

WHEN COVID MET DELTA

Revelation 7:9-17

A sermon by Larry R. Hayward on the Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost, September 12, 2021, at Westminster Presbyterian Church, Alexandria, Virginia.

After this I looked, and there was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, robed in white, with palm branches in their hands. They cried out in a loud voice, saying, "Salvation belongs to our God who is seated on the throne, and to the Lamb!" And all the angels stood around the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures, and they fell on their faces before the throne and worshiped God, singing, "Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our God forever and ever! Amen."

Then one of the elders addressed me, saying, "Who are these, robed in white, and where have they come from?" I said to him, "Sir, you are the one that knows." Then he said to me, "These are they who have come out of the great ordeal; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. For this reason they are before the throne of God, and worship him day and night within his temple, and the one who is seated on the throne will shelter them. They will hunger no more, and thirst no more; the sun will not strike them, nor any scorching heat; for the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of the water of life, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes."

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When in doubt as to how to begin a sermon, one failsafe method is simply to tell the story of how the sermon title came about.

Long about May or June, when the prospects of fully re-opening appeared within reach at Westminster and around our country, I chose this passage from Revelation for some of its images: "a great multitude that no one could count...standing before the throne...[having come] out of *the great ordeal*." At the time, I hoped that we would today be that multitude having returned to this Sanctuary "out of the ordeal" of COVID 19. So on the manilla folders I was preparing for my Fall preaching, I had written in bold black letters on the one for this sermon the title "Out of the Great Ordeal."

But as the Delta variant began to emerge, I scaled my hopes back a bit, and changed the sermon title to "Almost Out." A few weeks later, the title became "Almost." Then while away on vacation the last two weeks of August, as the variant took over and it became apparent that this upcoming church year would need to begin with still significant restrictions, I threw up my hands and named the sermon "When Covid Met Delta" as a spoof on the romantic comedy of twenty years ago – "When Harry Met Sally."¹ I trust the ending to the movie – in which Billy Crystal as Harry and Meg Ryan as Sally kiss at a New Year's Eve Party and marry three months later – will be a harbinger of a happy ending to our experience of Covid meeting Delta. Yet as with any romantic comedy, we must sit through twists and turns before we get to the happy ending, and our ending will always be marred by grief over the losses of those never to return.

¹ *When Harry Met Sally*, written by Nora Ephron and produced and directed by Rob Reiner, Columbia Pictures, 1989.

I.

Today's sermon will be different than most, in that its primary aim is to introduce you to the preaching I plan to do over the course of the next several months and perhaps beyond. I want to give you some background as to why I want to preach this series, so bear with me a minute.

Those of you who have been around Westminster for a while have likely surmised that I love the Old Testament; yes, sometimes even more than the New. My love comes not because I am secretly Jewish, though I proudly claim the Jewish roots of Christianity; rather, it is for the lesser reason that when I was in seminary, I simply had great Old Testament teachers who gave me a terrific overview of the 39 books it contains and introduced me to hidden gems and striking characters found within its pages.² In addition, in the early years after seminary, some of the best writers I read and most compelling preachers to whose videocassettes I listened on lengthy car trips across the plains of Texas or the fields of Iowa were Old Testament specialists.

By contrast, with one well-known exception,³ my New Testament teachers were not particularly inspiring. As I lacked a good overview of the New Testament, over the years I have pieced together my now reasonable knowledge of the Gospels, Epistles, and Book of Revelation through writers and teachers and preachers⁴ I have encountered since seminary and in the teaching I have done at Westminster and prior churches. Thus despite its being the heart of our faith, my appetite for the New Testament never quite matched that of the Old, because of the master chefs at whose tables I feasted on that more ancient cuisine of the Law, the Prophets, and the Writings.

Then a couple of years ago one of our members put me onto a book by a British author named Tom Holland, entitled *Dominion: How the Christian Revolution Remade the World*.⁵ *Dominion* recounts the history of Christianity to the present day and presents an overall *positive* assessment of the contribution our faith has made to world history. In the course of writing the book, Holland, who is a specialist in Classical and Medieval history, was gradually converted to Christianity by the *uniqueness* of the *crucifixion* of Christ, specifically by the fact that Christianity is the *only* religion in the world whose God literally dies – willingly – in a most gruesome and shameful way – executed as a common criminal in a public space for a crime he did not commit.

While all other religions worship gods of power, we as Christians worship a God whose “*power*,” as the Apostle Paul says, “is made *perfect* in *weakness*.”⁶ As Holland writes:

It is the audacity of...finding in a *twisted and defeated corpse* the *glory of the creator* of the universe...⁷

that led him to convert to Christianity.

² The original Old Testament scholar from whom I learned was George Landes, as well as the tutors in his introductory Old Testament course. Other Old Testament teachers who inspired me through their lectures and writing have been Phyllis Tribble, James Dunn, Walter Brueggemann, James Kugel, Robert Alter, Christine Roy Yoder, and Avivah Zornberg.

³ The exception – the late Father Raymond Brown – taught me a terrific course on the Gospel of John and another on the Passion Narratives (the last week of Christ's life).

⁴ I am particularly grateful for John Dominic Crossan, Margaret Mitchell, Beverly Roberts Gaventa, Luke Timothy Johnson, James Forbes, Tom Long, and Fred Craddock for what I have learned of the New Testament.

⁵ New York: Basic Books, 2019.

⁶ I Corinthians 12:9.

