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“Why Not?”

A sermon by Brian K. Blount

Fifth Sunday in Lent (Year A)

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Revelation 22:1-5

“My fellow Americans, ask not what your country can do for you. Ask what *you* can do for your country.”

I was on the stage, in an all school assembly, at segregated Hardy Elementary School, *shouting* a quote I had memorized from a white man my black parents and black teachers absolutely idolized.

“I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will *not* be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character.”

I was a little child. A little black child living in a nation where I knew every day I walked out the door that I *was* judged, I *was* taught, I was *churched* by the color of my skin because of the segregationist content of my country.

I will admit. Though my young life growing up in the segregated little town of Smithfield, Virginia, was sheltered by the love of my parents and the protective embrace of my church and community, I bear scars on my psyche that from time to time have perplexed my children. While they don't yet live Dr. King's dream, they are far closer to the day of being judged by the content of their character than my 10-year-old self could have ever imagined. I see them with their friends—the kind of friends that John of Patmos saw in his vision of God's future—friends from every tongue and language and tribe and nation and people of the earth and I marvel.

Because, when I was a child, every child I could be in relationship with had to be a child of a color and a kind like me. To use the symbolism of the Book of Revelation, in terms of U.S. race relations, I grew up in the time of a great red dragon of racism so gargantuan that its tail swiped away 1/3 of the stars from the integration sky, and its draconian influence was so great that it conjured a demonic, imperial beast from the sea, whose Jim Crow name was 666. My children have certainly not grown up in the new heaven and the new earth of race relations, but they have seen the dawn of a new possibility, and their generation struggles even now, against mighty odds, to create a new day. Sometimes, a child is shot or a Dylann Roof is shooting or a Trayvon Martin is killed, and I think the hopes of my children and their generation will fade and the change they seek will wither. And other times, like when I read a text like the scripture we read from the Book of Revelation just moments ago, a book scarred by hopelessness and yet powered by the portent of pregnant, positive possibility, I hope. And I believe in that hope.

“Some men see things as they are and ask, ‘Why?’ I dream things that never were and ask, ‘Why not?’”

That quote nicely summarizes the meaning of the Book of Revelation that climaxes here in the text we just read. For every community that has struggled to hope and yet dared to hope, John of Patmos wrote the Book of Revelation. He writes about great ordeals because he knows his people endure great ordeals. Illness. Oppression. Death. War. Poverty. Doubt. Legion, they are. And yet, he writes about a new heaven and a new earth because he knows his God will deliver them.

“Some men see things as they are and ask, ‘Why?’ I dream things that never were and ask, ‘Why not?’”

Of all the great lines in all the great American speeches, this is the one I wish were mine. Why, in this often nightmarish world, can we not dream more? Why can't the world we dream *of* be the world we live *in*? Some people see things as they are and ask, “Why, Lord?” Why can't we dream things that never were and ask, “Why not, Lord?” Why not? The Book of Revelation is all about the “Why Not?”

For some of us, those John F. Kennedy days, and Martin Luther King, Jr. days, and Robert F. Kennedy days, despite the desperate struggle for Civil Rights, despite the dizzying specter of the Vietnam war, despite the still bitter pain many of us still feel when we remember their assassinations, perhaps even because of all that, those days were glory days of glorious dreamers who aspired . . . who *dared* to create hope in the midst of hopelessness, possibility in the face of impossibility, love in the crossfire of hate. With their words. With their dreams. With their actions. With their very lives. John's words about the faithful witnesses of his time are appropriate for those martyred men: they conquered the dragon by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their witness, for they did not cling to life even in the face of death.

Even as they spoke and dreamed and acted, though, there was so much pathos and pain. Darkness cutting in, aiming to overtake the light. Dream speeches by dreaming men. Nightmare men answering those dreamers with death. Men who dreamed of life robbed of life by men who took life. Bobby Kennedy, the man who, in paraphrasing playwright George Bernard Shaw, dreamed dreams that never were and asked, "Why not?" died by the hand of an angry man whose gun answered, "Because I said so." Because hate and fear and oppression and injustice say so.

How does one face the "why" of so many injustices, so much fear, such staggering hate, and still find the courage, the vision, the faith to keep dreaming, "Why not?"

In the wake of the murders in the Emmanuel African Methodist Episcopal church in Charleston, South Carolina, the disaster of the lead-poisoned water in Flint, Michigan; the deluge of deaths in the killing streets of Chicago; the cataclysm unleashed in Ferguson, Missouri; the darkness of a world of countries spiraling out of control as people fleeing like a son of man with nowhere to lay his head; the perpetual political conflagration blowing up in Washington, DC; governments, like churches, broken into factions and fissures unable to lead us and guide us to a better communal, national, municipal, or faith place; I must admit that, in me, the "why" often overwhelms the "why not." *Why* must good people suffer at the hands of such hateful, evil people? *Why* is a 21-year-old, a young man whose face should be pointed to a multicultural future, so enslaved by the segregationist hate of the past that he would wreak such racial destruction on the present? *Why* cannot our people,

even though we so mightily disagree about so many matters, find some moral, ethical, or legislative way to protect each other? **Why** do entire communities of people still struggle beneath the weight of poverty and injustice in this the wealthiest and most democratic society ever to exist on this planet?

