“Gracious Interludes” - Stephanie Sorge, 8/24/25

We’re skipping around a little bit in the book of Revelation, but since it’s not exactly a linear book to begin with, I think we’ll be forgiven. A few weeks ago John was weeping, wondering who could open the seals of the scroll. Enter the lamb. In chapter 6, the opening of the seals begins. The first four seals open to reveal what we often call the four horsemen of the apocalypse. The first, riding a white horse, carries a bow and is bent on conquest. A fiery red horse carries a rider who has been given power to take away peace and make people kill each other. A black horse carries a rider of economic injustice. Finally, on a pale horse rides Death, followed by Hades, given power over a fourth of the earth to kill by sword, famine, plague, and wild beasts. Seals five and six aren’t much better. They include the cries of the martyrs, and an earthquake. The sun turns black, the moon turns to blood, the stars fall out of the sky, and people cower on earth in fear. When the seventh seal is opened, in chapter 8, there is silence in heaven - a full half hour of it - and then the destruction continues.

In between, we have this gracious interlude. Angels stand guard at the four corners of the earth, holding back the elements, providing shelter as God’s seal is placed on the foreheads of God’s servants. John lists the 12 tribes of Israel, noting that there are 12,000 from each tribe who are “sealed” by God. The total of 144,000 has been interpreted as setting limits on God’s grace and salvation, when the reality John was trying to convey is that it’s beyond computation. That leads to the great multitude that no one can count, from every tribe, nation, people, and language. God’s mercy and salvation are boundless.

In the midst of all kinds of trials and tribulations, death, war, famine - all of it - is this reminder of God’s promise to heal, comfort, and restore. One of the elders sees this great multitude and asks, “who are these people, and from where did they come?” John recognizes them immediately and says, “Sir, you know.” In fact, he does. These are the ones who have experienced great hardship, but who now worship God day and night.

This imagery conjures for me the final speech delivered by the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. The night before he was killed, he was speaking out for economic justice in Memphis: “It’s all right to talk about "long white robes over yonder," in all of its symbolism. But ultimately people want some suits and dresses and shoes to wear down here! It's all right to talk about "streets flowing with milk and honey," but God has commanded us to be concerned about the slums down here, and his children who can't eat three square meals a day. It's all right to talk about the new Jerusalem, but one day, God's preacher must talk about the new New York, the new Atlanta, the new Philadelphia, the new Los Angeles, the new Memphis, Tennessee. This is what we have to do.”[[1]](#footnote-1)

The promise of some future healing or redemption does not excuse us from the work of alleviating the hardships of injustice now. Even so, those who have endured or are currently enduring this suffering are promised God’s comfort and healing. We’ll get to the end of the story next week - the final chapters of Revelation - but right now we’re still in the thick of it. Even so, God will not leave us there.

Only as I was reading last week’s passage in worship was I struck with the echo of this chapter. The beast was given authority over every tribe, people, language, and nation, but here we read that the great multitude contained those from every tribe, people, language, and nation. We are thoroughly entrenched in the powers and principalities of Empire, and day by day it seems as though those Empire forces claim even more power and authority. Who is like the beast, and who can wage war against it?

Even though the powers of Empire can feel all-encompassing, they are not. There are people from every tribe, nation, and language who are waging faithful resistance every day. Even when it seems we’re facing the four horsemen of the apocalypse, unleashed to wreak even more havoc and destruction, God continues to work in and through everyday people - from every language, nation, and tribe. Before claiming any white robes over yonder, they are organizing here, quietly meeting needs now, and working together, we can also disrupt the seemingly endless onslaught of evil.

It’s a lot of work, and some days are more despairing than others, but there are also gracious interludes that remind us of who we are, whose we are, and our call to join together in faithful, resisting, beloved community. What can our response to these interludes be, if not profound worship of the One with the power to defeat even the worst of the evils of this world?

One day, what is broken will be healed. What is diminished will be restored. We will be led to life-giving streams of water, and God will wipe every tear from our eyes. Until then, we are the ones working together for repair and healing, for restoration and wholeness. We carry life-giving water to the ones who are thirsty, and we drink what we need when we are parched. God’s comfort comes through our handiwork of prayer shawls and shoo boxes, hands extended in love and solidarity, ears ready to listen, and so many other gracious interludes in life.

Tears are shed, shared, and temporarily wiped away while we await the promised end, and together we hold hope for the present and that future. Until that day, we join in the beloved community of saints and worship the One on the throne. “Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our God forever and always. Amen.”

1. https://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/mlkivebeentothemountaintop.htm [↑](#footnote-ref-1)