomatic offices of countries that we do not allow to have embassies in the U.S.). It offered us a personal glimpse of the one neighbor that has tried consistently to say no to U.S. empire, consumerism, and control. And our tour of the Holocaust Museum was disturbingly unforgettable.

Our resource people, as well as the authors of several books we read in preparation for the immersion week, agreed that we cannot sustain the greed, military excess, exploitation, and indebtedness necessary to maintain our empire and its grip on the world. We are living on the downward arc, friends. Our group left Washington with the question we had carried throughout the week still echoing within us: How do we follow Jesus and live faithfully in a time of crumbling empire? I suspect it's a question we'll be asking for quite some time.

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in a time of crumbling empire?***

Part of the answer lies in our vantage point. Columbus Day celebrates a myth of intrepid exploration. Indigenous Peoples Day honors native cultures, acknowledging a legacy of colonization and genocide inflicted upon them. As with October 11, how we view our current situation depends upon whether we are willing to open ourselves to the truth behind our nation's lofty and self-congratulatory rhetoric—and whether we are willing to see and be moved by the suffering of its victims.

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In the Transformers 3 movie (so I'm told), the cars-turned-robots clash with the evil Decepticons. I couldn't find much information about them, but, well, I'm guessing their modus operandi has something to do with deception. What I did find was an ad hyping the upcoming movie and a related video game. It begins with these words: "Good or evil...where you stand is a question of choice." And it ends with this promise: "Choosing sides is just the beginning."

I believe that both of those statements are true. Part of our calling as Christians is to discern what is indeed good, and what is evil—and to make a choice for truth. I returned from the week in D.C. feeling that, though necessary, this is not an easy calling. The principalities and powers are on the loose, always ready to beguile. Real transformation takes both time and courage. Beware the Decepticons.

Amen.