

“A Sad Day in Heaven Turned Glorious”

Revelation 5:1 And I saw a scroll in the right hand of the one who was sitting on the throne. There was writing on the inside and the outside of the scroll, and it was sealed with seven seals. ² And I saw a strong angel, who shouted with a loud voice: "Who is worthy to break the seals on this scroll and unroll it?" ³ But no one in heaven or on earth or under the earth was able to open the scroll and read it. ⁴ Then I wept because no one could be found who was worthy to open the scroll and read it. ⁵ But one of the twenty-four elders said to me, "Stop weeping! Look, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the heir to David's throne,¹ has conquered. He is worthy to open the scroll and break its seven seals." ⁶ I looked and I saw a Lamb that had been killed but was now standing between the throne and the four living beings and among the twenty-four elders. He had seven horns and seven eyes, which are the seven spirits¹ of God that are sent out into every part of the earth. ⁷ He stepped forward and took the scroll from the right hand of the one sitting on the throne. ⁸ And as he took the scroll, the four living beings and the twenty-four elders fell down before the Lamb. Each one had a harp, and they held gold bowls filled with incense -- the prayers of God's people! ⁹ And they sang a new song with these words: "You are worthy to take the scroll and break its seals and open it. For you were killed, and your blood has ransomed people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation. ¹⁰ And you have caused them to become God's Kingdom and his priests. And they will reign¹ on the earth." ¹¹ Then I looked again, and I heard the singing of thousands and millions of angels around the throne and the living beings and the elders. ¹² And they sang in a mighty chorus: "The Lamb is worthy -- the Lamb who was killed. He is worthy to receive power and riches and wisdom and strength and honor and glory and blessing." ¹³ And then I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea. They also sang: "Blessing and honor and glory and power belong to the one sitting on the throne and to the Lamb forever and ever." ¹⁴ And the four living beings said, "Amen!" And the twenty-four elders fell down and worshiped God and the Lamb.

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About twenty miles south of Marlinton, the little town I lived in West Virginia, is the national headquarters of the National Alliance, the largest white supremacist group in the United States. On the days surrounding April twentieth, which was Hitler's birthday the local motels, restaurants and bars would find themselves plagued with skinheads, neo-Nazi's, and people who looked just like you and me. They came to the area to celebrate Hitler's birthday and to have a conference to decide what they would do in the next year. The plans probably included some means of taking over the nation. About seven years ago they started a propagandic slaughtering of the minds of young people which included creating their own record label to produce racist hate music, developing violent video games, and publishing comic books. They began to venture into the market of young people in any way they could.

One may ask why the decision to start preying upon youth. Some have said that they like the church have experienced a drop off in numbers and see reaching out to young people as the means of insuring their future, but that is not

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the case. Categorically, white supremacist movements along with many other fundamentalist hate movements have been growing exponentially along with Internet growth. For some reason the young and disillusioned are attracted to groups that display a great deal of anger and hate towards target groups and promote violence as a means of expressing ones beliefs.

If it were up to me to give an explanation as to why the national Alliance suddenly decided to go after youth, I would say that it had a lot to do with the Columbine High Massacre on April 20th, 1999. The National Alliance leadership realized that disillusioned youth could make a powerful force for senseless, violent hate. These youth are ready made converts who could grow up to be as devoted to the cause as Timothy McVey who truck-bombed the Federal Building in Oklahoma City on April 19, 1995 which, incidentally, is the same date that things went haywire in Waco, Texas with David Koresh in 1993.

This brings us to Blacksburg, VA on April 16, 2007; a few days shy of April 20, but if you are American law enforcement you are beginning to get nervous just as you do on the days that surround September 11. April 20 and September 11 are dark cloud days upon which you know something involving hate crimes and terrorism will happen. You folks have children and grandchildren in university. Valerie's son is at a school just south of Chicago. Events like this shooting make us wonder even here in Canada whether our children are safe at school or even if we are safe anywhere because there is this undergrowth of disillusioned, disturbed people out there dressing up like video game characters looking to go out in a notorious way. And add to that, people and groups like the National Alliance lurking around in the background ready to supply these hurting, disillusioned, and disturbed people with a belief system that re-enforces predatory instincts particularly in young men. The next thing we know some disturbed young man dressed like Lara Croft of the video game Tomb Raider takes out thirty-three people military style and then himself with guns he has legally purchased not because he's fascinated with guns but rather for his well planned moment of glory.

