

Denice Leslie  
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Lent 1  
Reign of God  
(Interfaith Scholars Weekend:  
Apocalyptic Literature in Judaism, Christianity and Islam)

## “God’s Good End”

In the second movie of the trilogy of the Lord of the Rings, Frodo and Sam have been cut off from the rest of the Fellowship of the Ring and are forced to push ahead on their own. Not even the great wizard Gandalf can do this for them.

The odds against their success grow with every passing hour. Danger increases with every step as the forces of evil gather their powers.

Their goal: to go into the heart of the evil empire itself, Mordor to destroy the ring before it destroys them-- and save Middle earth from the powers of darkness.

In a despairing moment Frodo and Sam have this conversation:

Frodo says: I can’t do this, Sam.

Sam pauses and then thoughtfully responds:

I know. It’s all wrong. By rights we shouldn’t even be here. But we are. It’s like in the great stories, Mr. Frodo. The ones that really mattered. Full of darkness and danger, they were.

And sometimes you didn’t want to know the end. Because how could the end be happy? How could the world go back to the way it was when so much bad had happened?

But in the end, it’s only a passing thing, this shadow. Even darkness must pass. A new day will come. And when the sun shines it will shine out the clearer. Those were the stories that stayed with you, that meant something, even if you were too small to understand why.

But I think, Mr. Frodo, I do understand. I know now. Folk in those stories had lots of chances of turning back, only they didn’t. They kept going. Because they were holding on to something.

Frodo: What are we holding onto, Sam?

Sam: That there’s some good in this world, Mr. Frodo ... and it’s worth fighting for.<sup>1</sup>

Folks, in essence this is the message of the Book of Revelation. This is at heart the message of every vision of the end time passage in scripture.

There’s good in the world and its worth fighting for. The goodness of God will win out. The visionary scriptures of Daniel, Enoch, Esdras, and Revelation are all about times of darkness in which people were sore pressed by powers far greater than themselves: usually the powers of Kings and empires.

Take the time of the book of Revelation. Christians are being savagely persecuted by Emperor Nero Cesar. Dressed in animal skins and torn apart in the arena. Dipped in tar, crucified on stakes along major roads through the city to be burned as torches after darkness.

So brutal and inhumane were these persecutions, even pagans tried to intercede on behalf of the victims. Dark times. Evil times. Despairing times for the faithful.

Weary like Frodo. Not certain they can go on—that they can maintain their faith. Feeling powerless and over-whelmed—Christian believers are in deep need of hope, assurance that God is on their side. That all is not lost! They need a word of deliverance from God.

During this time, a Christian leader, named John has been exiled to an island called Patmos.

Inspired by the Holy Spirit John rises to the task of encouraging his people with a vision of God’s saving power—a vision that makes it clear that God cares, God is involved to defeat the unjust, violent and oppressive force of the Roman Empire. To lead his people out of not only the clutches of Rome—but also away from its values, its use of force and its violence.

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<sup>1</sup> From the second movie of the Lord of the Rings Trilogy, The Two Towers (2002):

Because he can't write this letter of encouragement without being accused of treason, John writes in a kind of a code, drawing on biblical images and analogies from Israel's past history.

And so Rome is labeled as Babylon. And the hero of the story, Jesus is cast as the Lamb of God.

In John's vision of Revelation, it feels as if at every turn there is some imminent and fearful danger with the forces of Light and Darkness lining up for the mother of all battles.

But a closer look reveals it is largely a battle fought and won without violence, by the Lamb of God, and the vulnerable faithful backed by the vindicating sword of God's final judgment.

And so this vision, this apocalyptic letter of hope in times of despair is first and foremost a metaphor larger than any historical event. A word of hope about the final and coming Reign of God.

It is not written to be understood in any literal, historical way as some game plan for nation states here in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. As tempting as it is to take it literally—even those who claim to don't take it all literally.

For example, Jesus is pictured as a Lamb. It's clear that is symbolic. So if that is so then why interpret other symbols literally? To do so is to put the end times into human hands and succumb to the temptation we can help things a long by encouraging war among nations in the Middle East in the false belief that this is a requirement of history.

Succumbing to a literalistic interpretation is a choice far more frightening for the true destruction of the world than anything in the Book of Revelation itself. Because the first mistake we make about this apocalypse is that the end time is that the end time is about the destruction of the world.

Not so. No reputable scholar today would conclude that. It's not about the end of the world. It's about the end of time.

