

Dies Irae? Some Theological Reflections on Plagues in the New Testament for Preachers in Advent

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How is it possible to preach the gospel (good news) with integrity in Advent 2020? What should the Church be teaching about the Second Coming of Christ and the Day of Judgment? In this paper I hope to (1) provide one preacher's assessment of our current cultural situation and some of its pastoral challenges; (2) comment on the very few references to plagues in the New Testament; (3) show how the New Testament tradition in Revelation is dependent on its precursor text of Exodus; and (4) suggest some strategies for preaching this Advent that preachers may wish to adopt and/or avoid. Never has the need for thoughtful, truthful, and compassionate preaching been greater than it is right now.

Where are the members of our congregations likely to be at the start of the Christian New Year? As I write this essay in August, looking ahead to Advent and the beginning of the Church's liturgical year, coming, as it will, at the end of this admittedly difficult calendar year, I do not claim any special revelation or skills in prognostication. Nevertheless, some things about our situation seem almost evident:

*The Covid-19 virus will probably still be going strong in many parts of the world, including much of the United States.

*Travel will become somewhat safer, but increased travel will probably work against efforts to contain and control the virus.

*School systems will have had various different experiences with opening and sometimes closing again; parents, children, teachers, and school administrators will all be under greater stress as they continually monitor results and second guess their strategies.

*Until there is widespread fast and reliable testing and a vaccine for Covid-19 that is widely recognized as effective and safe, all public and private institutions, businesses, and households will be trying to adapt to the latest information.

*There will probably be continued high unemployment, though it may lessen as consumer confidence and spending gradually increase.

* Because of long-term unemployment, many people will lose their homes because of their inability to pay their rents or mortgages. As I write, the temporary protections from eviction for renters is ending in most places, and the grace periods for delaying mortgage payments have expired. Utilities payments are also affected, so some people will lose their electricity, their water, and their communication systems.

*There will probably be more un-natural natural disasters, as we continue to ignore climate change signals and fail to make wise policies to protect the earth.

*There will almost certainly be continued and perhaps increased tension about race relations and differences of opinion about naming racism

in our history and reforming current injustices in almost all aspects of society, but especially in education, employment and compensation, housing, imprisonment and capital punishment, representation, and racial profiling and stereotyping.

*The nation will still be deeply divided post-presidential election, after what is expected to be a rough and mean-spirited campaign, with increasing difficulty of hearing opposing viewpoints.

*People will be emotionally exhausted, afraid, defensive, grieving many kinds of losses, not having much fun or much joy. They will be hungry for good news that is based on reality and may well be skeptical about whether that combination still exists. Preachers, you have your work cut out for you!

A Brief Study on the Few References to Plagues in the Earliest Christian Writings

It only takes a few minutes with a concordance to realize that the English words *plague*, *plagued*, and *plagues* occur much more frequently in the Old Testament/Hebrew Bible than in either the deuterio-canonical books or those of the Christian New Testament. A Greek concordance confirms that only a few words in Luke's Gospel and the same word repeated several times in the Revelation to John convey the idea of "plague" which has less to do with sickness or disease than with the idea of violent punishment.

Luke 7:21 reports that "He (Jesus) had just then cured many people of diseases, plagues, and evil spirits" (NRSV). The English word *disease* translates the Greek *nosos* (sickness or disease) while the English word *plague* is used to capture the Greek word which is a form of "mastigo" (to whip, to flog, or to scourge), which is also used for the prediction that the Son of Man will be scourged in Luke 18:33 and for the near scourging of Paul in Acts 22:24.

When Luke's Jesus describes the coming "pestilences and famines" or "plagues and famines" that will precede the end time, a different word is used, perhaps for literary effect (*loimoi kai limoi* makes a memorable alliteration) but, once again, the word is associated with an unpleasant event rather than sickness, as in Acts 24:5 when Paul is described as "a pestilent fellow" (*loimon*).

The word *pele* (Latin *plaga*) from which we get the English word *plague* occurs consistently in the Revelation to John (Revelation 9:18, 20; 11:6, 15:1,6,8; 16:9, 21; 18:4,8; 21:9, 22:18). Once again, the root meaning of the word is not so much "sickness or disease" as it is "blow, stroke, wound, or shock." Revelation 9:18 and 20 describe three plagues that follow the blowing of the sixth trumpet (horses that breathe fire, have the heads of lions and the tails of serpents) which kill a third of the earth's human inhabitants. At 11:6, God's two witnesses have authority "to strike the earth with every kind of plague" (NRSV).