Provoked into the first “why” by some senseless action on any given day, I am all of a sudden overwhelmed by the many “whys” that daily haunt me until I get to the one big why that every now and then consumes me: “**Why, God**, can’t this life be a better life than it often is? **Why, God**, can’t we people be better people than the people we often are? **Why, God**, can’t you just *make* us better?” All of a sudden, unlike Bobby Kennedy, I am seeing things as they are and asking, “Why?” All of a sudden, the ruthlessness of this world had slipped in and stolen my “why not?”

In times like these, I learn much from reading the words of John of Patmos, the author of the Book of Revelation. In his own way, John of Patmos was very much like Bobby Kennedy, at least very much like the Bobby Kennedy who quoted those famous “why not” words. We don’t forget that, even though the 1950s and 1960s produced some glorious speeches, those were not really glory days. Jim Crow segregation. The war in Vietnam. The often bloody Civil Rights struggle. Monumental unrest on college campuses. Bitter divisiveness in the American populace. Poverty so extreme that the nation went to war against it. There were deep emotional, political, and religious scars. The kind of scars that provoke men and women to cry out, “Why?” And yet, some people dared *even then* to dream, “Why not?”

For John of Patmos, the devastation was so extreme that John could rightly have feared the end, the obliteration of all that he held dear. The power of mighty Rome was so great, so Leviathan, that John’s only comparison for it was a mammoth, multi-headed, misanthropic dragon. This dragon had a bestial appetite for slaughtering and devouring any person, any people, any *faith* that opposed its desire for domination. **In Rome**, John saw an economic engine that not only controlled the commerce of the world, but threatened with impoverishment any people or person who did not use its money or buy and sell its goods. **In Rome**, John saw a military power that dispatched its legions far and wide and claimed control of almost the entire planet. **In Rome**, John saw a political power so vast that the great kings of

the great kingdoms bowed down before the emperor and swore to him their allegiance. *In Rome*, John saw a religious power so great that it declared that its emperor and its faith were due greater praise and worship than the God of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Jesus of Nazareth. In Rome's quest to make *its* rule the *one* rule for the *one* world, John saw cataclysm and destruction. John saw his own people, his Christ believers, many of them so frightened of what Rome could do to them if they did not worship Rome, that they turned away from their trust in God and the Lamb of God and took on the mark of Roman economic, social, political, and spiritual might.

You know the Book of Revelation. Even if you have not read it recently or read it thoroughly, *you know* about its presentation of destruction, its fear that the world was ending in the worst possible of ways, its haunting promise that the days of apocalypse had come. We are living in a time preoccupied with apocalypse, too. Zombie books and movies, vampire and werewolf stories, nights and days of the living and walking dead, ecological catastrophes, biological and chemical apocalypses. *You know* that many people fear the Book of Revelation precisely because they fear that the apocalyptic horrors in its pages threaten to become the subject of the next contemporary news cycle. It is any wonder, given everything that was happening to John, given everything that John was seeing happen to his people and the churches they worshipped in and the faith they believed in, that John lifted his eyes to the heavens and cried out, "Why, Lord? Why?" How long, Lord, before you stand up for your people? (Revelation 6:9) He is asking, Why? Is it any wonder, given everything that seems to be happening to us today, that even many contemporary Christians lift their eyes to the heavens and cry out, "Why, Lord? Why?"

But John's book does not end with "why?" John's book ends with "why not?" Despite everything that he sees with his eyes, having been transported in the spirit into God's intent for our world, John perceives with his faith a reality that, given all that was happening in his world, can only be described as a dream. At the same time, *at the very same moment* that Christ believers in John's seven churches were drowning in their own blood because they dared to stand up and testify to the Lordship of Jesus Christ in this world, John dreams of a resurrection river flowing from the throne of God. *At the same time*, the very same moment, when a person

who stood up for Christ was threatened even with death, John dreams that on both sides of that resurrection river is the tree of life. *At the same time*, at the very same moment, that nations were caught up in conflict fighting each other without and beset by conflicts of groups fighting each other within, threatening a violence and wounding at every turn, John dreams of trees whose leaves are like honey that drips down the healing power of peace on the nations, bringing them to a state of reconciliation. While so many struggling, suffering Christ believers in Asia Minor who were looking at all that was happening to God's churches and God's people were crying out, "Why?" the dreamer John was screaming, "Why not?"

Why not, with all that God has done in the past, with all that God has done in the present, believe that God will in the future bring to living reality the vision God has promised? Why not, believing in such a vision, with all the resources we have as individuals, as a church, fight to bring that healing future into our often painful present? Even at the very moment that we think of the Charlestons, or the Flints, or the Fergusons, or the Aleppos, Syria, and their fighting, or the Washingtons and Richmonds and Durhams and their infighting, in even such powerful "why" moments, John would press us to remember the dream that God is even now dreaming, on our behalf. A city of God. A throne where God and the Lamb sit. A throne that indicates not just the rule of God and the Commonwealth of the Lamb, but a throne that promises that the love of Jesus illustrated in his ministry, a love for all God's people of every tongue and language and tribe and nation and people of the earth would be the rule of life for God's people.