There really is no sane reason for this mass murder at Virginia Tech. We can point fingers all we want because the signs were all there, but it still remains that we simply have had one more instance of evil fed by evil erupting and thirty-four deaths, thirty-four broken families, and thousands of grieving people later we gather here and remember these people in our prayers and try to find comfort for our own fears. We want assurance from God that our children are safe, that we are safe. We wonder what we tell our children when they wonder if they are safe. We wonder why God lets such terrible things like this happen. Where is God in all this?

Well, the Book of Revelation proposes to give us a behind-the-scenes glimpse into what is really going on. The Book is not a road map to the end-times given to tell us when things will end if we can just figure out what all the weird stuff is about. It is called the Revelation simply because it reveals what was, what is, and what will be from God's perspective. Oddly, it shows us a creation at worship. God the Father is seated on a throne but yet remains unsee-able. In his right hand is a sealed scroll which represents the explanation

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of what is going on in history. Surrounding God are four living creatures which represent all things that have life. There are twenty-four elders representing either all peoples or God's chosen people throughout time. Then there are myriads of angels all around. The Revelation reveals that behind the scenes creation is at worship. There are no guarantees to safety in this fallen world where the consequence of sin is having to live with the consequence of sin even when things get as twisted as they have this week. Even so, we can join in with all of creation, gather around and sit in the presence of God knowing that history is in his hands and God himself will minister comfort to our hearts and we can pray and know we are heard.

The next thing we see in John's vision is that it is a very sad day around the throne, no one can be found who is worthy to take the scroll and open its seals and find explanation for what is, was, and will be. The situation seems hopeless. Is there no one who can tell us or show us what the will of God is so that we can have hope? This hits on this feeling we get when we wonder if God is really real and involved in things rather than just out there judging us on our morality. Then comes Jesus, the lamb who was slain adorned with the horns or power of the Holy Spirit. His being faithful to God unto death has won the victory over sin and death and made him worthy to open the scroll. Yes, there is hope yet. He can reveal God's will to us.

If we want to make sense of what is going on in this world we have to look at it from the perspective of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth, God the Son become human flesh for God is at work through him by means of the Holy Spirit to work his will in history to re-create humanity in his own image. Hurt, fear, disillusionment, are all being overcome by God himself by his steadfast love and faithfulness that looks like the love and faithfulness Jesus displayed with his life. History is fulfilled in Jesus Christ and by the power of the Holy Spirit we will become as he is, beloved children of God made alive with the life of God in New Creation, and this is good news in a world of hurting, disillusioned, and disturbed people.

Yet, there is still evil to contend with, still sin, still death. Even so, at the heart of history, at the very heart of each of our lives is Jesus Christ who was slain by evil and human sinfulness, but raised by God because of God's love. History is about God's purposes in Jesus Christ and we play a vital part in it all. We are the people that Jesus has ransomed from among all peoples to live the revelation, to love our neighbours as he has loved us. We are the light of the world called to let God love his world through us. We and our changed lives are living proof that there is reason to hope.

What do we tell our children, indeed ourselves, when we worry about safety. Honestly, we cannot guarantee safety. This is a precarious and twisted world that we live in. We can not be naïve about it. We need to be able to recognize the warning signs in other people that things aren't right with them and we have to have the courage to do something about – reach out in love to them. People may not respond the way we'd hope, but at least we can say we tried. We can't guarantee safety, but we can guarantee that there is reason to hope for God is with us and the restfulness of worship is everywhere around us. We just

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need to lay the fears and worries aside in faith, because the worship is there. We can guarantee that death and violence and evil do not have the last word. God does and the word is resurrection. Just as Jesus was raised so will we simply because God loves his creation and the people in it. We are the people who know and knowing this we have a responsibility. It's called loving our neighbors, taking our minds off our petty little lives and loving our neighbors. Go and give somebody reason to hope. Amen.