Chapter 15:1-8 introduces us to "seven angels with seven plagues" who receive "seven golden bowls full of the wrath of God" in the heavenly temple. In 16:9 the fourth angel pours his bowl on the sun, and it scorches people with intense fire. "They cursed the name of God, who had authority over these plagues," but they did not repent and give God glory. At 16:20-21, both the islands and the mountains have fled the scene — so we know it is going to be very bad — when hundred-pound hailstones fall on the people, who curse God again.

At 17:1, although the word *plague* does not appear, one of the seven angels with the seven bowls carries the seer John in the power of the Spirit to see the judgment of the great whore of Babylon (Rome). Verses 18:4 and 8 warn that plagues are about to strike Babylon/Rome and call upon God's people to "come out of her." At 21:9, after all the destruction is over, it is "one of the seven angels who had the seven bowls full of the seven last plagues" who shows the seer John the holy city of Jerusalem, the bride of the Lamb. One of the most chilling verses of the book (22:18) warns that if anyone adds to the words of this book, God will add to that person the plagues described in it. The book of Revelation is filled with the number "seven" both explicitly and obliquely (as in seven candelabra or lampstands, each of which is a menorah with seven candlesticks in 1:12; or in the seven gifts bestowed upon the Lamb in 5:12), a number signaling the completeness of the seven days of creation and the hallowing of the seventh or sabbath day. The end of the series of the seven last plagues marks the opposite of creation: the destruction of the great city of the empire which has opposed God's will for creation.

Those Seven Angels with Seven Plagues Should Remind Us of Something: Exodus!

There are many verbal clues in the key chapters (15 and 16) of Revelation dealing with the plagues that are coming upon Babylon/Rome. Eugene Boring (*Revelation*, John Knox Press, 1989, p.172) calls them "an exodus scene—biblical memory transfigured" (this current situation is a replay of that ancient story). Chapter 15:2 references the sea of glass in the heavenly throne room which reminds us of the Red Sea in which the armies of the Pharaoh were drowned after Israel passed through safely. In 15:3, we are told that those who have conquered the beast(s) sing the song of Moses and the song of the Lamb. The song of Moses (which was first the song of Miriam) begins at Exodus 15:1: "I will sing to the LORD, for he has triumphed gloriously; horse and rider he has thrown into the sea." It continues, and one of its most important lines (15:11) is still sung weekly in synagogues when the Torah scroll is taken out of the ark and carried around the room before being read aloud: "Who is like you, O LORD, among the gods? Who is like you, majestic in holiness, awesome in splendor, working wonders?" The name of the archangel Michael (Micha-El, "Who is like God?"), who plays such an important role in conquering the beast (Chapter 12), is a direct reference to this song of Moses at the Red Sea. It is God's final victory over stubborn Pharaoh.

Craig Koester (*Revelation and the End of All Things*, Eerdmans, 2001, p.142) points out that the song of the Lamb sung by the heavenly host in Revelation 15 differs from the song of Moses in Exodus 15 in one important aspect: it celebrates God's position as King of all the nations, expecting the conversion of the world's peoples to the reign of God. The singers ask, "Lord, who will not fear and glorify your name?" and they answer their own question by asserting, "All nations will come and worship before you" (15:4).

But clearly the focus of these chapters is on Rome. Rome is the new Egypt; Caesar is the new Pharaoh. Many of the plagues match: sores in 16:2, sea and rivers turn to blood (16:3-4), the darkness in 16:10, dried up waters in 16:12, frogs in 16:13, thunder, fire, hail in 16:18 and 21, and more. God sends plagues upon the Rome of the Caesars who believe they are gods for the same reason God sent plagues to teach Pharaoh who is (and who is not) God (Ex 9:16). At 18:4, there is a clear reference to

the idea of exodus when a heavenly voice calls, “Come out of her, my people,” warning about the coming destruction of Babylon/Rome. The word *exodus* means “the way out,” so “do the exodus thing, my people” would be just as good a translation.

The issue of slavery is specifically referenced in Revelation 18:11-13. It is the clearest critique of slavery in the New Testament. At the end of a long list of luxurious items imported by the merchants for the wealthy in Rome—“gold, silver, jewels, spices,” etc., is “slaves, that is, human souls.” (The NRSV translates the Greek *kai* as “and” so “slaves and human souls,” but it is almost certainly what is called an exegetical “*kai*” which equals “that is to say.” The writer is underlining that it is ensouled human beings that are being bought and sold at the market.

What is missing in Revelation is the deliberate ambiguity in the text of the exodus story about whether Pharaoh hardens his heart against God and the people of God or whether it is God who hardens Pharaoh’s heart. In Exodus 4:21, two major themes are introduced, the hardening of Pharaoh’s heart and the first born son (Israel is the first born son of God). At first Pharaoh hardens his own heart (8:15, 8:32, 9:34, etc.), but towards the end, God responds by hardening it for him (10:1, 11:10, 14:4, 14:8, etc.). The theme of the first born son is carried to its terrible conclusion in the final plague, the death of the first born sons of all the Egyptians, including the first born son of Pharaoh. This event causes Pharaoh to relent, and he allows the Israelites to go, but later he changes his mind and sends a pursuing army. No such ambiguity exists in the Revelation to John. The whore (Babylon/Rome) never sees the end coming: the Roman empire assumes it will last forever. Rome has not reckoned with the wrath of God; it never expects the Day of Judgment that will finally call it to account for its many wrongs.

