

## Revelation 10:22-30. Easter 4

Grace and peace to you from the One who was, who is, and who is to come, the Alpha and the Omega, amen.

You will not need to be told which scripture is most commonly asked for, at bedsides and funerals, at disaster sites and awaiting life-changing news. It is, of course, the 23rd Psalm. The pastoral images of green pasture and still waters have calmed literally millions of people over the centuries and bolstered our trust in a Good Shepherd who cares for us and keeps us from harm.

This week as I was preparing for today's sermon, and also praying for and supporting dear friends in crisis, I suddenly understood that this beloved Psalm of David had not just been dashed off on a beautiful day full of sunlight and warm breezes but written intentionally and under duress,. The exact context of its writing has been lost in the thousands of years since, but the author had undoubtedly experienced the valley of the shadow of death already. And only then came to realize that God had been there ahead of him and continued to provide guidance and protection all the way. This scripture having such a peaceful resonance probably did not begin in peace.

The context for today's second reading in Revelation is slightly clearer. We believe this text was written during the reign of the Roman Emperor Domitian, when Christians were persecuted as "atheists" because they would not worship the emperor. Previously, Domitian's brother and predecessor Titus had successfully quelled a Jewish uprising and destroyed the temple in the year 70, killing tens of thousands of Jews and imposing a steep tax on anyone who continued to worship in the Jewish way. The historian Pliny II, a member of the Roman senate during Domitian's reign, called him "the beast from Hell, who sat in his den licking blood." So Revelation's lurid imagery did not necessarily all originate with John. It is, quite openly, a political text.

Just below the surface of all four of our readings amid the lovely images of resurrection and restoration, we can see the lines of war and trauma and personal tragedy. It is no wonder we need to hear over and over the words of comfort these texts provide: God will wipe away every tear from their eyes. Goodness and mercy will follow me all the days of my life. I give

them eternal life and they will never perish. These are not just platitudes embroidered on a dish towel, but hard-won truths that we grab hold of in the worst times.

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“After this 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.”

“These are they who have come out of the great ordeal.”

Depending on which news sources you follow, you might know a little about the unfolding crisis in Gaza, but you probably don’t know a lot. I count myself among you. Here are some statistics I sussed out. These come from Reuters along with an “explainer” that evaluates the accuracy of the numbers. As of March 23, more than 50,000 Palestinians had been killed since the beginning of the war, in October, 2023. Almost a third of those 50k, 31 percent, were children.<sup>1</sup> NBC reports the current death toll to be over 52,000.<sup>2</sup>

“These are they who have come out of the great ordeal.”

Israel cut off humanitarian and food aid to Gaza more than two months ago. Sean Carroll, president and chief executive of the nonprofit group American Near East Refugee Aid, writes in the New York Times that two million Palestinians, half of them children, are now surviving on a single meal every two or three days. He says that Israeli officials have declared “what effectively is the intent to use starvation as a tactic” to get Hamas to release its hostages, in clear violation of international law.<sup>3</sup>

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However, these acts are not without local opposition. Last month thousands of Israelis gathered to protest Prime Minister Netanyahu’s

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/how-many-palestinians-has-israels-gaza-offensive-killed-2025-01-15/>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.nbcnews.com/world/gaza/israeli-strikes-death-toll-in-gaza-rcna203201>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/05/06/opinion/gaza-israel-aid-starvation.html>

decision to call up 60,000 more reservists to fight in the conflict. Such reservists are reportedly increasingly refusing to serve in this capacity. Members of the Israeli air force issued a letter claiming the war served only Netanyahu's "political and personal" interests and not those of national security. Similar letters followed from other branches of the military, and even Israel's foreign security agency, Mossad.

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Revelation is a difficult text for many reasons, not least of which are its over-the-top imagery and the age-old speculation that has grown up around it regarding who is “in” and who is “out.” But I think it is best read in the vein of its companion readings, as a book of comfort for those who are most afflicted. The green pastures and still waters for those currently in the grip of their own ordeals, who think and hope and try to dream of the time when they will have come out on the other side.

Princeton theology professor Kimberly Wagner writes: “In a time marked by excessive hunger and thirst, by war and worry, by violence and vitriol, by climate change and corporate corruption, by acts of hate and hurt done by one child of God to another, these images and promises might feel like a fantasy. In such formidable days, we, even as people of faith, may find our imagination limited. It is sometimes hard to have any kind of imagination for something beyond our present circumstances. In fact, we may fall prey to believing that God's future is just our present, but a little better.

“We may buy into the idea that God's future is just a little less violence or a few more people getting along or a few more hours in the day for rest or work or play. In times like these that are challenging and filled with uncertainty, we have remarkably low expectations for what God can and will do. We lose our capacity for holy imagination.”<sup>4</sup> Don't we?

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<sup>4</sup> <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/fourth-sunday-of-easter-3/commentary-on-revelation-79-17-11>

So I encourage us instead to inflame our holy imagination in the God who has brought us this far along the way. To listen with fierce attention to the stories of salvation history we tell about our mighty God—Noah's safe passage out of flood waters, Israel's exodus from Egypt, Esther's salvation of her people, and of course the incarnation, death, and resurrection of the Lamb of God, Christ Jesus. And to remember that all these are only the first part of the story. Because the rest of the story concerns God's continuing faithfulness to God's promises now and in the time to come.

If present circumstances seem beyond control and beyond even our ability to come out on the other side, Revelation joins other texts that help broaden our imagination of the Good Shepherd's power and mercy for us, that we might continue to hope and dream and continue in the struggle:

They will hunger no more, and thirst no more;  
the sun will not strike them,  
nor any scorching heat;  
for the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd,  
and he will guide them to springs of the water of life,  
and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.

Amen.