

Revelation 16:1-7

Psalm 59

Luke 10:1-11, 16-20

God is a resurrecting avenger

In a sentence:

The violence of God in the Bible is “necessary” in a violent world but also contradicted by God’s final renewal of all things.

There are probably not too many here today with a good understanding of the Marvel Cinematic Universe. For those unfortunate souls, the MCU is a superhero movie franchise – the highest-grossing franchise in history, which is to say that pretty much everyone knows about it except for you. Numerous storylines run in all sorts of directions across these films, but a particular series recently (2019) concluded with the instalment *Avengers: Endgame*. The backstory to this finale is that one Thanos – whose name is suspiciously close to the Greek word for death (*thanatos*) – has determined that the universe is overcrowded and that space must be made for life to continue to thrive. Despite all the best efforts of the series’ superheroes to avert this, Thanos succeeds, and half of all living things simply disappear.

In the final instalment to the series, the surviving heroes develop a plan to undo what has been done, now five years after the event. Overcoming enormous obstacles including time travel and Thanos himself – and all in spectacular computer-generated imagery – these “Avengers” manage to undo the evil, and everyone who was lost is restored to life. This is the happy ending the fans needed and is what makes whole the story a “comedy” in the technical sense – a restoration after a period of loss. *Endgame* is to this film series not unlike what Revelation is to the whole Bible: the comedic restoration of a fall from Paradise. Here is the point at which everyone can smile again.

And yet, as necessary as this ending is for the story to deliver the “required” final lift, it is a morally unjustifiable ending. With the loss of half the people in the world, economies would collapse and people would starve or go to war in order not to starve. Over the next five years, the widowed would re-marry and infant orphans would be adopted. Some people would just die because they were going to die anyway. And then, all the lost suddenly return. The collapsed economy now has at least twice as many people to support: more starvation and more violent struggle to survive. Those returned – who don’t even know what has happened – suddenly find themselves *unmarried* from former partners who’ve moved on, or widowed themselves because their spouse died in the interim, or find that their children don’t remember them. The heroic restoration to life of all who were lost threatens to be as violently disruptive to souls and bodies as was Thanos’ destruction in the first place. This is what resurrection looks like in the hands of amateurs: a prelude to more death.

The story, of course, is structured out of pure fantasy. Yet its *purpose* is not fantastical. It seeks to answer the question, How do we respond to a great evil such as Thanos’ wiping away of half of life? How do we respond to the pain of that loss in those left behind? Does good triumph over evil, and what does that triumph look like? The answer of the film, and of nearly every story we tell, is that good can triumph over evil. In the case of *Endgame*, the sign of this conviction is the heroic reversal of the evil itself. And so we find ourselves in the situation that the *Endgame* story is both right and wrong. It

is right that evil does not triumph; it is wrong that evil could be reversed in the way the film proposes. Such a restoration would be morally unjustifiable for all the subsequent suffering it would bring. The film, then, *says the right thing wrongly*. It must do this because, in our violent world, it seems impossible that good could triumph over evil and still be good.

This rightness-in-wrongness matters because it guides us in how to understand the troubling notion of the wrath of God. We noted last week the violence in the book of Revelation and considered the violence directed at those people of God who appear as martyrs in the narrative. Today we'll spend a little time with perhaps the more disturbing imagery in Revelation – *God's* apparent violence. Drawing from how *Endgame* tries to deal with the problem of evil, we'll see that God's violence is "necessary" for an account of justice but also wrong – a kind of mistake about God the story makes in order to speak about justice and injustice in a world in which good responses to evil seem to be evil.