The Wrath of God? The Day of Judgment? Plagues as Punishment? Advent? Covid-19 today? Help!

Advent is the season of the Church year when people are most likely to remember, read, and worry about the book of Revelation because of its focus on the Second Coming of Jesus Christ. Indeed the Apocalypse ends with the words of the risen Christ, “Surely, I am coming soon” and the Church’s response, “Amen. Come, Lord Jesus!” The word *Advent* (Latin, *adventus*) means “coming” or “arrival,” and the Church has traditionally prepared for the Incarnation of Jesus Christ at Christmas during the four weeks of Advent. The lessons chosen for Advent reinforce the threefold coming of Jesus Christ, in the *past*, as the Jesus of history; in the *present*, as God’s presence with us in Word and Sacrament through the power of the Holy Spirit; and in the *future*, when Christ, the Lord of time, will return to judge the living and the dead, as confessed in the ecumenical creeds. A shorthand way of saying this is to say that Jesus Christ comes to us in history, in mystery, and in majesty.

It is this third way of thinking of the coming of Jesus Christ (in majesty and power, for judgment) that, rightly, worries the Church. This year, churches that follow the revised common lectionary will have been hearing parables of judgment from Matthew’s Gospel which is read in Year A. The Sunday that immediately precedes Advent, Christ the King Sunday, has for its Gospel passage Matthew 25:31-46, the parable that describes the separation of people on the day of judgment as a shepherd separates the sheep and the goats. Those who have cared for the least and the lost are welcomed to the right hand of the king, blessed, and given the kingdom prepared for

them from the foundation of the world. Those who ignored the poor and powerless now stand at the left hand of the King, who banishes them to an eternal punishment in the fire prepared for the devil and his angels.

The Sunday following that lesson begins Advent Year B, which brings a Gospel reading from the little apocalypse of Mark 13. The Son of Man will come on the clouds with great power and glory and will send out the angels to gather his elect from the four corners of the earth. No one knows exactly when he will come, so “keep awake!” It would be surprising if the themes of judgment and the sudden return of Jesus Christ were not on the minds of many people in our congregations. Even though there are no lessons from the Apocalypse read on the four Sundays of Advent, the connection between sin and suffering made in the account of the plagues and elsewhere in the Bible is likely to be somewhere in the background of the season of Advent. It might be a good time for a forum hour or a church bulletin comment on what the Church teaches about the Second Coming of Christ. Or that topic might be addressed in an Advent sermon.

It is quite common today to hear Covid-19 described as a “plague” and even as “a plague of biblical proportions.” But it does not necessarily follow that Covid-19 should be either conflated with the return of Christ or interpreted as the divine punishment of a disobedient empire, as in Exodus and Revelation. The strategy a preacher chooses will probably depend on a number of factors and will vary from denomination to denomination. While I am not willing to say that it is un-biblical to preach this Advent on Covid-19 as a plague sent from God to punish our nation (for whatever sins the preacher has in mind), I will also insist that it is not necessary to preach that message in order to be preaching biblically. The preacher who wants to say that the suffering caused by death and separation from loved ones and loss of income and home and many other things from Covid-19 is God’s punishment for sin does not need much help. That sermon can be read simply off the pages of the plague stories in Exodus and Revelation. The rest of this article is meant to assist preachers who do *not* want to say that.

In the first place, you will remember that the several New Testament Greek words that English translators render with the word *plague* do not refer to sickness or disease, but to an act of violence, “a blow, strike, stroke, wound”; so to use the word *plague* to refer to a sickness or a calamity is already a metaphorical leap. The Bible has already made that move: frogs, hail, rivers of blood, darkness, etc. are not blows or wounds in the conventional sense of those words. To describe them as plagues is to say they were events deliberately caused by an agent, specifically God. But to identify plagues with diseases is yet another metaphorical leap, one not made by the Bible. With the possible exception of boils, the things described as plagues, both in Exodus and Revelation, are not diseases and not viruses. What might at first glance look like an obvious connection, because the same word is used for both, turns out not to be the case.

