

## **Multitudes**

November 7, 2021

Bendersville & Wenksville United Methodist Churches

### **Revelation 7:9-17**

How many of you remember the movie Jumanji?

Jumanji was released back in 1995, starring the late Robin Williams. And the basic plot was that there was a board game called Jumanji, that a couple of kids found in an abandoned attic. When they would roll the dice, the game pieces on the board would move all by themselves, and then an ominous message would appear in a crystal ball at the center of the board, declaring the outcome of that roll. And it was never good news.

Some rolls would summon giant mosquitoes. And others, swarms of monkeys. Many years ago, a young boy was sucked into the board on one roll, not to be released until somebody rolled a 5 or an 8. Flesh-eating vines. Animal stampedes. Ruthless hunters. Every roll of the dice summoned something more vicious than before. And here was the catch: the only way to make it all go away was to finish the game.

I've had to laugh a lot in the last couple of years, at the number of memes that have gone up on social media with a picture of a bushy-looking Robin Williams, saying something to the effect of "Locust swarms? Murder hornets? Wildfires? Pandemic? Who is playing Jumanji?! Whoever started this game at the beginning of 2020, please finish it quickly."

Here's the thing. The last couple of years have been long. And confusing. And frustrating. And exhausting. How many times have we prayed for it all just to be over already? But when we open the words of scripture – words that were written over thousands of years, in times and in cultures so different from our own, it really strikes me just how often the people of God prayed the very same prayers that we pray today.

How long, O Lord?  
Can it just stop now?  
When will things get easier?  
Save us, O God!

We see these prayers in the story of the Exodus, in the cries of the Hebrew slaves; and then later in the complaints of the Israelite wanderers. We hear them in the prayers of the young Israelites who keep getting captured by the Philistines, and in the cries of the Psalmist when life isn't going as expected. The people of Judah pray these prayers when they are in exile, and the people in the gospels pray them, hoping against hope that Jesus has come to overthrow Rome. And we see these prayers being lifted, in a more cryptic way, in the book of Revelation.

So, let's talk about Revelation.

Of all the books in the Bible, Revelation is probably the one that is the most shrouded under a cloak of mystery – and misunderstanding. It is filled to the brim with powerful images and metaphor. But unlike other images that we find in scripture like, say, the parables – where Jesus tells a story to illustrate a divine truth, and then sometimes (not always, but sometimes) explains the meaning of the parable, Revelation doesn't really take the time to explain much of anything. And so, we are left with the task of interpreting what the book of Revelation is saying to us, as we read it. And that is no easy task.

On one hand, Revelation reads something like a fantasy novel, with characters like colored horses with scary riders; animals with seven wings and eyes all over their bodies. There's a 7-headed sea monster in Revelation, and a beast from the underworld, and a dragon.

And then on the other hand, parts of Revelation read more like first-century Yelp reviews. Especially the letters to the seven churches – where each individual church's gifts and failings are written for all to see, sometimes in very colorful language. And God gives some of the churches flaming 1-star reviews. That's pretty horrifying in its own right.

Some people like to read Revelation as a historical work, telling the story of early Christian persecution under the rule of the evil and somewhat crazy Roman emperor Nero, and drawing parallels between each one of the scary characters and noteworthy Roman rulers at the time. For people who read Revelation this way, they see it as offering a word of hope to the original readers that no matter what horrors the early Christian church was facing (and in some cases perpetuating), God would always get the last word.

Others read Revelation as more of a futuristic work, telling the story of what will happen in the end times, and drawing parallels between events described in Revelation and actual world events happening throughout history and even in the present day. And again, reading it as a word of hope that no matter what we as children of God are facing, and however painfully we might contribute to the problems, God will always get the last word.

But no matter how you personally tend to read and understand Revelation, there are some unmistakable themes.

Themes like:

- The world is hard, and messy, and sometimes it feels like it is broken beyond all repair.
- Sometimes, there are scary things out there, over which we have very little control.