It's about God's will for the world winning out. It's about the barriers between Creator and created coming down—and all that would keep

those walls in place, and defy God's power being done away with in a final judgment.

That's a big difference.

The second mistake we make is that there is a cosmic battle going on in which the forces of good and evil both engage in violent warfare. Not so. In the end, the faithful are vindicated—not avenged with violence.

The powers of light are dressed not in armor but in robes. The leader of the forces of God, the Messiah, Jesus Christ, appears on the battle field not as a conquering hero or militaristic archangel, but as a Lamb bearing the marks of slaughter. And the word used for lamb in the text is the diminutive—meaning a little baby lamb. Not a full grown ram with horns.

The message: God conquers through vulnerable and suffering love. Sacrifice is the key weapon. Sacrifice and testimony. The testimony of truth.

The testimony of the believers steadfastly speaking the truth of Christ is a word that brings change. A word that is saving. A word that will win the day. This is the power of the Lamb. And this is the power of the faithful.

Every one of us no matter how small or insignificant we may appear to be has the power to testify, to speak the truth we know. Truth is terrifying to tyrants because it has the power to change the world.

Just as God's spoken word brings creation into being in the beginning, so our God breathed spirits have the power to bring change by speaking truth.

Even if doing so should mean our death. In the end truth tellers who are martyred are sheltered under the throne of God, John's Revelation tells us, to await the final day when all shall be saved.

Everyone one of us can do this much—and it is MUCH—it is power, John assures us.

In fact the conclusion of John's Revelation teaches us that the end is in God's hands, and our role is to follow the example of the Lamb.

The power of God stands behind us and joins in the battle to right all injustice through a final judgment of the powers and principalities that misuse their authority to exploit, to dishonor, and to oppress. These personified forces are cast into the Lake of Fire—the second death which is the annihilation of evil and evil doers who chose to oppose God.

God is not about destroying nations either. Our text for this morning tells us that God's will is for the healing of the nations.

If you think about this healing of the nations—you realize that although the forces of evil are annihilated in an earlier chapter, here the image is that the people of the nations are not. The good, the bad, the indifferent are made whole again by the flowing, healing power of God.

Is this a message that even as they are judged and punished they are finally healed? Because nothing in the end can withstand God's sovereign power? No one and no force is greater than God.

No, the overarching message of the vision of John is that in the end the world will be restored to the way God intended it to be when it was first created: good, whole, without hurt, pain, evil or death.

Paradise regained. Not regained, however, by going back to the Garden of Eden. Do you remember the story of the Garden of Eden? How God expels Adam and Eve before they can eat of the Tree of Life and "become (immortal) like" God?

God's expelling of Adam and Eve from the Garden before they can eat of the Tree of Life is an act of mercy so they will not become *immortal in their sin!*

God's goal is always to save us from our worst selves. We need God's help to do that. The goal of the end time, is of course the final redemption, or restoration of the created order—you and I and every living thing. This is God's plan, God's final goal.

But because time doesn't stand still or reverse we won't find ourselves wearing fig

leaves because the image is of a new city—The City of God, the New Jerusalem.

In the city will be the Tree of Life. And with it many trees bearing fruit alongside the River of Life—a gorgeous crystal river flowing from the throne of God. Because God will be in the center of the city. And the river that flows from God's throne will be for the healing of the nations.

Trees, fruit, water—all life giving images . Heaven and earth coming together. Crystal, jeweled diadems (crowns), the throne of God, angels and archangels, a resplendent city—all images of grandeur beauty, and the awesomeness of God.

And so we arrive at the end in the final chapters. The battles are over, the Lamb is victorious. Heaven and earth are no longer separated. There is no longer any duality of good and evil, creature and Creator. All are together now. All are one. And there is no lamp stands in the city because there is no need—the city is filled with the brilliant glory of God—and so there is no longer any division of night or day. Just goodness. With all the people standing before the throne of God with singing and jubilation.

Paradise regained beyond our wildest imaginations: the best of the garden and the best of the city and the reward of heaven on earth combined here to give us the image of God's good end.

So take hope. Do not live in anxiety. Do not be seduced by the fear mongers who sell visions of terror and division or extremist politics mixed with religion—do not be taken in by those who would take the Kingdom by force and tell you they have a direct line to God about the future. That violence and war is God's will.

For the Lamb of God has already conquered. And he has warned us all, No one knows the day or the hour, not even the Son. We are to take heart, be of good courage and speak the truth in love. God will do the rest.