But, secondly, the preacher should not adopt one common strategy to get God off the hook. The seven plagues in the Revelation to John are not described in detail as they are in Exodus. Preachers may want to look back to Exodus to describe the seriousness of the situation in Babylon/Rome. But wise preachers will resist the temptation to explain away the plagues in the Exodus story as quasi-historical memories and theological interpretations of perfectly natural disasters occurring in

thirteenth century BCE Egypt. For example, an unusually powerful flooding of the Nile could explain the river turning to “blood” as an intensification of the naturally red clay color; the dead frogs would have attracted gnats, then flies; the disease affecting the livestock could cause the festering boils; the cyclical return of locusts just happened to coincide with the great flood; the thick darkness resulted from the hot wind blowing dust and sand in from the desert, etc. If modern minds resist the idea of miracles in general and are especially reluctant to attribute “bad miracles” to God, the preacher can name those assumptions as part of what makes it hard for us to hear these texts, and invite the congregation to re-think “what we all know is true,” but the power of the story is completely undermined if unlucky Egypt just had a very bad agricultural year and, for apparently no reason at all, the ruling Pharaoh decided to end the slavery of the Israelites and allowed them to depart from the land.

Thirdly, there are other important passages in both testaments that critique the idea of a tight connection between sin and suffering. Job’s friends are quick to insist that he must have sinned because of what he is suffering, and they urge him to confess his sin. But Job insists that he has not sinned, and at the end of the book, God says that it is Job who has told the truth about God, not his friends (42:7). God even warns them that they better get Job to intercede for them because God will listen to his prayers and not to theirs (42:8). In the same way, Psalm 44:22-23, after reciting a series of hardships and calamities that God has allowed Israel to experience, insists, “All this has come upon us, even though we have *not* forgotten you or been false to your covenant. Our heart has *not* turned back, nor have our steps departed from your way.”

The two most important passages in the New Testament which break the automatic causal connection between sin and suffering are John 9:1ff (where the disciples ask Jesus, “Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?” and Jesus responds “No one sinned!”) and Luke 13:1-9 (where Jesus says it was not because of their sin when some pilgrims to Jerusalem were cruelly murdered by Pilate or when 18 people died because the tower of Siloam fell on them). At the same time, he teaches that catastrophes can be useful; they often provoke reflection that can lead to repentance. So the clear and rather simple connection between national sin and human suffering proposed by the plague stories is not the Bible’s only word on the subject.

Fourthly, the rabbis have much to teach Christian interpreters about how to read the Exodus traditions, whether they are found in Exodus or in Revelation. A well-known midrash in the Talmud comments on the narrative in Exodus 15 where God causes the waters of the Red Sea, which had been separated to allow the Israelites to pass through on dry land, to return so that the Egyptian Pharaoh’s armies pursuing them were drowned. As the Egyptians began to drown in the Red Sea, the heavenly hosts began to sing praises, but God, weeping, silenced them. “Are not the Egyptians my children, too? The works of my hands are drowning in the sea, and you want to sing praises?” Another place where the readers of Scripture are invited to think compassionately, even about the enemies of Israel, is found in Judges 6:28-30. The powerful Canaanite general Sisera, who has tormented Israel, has just been killed, and there is great rejoicing, but for just a moment the narrator invites us to think about his mother who waits for him to return from the battle, when we know that he never will.

Finally, the preacher may want to consider the logic of two other theologi-

cal texts about God's wrath and judgment: one liturgical, the other biblical. The *Dies Irae* (the day of wrath) is a mediaeval sequence hymn written by Thomas of Celano in the thirteenth century that contemplates the day of judgment and the great fear of every person because "there is no one who is righteous, not even one" (Romans 3:10). The speaker imagines that day when the trumpet will sound, raising the dead from their tombs and compelling them to stand before the throne of judgment. The great book will be open containing all the misdeeds he has done, and he wonders what he could possibly say when even the righteous are scarcely secure. What he does plead is a reminder to Christ, "You came to earth to find me and save me; you died for me: let such a great work not be wasted!" It is the saving work of Christ that comforts us when we think about the Day of Judgment.

The other text is Hosea 13:14. There the prophet has God speak in anger about his plan to punish sinful Israel: "I will destroy you, O Israel; who can help you?" (13:9). But then God has second thoughts. In the Hebrew Bible, Hosea 13:14 reads, "Shall I ransom them from the power of Sheol? Shall I redeem them from Death?" But the translators of the Septuagint, who turned the Hebrew into Greek shortly before the birth of Jesus, read the question as a promise: "I will ransom them from the power of Sheol; I will redeem them from Death!" And the taunt song that follows that promise mocks defeated Death and Sheol as powers punished by God instead of the people of Israel. This is the verse that lies behind 1 Corinthians 15:55. Death has lost its stinger somewhere, because of the death—and resurrection—of Jesus Christ. Paul concludes, "Thanks be to God who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ!" For Christians, 1 Corinthians 15:57 shows how God treats both disobedient Israel and disobedient us!