The apparent violence of God does not arrive with the book of Revelation. We have seen it in the Old Testament prophets we've considered over the last few years – Hosea and Ezekiel, in particular. What is new in Revelation, however, is the shift in direction of that violence. For the most part, God's violence in the prophets is oriented toward Israel itself. Israel has been unfaithful, and the arrival of the marauding Assyrians and Babylonians is God's punishment of God's own people. However, one aspect of apocalyptic thinking we see in Revelation is that this no longer applies. God's people are faithful and await God's alleviating of their suppression by foreign powers. The violence of God in the apocalyptic imagery of Revelation is now not against God's own people but is "vengeance" for the suffering they have experienced.

This, then, is not wild and capricious violence. Neither is divine vengeance in Revelation a retaliating eye-for-an-eye. It is *vindication* of those who have been killed for their testimony to the truth of God in Jesus. These died unjustly, and this injustice is *proved by the death their oppressors*. Divine vengeance is vindication. Divine vengeance locates true righteousness in those who are being avenged.

But this brings us to a strange tension between means of vindicating the righteous as those means appear in Revelation and in the Gospels. We have just seen that the vindication of the godly in Revelation – Revelation's identification of the righteous – comes in the avenging destruction of the ungodly. The vindication of the godly and the identification of the righteous in the Gospels, however, is seen in the resurrection of Jesus. The resurrection is fundamentally the assertion that the cross was a mistake. In raising Jesus, God saying to his persecutors, "Guys, you got this *seriously* wrong". This is precisely what God's vengeance is intended to say about the persecution of the faithful. The wrath of God in Revelation is *a* revelation of where righteousness is found in the world.

The Bible, then, employs two very different images to speak of the vindication of the righteous – on the one hand, the raising of the one persecuted and, on the other hand, the utter destruction of the persecutors. We must dare now to say that these are the same: *resurrection is vengeance*, and our God is a resurrecting avenger.

This means that a simplistic affirmation of divine vengeance is simply wrong; it does not take the meaning of Jesus' resurrection into account. But a simplistic notion of resurrection into heaven is also wrong, because it does not reckon with the demands of justice. If God does not do with the unrighteous what Revelation describes, how are the demands of justice for the persecuted answered?

If you're still wondering what we are doing splashing in Revelation as we have been over the last couple of months, let me try to explain again. In order for the foundations of our world to be shaken – and surely we desire this, for the sake of the justice and peace we don't yet have – the foundations of our ideas of heaven have to be shaken. Revelation does this, although not by giving us “the answer” about heaven. Revelation's portrait of heaven demonstrates not only confidence that there *is* an answer to our questions about truth, justice and peace – an answer to our questions about heaven – but also that any such answer is *inadequate*. Over the last few months we have wondered whether heaven might be a space of traffic jams or filled with people we don't like very much – none of which seems very heavenly. That is, we have seen that heaven could not be very heavenly unless there is a God who can, at one and the same time, be holy and yet embrace an unholy creation – who could be just and yet satisfy the demands of justice without destroying the unjust.

In its interaction with our sense for justice and peace – with our desire for “heaven” – Revelation proposes that the God we worship is an impossible God. The vengeance of God in the book of Revelation is necessary if evil is to be utterly contradicted. And yet, at the same time, it is a kind of “mistake” in the story which cannot be sustained against other parts of the gospel which speak of the final power of God to make *all* things new: heaven and earth, the good and the evil, even us. But other parts of the gospel need the divine vengeance for the sake of justice. Rejecting the vengeance of God unthinkingly requires also that we reject cheap ideas of resurrection and salvation which don't take evil seriously enough. The gospel holds death and life together in a necessary but impossible tension, and so we have to say that our God *is* an avenging God, until the time the gospel anticipates when God proves that he is *not*.

Today, the invitation is simply that we see this. There is no clear imperative which drops out here – no “go and do this.”

The best response to Revelation's vision of heaven is not so much this or that action but *wonder*. This is not “to” wonder how such things could be, although this is part of it. It is more marvelling at the power – and the *beauty* – of a God who can do such a thing as justify the unrighteous: who can justify *us* who so often do bad things for good outcomes.

For only a God who can realise life out of death could be an answer to all that life and death seem to ask of us.