Richmond, where I live, is a river city. Like Richmond, God's eternal city is a river city. A river runs through the heart of it, like the arteries and veins that run through and from the heart of a human body, nourishing, replenishing, energizing, sustaining, life giving. A river whose water is life itself. A people who drink from this river drink *in* life the way they take in water. And because its water is life, every thing rooted in this river *always* bears fruit. The fruit of life from which the nations feed. And just as the water gives life to the people who drink it, so the fruit gives healing to the nations who eat it. In these healed nations, the people are finally set free to be the people God intended them to be. With nations no longer fighting other nations, the people *in* the nations no longer fight with each other. No one is any longer tattooed with the marks of bestial Rome, no scars of greed or hatred or

racism. They are marked instead by grace and love and inclusiveness. The darkness of divisiveness is driven away. The light of God's living presence has forever thrust it out and taken its place. It is like they have the name of God, the evidence of their belonging to God's love and living out God's love, plastered on their foreheads.

Imagine that. Walking around a world where instead of people marked by divisiveness, or greed, or consumerism, or hate, they were tattooed on their foreheads by the love of God. Imagine looking at everybody you saw, everywhere you saw them, and seeing the love of God staring you back in your face. The love of God is right here! God goes out from here to everywhere I point my face, and raise my voice, and extend my hand, and bear my body in this world. Why not?

As I read the verses that start Revelation chapter 22 over and over again, I can almost hear John saying the words. *Some* people see a racist 21-year-old killing people, and they pray to the Lord and ask "Why?" *I* dream an inclusive people gathering not only to condemn such evil, but to build upon the bestial killing grounds a city where all people are seen and cherished and loved equally as God's people, and I ask "Why not?" *Some* people see a world where nations will continue to rage against nations until we destroy ourselves in the world conflagration that will inevitably erupt, and they ask "Why?" *I* dream of a world where the nations will be healed of their fury and will find a way to work together to build a history where resources are shared, border crossings are welcomed, national hopes support an international vision, and I ask "Why not?" *Some* people see a world where human consumption continues at such a reckless pace that we end up destroying the very environment that nourishes us, and they ask "Why?" *I* dream of a world where we treat nature as though its waters flowed with life and its trees brought healing to nations and individuals alike, and I ask "Why not?" *Some* people see in our country the largest child poverty rate among 35 industrialized nations where over 20 million children live in extreme poverty, having access to no more than one meal a day, while income inequality has reached record highs, and they ask "Why?" *I* dream of a nation where we share our resources the way God shared God's Christ child, with boundless generosity and reckless love, and I ask "Why not?" *Some* people see such darkness in our world, perpetuated by people consumed with hate for themselves and for the people around them, and they ask "Why?" *I* dream of God's

light breaking in so fearlessly and so endlessly that we see each other as **God** sees us and we love each other the way *God* loves us, and I ask “Why not?”

Why not? There is no reason why not? Unless we who know better refuse to stand up, demand better, and do better. What that great dreamer, Martin Luther King, Jr., declared about his own time still applies to our time: “We will have to repent in this generation not merely for the vitriolic words and actions of the bad people but for the appalling silence of the good people.” Good people, do not go gentle into this dark night.¹ Rage. Dream. Of God’s light.

Be God’s light. So people in darkness don’t need to switch on a bulb to see. They will see by the glow of your life. We can be the light. First Presbyterian Church can be the light. You can be the bearer of God’s light. Why not?

Because sermons are meant to be preached and are therefore prepared with the emphasis on verbal presentation (i.e., are written for the ear), the written accounts occasionally deviate from proper and generally accepted principles of grammar and punctuation. Most often, these deviations are not mistakes per se, but are indicative of an attempt to aid the listener in the delivery of the sermon.



The Rev. Dr. Brian K. Blount is the president and professor of New Testament at Union Presbyterian Seminary, Richmond, VA, and Charlotte, NC. He was called to this position in 2007, after serving for 15 years as the Richard J. Dearborn Professor of New Testament Interpretation at Princeton Theological Seminary. An M.Div. graduate of Princeton Seminary in 1981, he obtained his B.A. from the College of William and Mary in 1978. After graduating from Princeton Seminary, he went on to become pastor of the Carver Memorial Presbyterian Church in Newport News, VA, from 1982-1988. He received his Ph.D. in New Testament Studies from Emory University in 1992 and returned to teach at Princeton Seminary the same year. His primary work has been in the Gospel of Mark, the Book of Revelation and in the area of cultural studies and hermeneutics. He is an associate editor of the New Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible for Abingdon Press and the General Editor for True To Our Native Land: An African American New Testament Commentary by Fortress Press. He also preaches and directs adult education classes in local congregations. He and his wife Sharon have two children, Joshua and Kaylin.

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¹ Dylan Thomas. “Do Not Go Gentle into that Good Night.”