

**“Beyond the Veil”**  
**Revelation 1:4-19**  
**Andrew Foster Connors**  
**Reign of Christ Sunday**  
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“Let me tell you why you’re here,” Morpheus says to Neo in one of my all time favorite movies. You’re here because you know something. What you know you can’t explain, but you feel it.

You felt it your entire life, like there’s something wrong with the world. You don’t know what it is, but it’s there, like a splinter in your mind driving you mad.

It is this feeling that has brought you to me. Do you know what I’m talking about?

Neo leans in and whispers “The Matrix.”

“The Matrix,” Morpheus explains, “is everywhere. It is all around us. Even now in this very room, you can see it when you look out your window or when you turn on your television. You can feel it when you go to work, when you go to church, when you pay your taxes. It is the world that has been pulled over your eyes to blind you from the truth.”

Neo seems to struggle in opposite directions at least far as the limited acting ability of Keanu Reeves enables him. He wants to know this truth, but he’s also afraid of it, of what it might mean.

“Unfortunately, no one can be told what the Matrix is” Morpheus says somewhat ominously. “You have to see it for yourself.”

Morpheus takes two pills out of a box and places them before Neo. “This is your last chance,” he says. “After this there is no turning back. You take the blue pill the story ends, you wake up in your bed and believe whatever you want to. You take the red pill, you stay in wonderland, and I show you how deep the rabbit hole goes.”

Neo takes the red pill and after a lot of special effects, he discovers that the life that he’s been living is a total fiction of his imagination. For his entire life, he’s been plugged into a machine that creates a computer-generated reality for his mind, while his body lies incubated with millions of other humans, generating energy that powers the machine. Neo takes the red pill, escapes that constructed reality, to discover the horrific truth of the real one.

If you’re going to dare to read the Book of Revelation, it helps to read it after you’ve seen the Matrix. Apocalypse means “unveiling” and the vision that John received on the island of Patmos unveiled the truth as he saw it and shared in this book.

John’s look behind the veil revealed that reality was divided into two branches – there is the world constructed by those with social power – a world

considered “reality” by most. And then there is the world where God lives and reigns – the true world.

Unlike a lot of the apocalyptic stuff that we hear from tv preachers, or religious cults through the ages, this bifurcation is not so much between present and future time. Revelation is not about some time that will occur after this one. It is about two simultaneous realities. One traditionally called “earth” and another called “heaven.” Heaven and earth are not places, but metaphors. As Richard Bauckham states “John is taken up into heaven in order to see the world from the heavenly perspective. He is given a glimpse behind the scenes of history so that he can see what is really going on in the events of his time and place.”<sup>1</sup>

William Stringfellow put it this way: “Heaven is not a site in the galaxies any more than ‘hell’ is located in the bowels of the earth. Rather it is that vocation. . .that blessedness – to which every human and the whole of creation is called to live *here* in this world.”<sup>2</sup>

Heaven is the truth behind our matrix, and once we’d seen how far that rabbit hole goes, John of Patmos argued, we’d begin to resist the lies of this world in favor of the real one that we began to see.

On earth, power seems to flow from Caesar. In heaven, power flows from the crucified one whose way now reigns triumphant. On earth fear of death in what drives the decisions of our governments, and the decisions of our lives. In heaven, death has been defeated so there’s no reason to fear anything. On earth, we save ourselves by locking our doors or closing our borders. In heaven, we save ourselves by welcoming the stranger, and sharing our bread. On earth the poor are always shafted, and wealth is the pathway toward sanity. But in heaven the poor are rich, and wealth is a temptation that can destroy your life. And since heaven is not a place we have to wait for until after we dead, but rather a vocation available to us now, the triumph of heaven means we can resist Caesar and fear and xenophobia and division right now.