- And yet, even though we can't control a lot of what is going on in the world around us, sometimes we as a church underestimate the amount of influence that we actually have – both for good and for bad.
- And no matter how hard it gets, God. God is above all and within all and through all. God is Alpha and Omega. The first and the last. The beginning and the end. God will make all things new. A new heaven and a new earth. For God is seated on the throne and there is no power in life or in death that can ever un-seat him. Period. The end.

So, our scripture reading today is really a powerful one. Not just because of *what* it says, but *when* it says it.

In the chapters leading up to today's reading, the writer (presumably, John) tells us about a vision that he had, in which God presents the world with a scroll, sealed with seven wax seals. And when each one of the wax seals is broken open, a different horror is unleashed. So, the first seal is opened, and a white horse with a rider comes and conquers everything in its wake. The second seal unleashes a red horse whose rider takes peace away from the world, allowing all the people to fight against and slaughter one another. The third seal unleashed a black horse whose rider wielded a scale in which he would dole out a pittance of food for a hard day's work – a picture either of famine, or of greed, or both. And then, a green horse whose rider was death, snuffing out the life from everyone in his wake. When the fifth seal was broken, the martyrs cried out from the ground, pleading for justice, and finally, the sixth seal is broken, and there is an earthquake, and then the sun, moon, and stars go dark. The whole created order begins to roll in upon itself.

And then chapter 6 ends with a question: In the midst of all of this: In the midst of war, and division, and hunger, and disease, and famine, and death, and injustice; when even the earth and the heavens themselves are threatening to crumble all around us, who is able to stand?

And good golly, have we not been asking that question a lot lately? Can we not look at each and every one of the horrors unleashed and give them a name, based on the world we are living in today? In the midst of war, and division; in the midst of economic collapse and pandemic; in the midst of injustice and greed; in the midst of natural disasters it seems like every few weeks, who is able to stand? How can we continue to walk through this world in the midst of what feels like so much unending bad news and chaos?

And that's where God hits the pause button. And today's scripture is a direct answer to that question. When the world has unleashed its worst, and it feels like the hits just keep on coming, Who is able to stand? When we are at the end of our rope, feeling like we are living in one big, neverending game of Jumanji, who is able to stand? When everything feels wrong with the world, who is able to stand?

*"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!'"*

When life brings its worst, who is able to stand? A great multitude, that's who.

A multitude too big to count.

Every child of God, both alive and dead, from every time and place in history. From every country; every empire that has ever risen or fallen. People who speak every different language that has ever been spoken. Men and women, of all ages – from the child loved and lost in the womb to Methuselah standing at 969 years young. Rich and poor. Rulers and peasants. Monks and priests and pastors and farmers and teachers and carpenters and doctors and electricians and truck drivers and lawyers and stay-at-home moms and stay-at-home dads. Those who walked through sickness, and poverty, and addiction, and mental health struggles; those who built hospitals, and schools. Those with big extended families, and those with no place to call home.

In the face of chaos and darkness and disaster, who is able to stand? By the power of God; and by the grace of Christ, and by the strength of the Spirit, we can. We. The saints of God. We, members of the vast multitude that spreads across all time and space. We, together with all God's saints, both here on earth and on the other side of the grave. Not only can we stand, but when we do so we are standing alongside the very angels of heaven, singing

*"Blessing and glory and wisdom  
and thanksgiving and honor  
and power and might  
be to our God forever and ever!"*

Life is a mess, the writer of Revelation is telling us. Life has been a mess ever since Adam and Eve got kicked out of the garden. That bite of the forbidden fruit started a board game playing, that we are still playing today. And some days, we wonder if we have the strength to keep on going. To keep on standing.

And that is when God hits the pause button, and reminds us: We are not standing on our own, but as a part of a vast multitude. Those who have gone before us, and those who will come after us, all join together with us as we lift up our voices to God. And as we lift our voices in prayer and in song, God reminds us that the end of the story is written. And death does not win. So when the horsemen rage and the martyrs cry and the earthquakes rattle and it looks like the sun itself is going dark, we can join together, hand-in-hand with all the saints throughout history, in knowing that our God – who is bigger than all of it – will lead us to the waters of life, and will wipe every tear from our eye.