⁷ Holland 539-542 gives an account of how the crucifixion led him to faith.

About a year ago, my wife Maggie, who is also a Presbyterian minister, came across a book entitled *The Crucifixion: Understanding the Death of Jesus Christ*. It was published in 2015 by an Episcopal priest named Fleming Rutledge, one of the first women to be ordained into the priesthood in the Episcopal Church. I had known her name vaguely because she had graduated from Union Seminary the year before I started. But I had never met her or read her books.

It took Maggie about a year to read *The Crucifixion* – it is over 600 pages – and she kept telling me how good it was. At the last minute I asked her if I could throw it in my suitcase for vacation, knowing that she reads faster than me and assuming it would take me a year or more to read it, but thinking I might get started on it while we are away. Once I started the book a few days into vacation, “something like scales [must have] fallen from [my] eyes,”⁸ as I was able to read the entire book during the two weeks we were away.

The book lived up to the enthusiasm with which she recommended it. Its well-written and researched prose provides the thick background and theological foundation that Tom Holland and others over the centuries have found behind the death of Christ.

So despite the fact that I had already planned a series on the Letter to the Hebrews for this Fall, and knew that Ben had already started selecting music toward it, I called Ben and asked if we could change horses just as we were pulling into the starting gate. In his inimical and flexible way, he cheerily said “Of course.” I have no idea what he said when he clicked off the call.

What I plan to do is for most of the Sundays that I preach this Fall and possibly into next year is to focus on the *crucifixion* of Christ as the *fulcrum* around which our faith turns and what it *means* concerning God’s *presence* and *governance* of the world.

There are times I’ll pause the series for other topics: Stewardship, Remembrance Sunday, Advent, national or church events. But for the most part I’ll be returning to the crucifixion and seeking to understand its *meaning* and *significance* for our faith. Rest assured we will not *stop* with crucifixion, for it is *vindicated* in resurrection, which as Rutledge says, is its *continuation* not cancellation, *ratification* not replacement.⁹

II.

Why do I think a series on the crucifixion fits now? We are not, after all, in Lent.

With the appearance of Delta, with its quick spread, with vaccines for children as yet unannounced, we are *not* likely to be free of COVID for several months (if we ever fully will be). But with the resurgence, we *now more than ever* need the *spiritual strength* and *consistency* not only to *get by*, but to *flourish* as much as possible.

By offering a sermon series, on a topic as central as the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, I want to provide some *consistency* from the *pulpit* that might lead you to a *deep dive* into the Christian faith. I hope you will find a special reason to “rekindle” your faith in this *stalled* time by *attending worship in-person* every Sunday you *feel* sufficiently safe; or by *following livestream* when not in person, preferably *during the worship hour*, and when not, later. By preaching a series which starts with the *crucifixion* and works

⁸ Acts 9:18.

⁹ Rutledge 44.

backwards through the *life* and *origins* of Christ and *forward* across and beyond history, I hope you will emerge from COVID with a deeper understanding and commitment to

- *Who* Jesus Christ is
- *Why* his death and resurrection are so *central* to his identity
- And *what* they mean for our *personal* lives and our lives in *community* as part of our *nation* and our *world* in 2021.

When COVID and Delta have retreated into marital bliss and no longer dominate our thoughts or media attention, I hope you will look back and remember this series as one in which you came to know more about Jesus Christ in your *heart* and *mind* and *will*. For these three form a *Trinity of faith* no less important than that *Trinity of belief* formed by the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. You might even some day say: “If it weren’t for COVID, I may not have learned what I learned.”

III.

Along the way, we will encounter certain *questions*, not as titles or direct *topics* of the sermons, but as part of the meaning of the death and resurrection of Christ. Examples:

- *How* did Jesus die?
- *What* exactly was the crucifixion?
- *Why* was he put to death?
- Who *wanted* him to be put to death and why?
- Who *decided* that he would be put to death?
- Did he *have* to die to *fulfill* his role as God-with-us?
- What is the *relationship* of his death to the *God* he called Father and who in turn called him Son?
- What is the relationship of his death to our *individual* salvation?
- What is the relationship of his death to the *sins* we *have committed*?
- What is the relationship of his death to the *sins* that have been committed *against* us?
- What is the relationship of his death and resurrection to the *incredible evil* we have witnessed in the world, especially in the twentieth century and the opening decades of the twenty-first – one of which we commemorate this weekend?
- What is the relationship of his death to the *incredible suffering and loss of life* we have seen through what we call *natural disasters*?
- What is the relationship of his death and resurrection to the *demonically evil* people in human history – Hitler, Stalin, Pol Pot?
- What is the relationship of his death and resurrection to the many *good* people we know who seem not to believe in God?

We will even get to explore some of these questions in four Sunday evening Zoom calls I am going to offer during this series to discuss the sermon given that day. You will see these listed in the weeks ahead.

IV.

In this year, when COVID met Delta, I hope you will do what you need to do to make these sermons and our church a part of your life nearly every week. Your involvement can become a *new* or *rekindled* spiritual discipline as we walk together through the Cave of Covid until that day when we see a ray of light, follow it into sunshine, cumulus cloud, blue sky, the chanting of birds, and then become part of “*the great multitude*”

who are able to gather “*before the throne of God*” and who are moved to *give thanks* in “the light of a clear blue morning.”¹⁰

Amen.

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¹⁰ The choir began the service with an introit written by Dolly Parton and arranged by Craig Helia Johnson entitled “Light of a Clear Blue Morning.”