Now if this sounds a bit, well, crazy to you, it seems to me there are two possibilities when reading a book like Revelation. One is that this book, and apocalyptic faith in general, is not fit for 21<sup>st</sup> century consumption. It’s the stuff of extremists. Stuff the church outgrew a few years after Paul and his people died off. Crazy people read this stuff. The crackpots, the dispensationalists always looking for the world to end, the terrorists with their own apocalyptic visions for the end of the ages. It’s those apocalyptic visions that lead people to drink the cool-aid, or don suicide vests with glorious visions of the future in their heads.

But there’s another possibility. Maybe we are so captive to the illusions that we accept as reality, that we have a hard time discerning what’s really real. Or maybe like the elites in western Asia where this letter was first directed toward the end of the first century, we welcome empire because it seems to benefit us. We

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<sup>1</sup> Richard Bauckham, quoted in Wes Howard-Brook and Anthony Gwyther, *Unveiling Empire: Reading Revelation then and Now*, (New York: Orbis Books), 1999, pp. 134-135. Howard-Brook and Gwyther first brought to me attention the use of the term “bifurcation” to describe the apocalyptic world view.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid*, 128.

benefit from the stability empire brings to us. We benefit from the security empire brings to us. We benefit from the peace empire brings to us. And as long as we benefit, we'll choose the blue pill over the red pill everyday. The one that lets us wake up in our bed and believe whatever we want to.

I have to say that in the wake of the unrests, I thought many more of us had decided to take the red pill to find out the truth of our situation. In the wake of Tanehisi Coats writing about the two different worlds he navigates as a black man, I thought the veil had been lifted. In the wake of black lives matter, Freddie Gray, Ferguson, Baltimore, I thought the veil had been lifted. I thought many of us had seen the world for what it is – two Baltimores, division in our city that cannot endure – that God won't let endure. At the tail end of the uprising I was feeling something like hope because swallowing the blue pill didn't seem like an option any more. I thought we were all ready to follow the rabbit hole and get to the truth that our world as we find it with all of our deep divisions is a constructed reality that will not last.

But now I'm not so sure. We all name the reality of two Baltimores and even start naming pathways to bridge it: a school system that works, a new focus on kids in neighborhoods that have no place to play or dream, jobs, safety. But the minute we start translating those broad goals into specifics that demand something different from all of us, that we trust differently, that we value differently, then those old narratives stop every bit of change we dare imagine. Every politician and leader says we need new jobs, but the minute 1000 new ones are proposed we can come up with every reason not to make it happen. And many of us come up with those reasons, from the armchairs of our comfortable living rooms paid for by the jobs we already have. We talk about the need for people to stop shooting each other, but deep down many of us have bought the empire's racist conclusions that poor black *people* kill each other because there's something wrong with their culture instead of owning the way our nation exports violence: from the working class kids who fight our wars, to the ghetto kids who manage our drug supplies. And we've all accepted it as reality.

Our faith is being tested, church. Just as the faith of those early Christians was tested in western Asia. Do we believe that Jesus is Lord? That's the question that Revelation put before the church at a time when the church's radical message of inclusion was being acculturated by empire. So the early church founded with some early women disciples, gradually becomes the church where women must submit to their husbands. The early church where slaves lose their earthly masters, gradually becomes the church whose slaves are directed to obey their masters. The early church where people of multiple ethnicities and nations are brought together in the community of Christ, gradually becomes the segregated church whose God defends their sectarian ways. In the midst of this accommodation, Revelation offered a different voice. Empire wants you to bow down to earthly power. Do you believe that Jesus is Lord or not?

Jesus is Lord. It's a radical statement: Not only is it possible to live generously, across our divisions of race, of income, of nation. Not only is it possible to live without violence, without fear. Not only is it possible for everyone to have

enough, but that world is more real than the one we live in now. That's the world that lasts. That's the world that is eternal. That's the world that is here among us. That's what Jesus is Lord means to me. Our faith is being tested.

Because if John's vision is correct, then the empire that we live under. The one that acts as though the lives of American citizens are more valuable than the lives of Syrians or the lives of Salvadorans who have left everything to live. The one that acts as though we don't have a crisis in the city that requires all of us to change until something else burns or until a single white child joins the list of casualties reserved so far for poor black children. The one that acts as though the 2<sup>nd</sup> Amendment trumps the 6th commandment not to kill; the one that acts as though our manifest destiny gives us the right to collaterally damage brown-skinned people anywhere we choose to in the world. The one that acts as though what we can produce as individuals or a nation is the only thing that gives us value. That empire will pass away. Just as the Babylonian Empire passed away. Just as the Persian Empire passed away. Just as the Roman Empire passed away.

And Revelation claims that knowledge of this end of empire is no reason to fear because the real world isn't rooted in realities we've come to accept as somehow eternally true. God's realm is already among us. So there's no reason to fear. God's realm is already around us, within us, among us.

I've seen it. The world where people of many races carve out a common way forward not by ignoring our differences but by embracing them. The world where refugees are welcomed because that's the only way to peace for our grandchildren. The world where a man who used to sell drugs and do them, shot four times, a man who did 15 years in prison is more qualified than this seminary educated pastor to educate me on what God's grace means. The world where we tend to the wounds of those damaged by violence – so many young people near to us but not known to many of us – instead of leaving them to fend for themselves. I've seen that world – it is possible, but the hard thing is that I cannot really tell you about it. You have to see it for yourself. You have to live it for yourself.

And that's the part of Revelation that still seems to trip us up, at least in Baltimore. I can tell you that it is possible for kids in the city schools to excel despite the statistics that seem to prove otherwise, but you'd have to make the commitment to tutor a child to believe it for yourself. I can tell you that it is possible for a mother from Roland Park to build a true friendship with a mother from Harlem Park, but you'd have to make the commitment to take the risk and see for yourself. I can tell you that it is possible for returning citizens who once dealt drugs and did time for their offenses to completely turn their lives around, but you'd have to do more than read about people you don't know – you'd have to make the commitment to meet them. I can tell you that Jesus is Lord, but until you see bread multiplied when the corporations say it can't be done, until you see hospitality granted when so many Euro-Americans – children of immigrants themselves – say it shouldn't be done, until you know forgiveness in your own life where you have no right for forgiveness to be granted, until then you'll just be repeating a doctrine – some words that don't make a bit of difference to your life.

You have to see it for yourself. It's really your choice, according to Revelation. Morpheus offers the red pill and the blue pill, but Neo has to decide

what to choose. Revelation doesn't offer much more. As Neo reaches for the red pill Morpheus hesitates – "Remember," he says, all I'm offering is the truth, nothing more."

The sermon doesn't have an ending. My wife read it and said you've got to give people some place to land. As always my wife is right. But the truth is I don't know where we are going to land.

Tuesday night as Presbyterian churches were together an elder at Madison Avenue Presbyterian Church got a call – her grandson was in shock trauma after being shot 7 times. Thursday afternoon we Yesterday my phone lit up with texts from a BUILD team doing voter registration in Sandtown. There was a gun battle going at 10am in the middle of the street. The truth is I don't know how to immediately stop the violence. I don't know that the city's not going to burn again.

But here's what I do know, the only way forward is by letting go of the patterns of empire that have kept us separate. The only way forward is together. And we don't have to wait for another round of riots for that. We don't have to wait for another round of shootings for that. I don't believe that grief is the only power that can unite us – there is a world of hope and love and peace that God is offering to us – that we can embrace right now.

So if you need some way to act, then come with me to worship next Sunday at 4pm. Let's hold the grief, let's share the outrage, and then take a risk to see what God will do with us next.

And maybe that is the ending to this sermon. Not one more plan dreamed up by one pastor in the isolation of his prayer life. . .not another plan dreamed up in the board room of a business or foundation. . .not opinions that solidify by watching our favorite cable news channel by ourselves. . .but a future God wants to give us – can only give to us – when we come together.