

“Silence in Heaven for Half An Hour”

For circulation among members of Collegium

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Introduction

In June 1991, I took a summer school course at The Iliff School of Theology from a visiting professor, Fr. Daniel Berrigan. The title of the course was “Images of Apocalyptic: The Book of Revelation as a Handbook of Hope.” Since Fr. Berrigan is the Distinguished Guest at Collegium this year, I thought it would be interesting to revisit the paper which I wrote for that course. I regret that I cannot be with you to offer to present this paper, but I would greatly enjoy receiving any comments which any of you would like to make.

The title, “Silence in Heaven for Half an Hour,” comes from Rev. 8:1. In the first seven chapters of the Book of Revelation, John of Patmos begins to narrate his terrifying vision of the exalted, apocalyptic Christ. Christ instructs John to send messages to the various churches, praising some, encouraging some, chiding others. In chapter 4 the full measure

of the Apocalypse is described: the Lord God is surrounded by four living (but very strange) creatures, all of whom sing glory and honor to God; and there are twenty-four elders who fall before God and sing "...you created all things, and by your will they existed and were created" (4:11) (NRSV). Then the Lamb (Christ) opens the seven seals, none of which reveals Ingmar Bergman, but out of the seals come the Four Horsemen, all commissioned to destroy; out of the seals come all the martyrs, who cry to the Lord for vengeance. The Apocalypse becomes even more terrifying, with kings cringing from the Lord's power and begging the mountains to fall on them and hide them from the wrath of the Lord. Eventually, John himself is addressed by an angel who praises him and other martyrs who have suffered "the great ordeal;" these are those who have been washed "in the blood of the Lamb" (7:1-14).

Then we come to the verse that particularly interested me in Revelation:

8.1 "When the Lamb opened the seventh seal, there was silence in heaven for about half an hour."

But first, we should take a very brief look at the rest of Revelation, 8:2-ff. The earth (most of it) is destroyed, in spectacular, unforgettable language. All sinners, including those who have worshipped the Beast, are punished with exquisite torture. We could make an analogy to practices of torture in our own time: Auschwitz; Guantanamo; the gulags. It has been said that people don't have to wait for the End Times; we are experiencing the End Times now. Yet, there is hope even now, and that is part of what this paper tries to show.

“When the Lamb opened the seventh seal, there was silence in heaven for about half an hour.”

What is this verse about? Is it merely a transition? Is it about time, or is it about silence? Or something else? Hope?

Most scholars say that the verse represents a transition from the tumultuous scenes that precede it; that silence precedes the burning of incense in the Old Testament; that all the tumult of chs. 1-7 involves enormous noise and that the silence stands in illuminating contrast to the noise. This is consistent with the ancient Israelites' idea of apocalypse. Harper's Bible Commentary describes the verse as “an anticlimactic period of silence in heaven, perhaps representing the primeval silence of the seventh day of creation.”

But why would God, who orchestrated all of this, want an intermission, as it were? Or (more likely) is the half hour of silence simply a literary device to mark off one section of the cataclysm from another? Rev. 8:1 is the only verse in the Bible that mentions the phrase “half an hour.” In 17:12 there is a reference to ten kings who will “receive authority as kings for one hour, together with the beast.” The note in the NRSV refers to an hour as “an extremely limited period of time” -- by contrast, the martyred are to reign with Christ for a thousand years (20:4-6) and Satan is imprisoned for a thousand years, but “must be let out for a little while (20.3).”

In his book, *Nightmare of God*, Fr. Berrigan suggests that Rev. 8:1 advises us, who have just read (or visualized) the beginning of the apocalypse, to “listen -- and to grow silent” (p. 38). Thus we may consider the verse to mark an interval to begin to contemplate the powerful vistas which have just unfolded . (We should realize that the Book of Revelation was read aloud to its early audiences. Imagine its impact on those audiences.) The verse is an interval, but there is more.

It is useful to remember that throughout the Bible, God is elusive; but here, in the final book of the Bible, the author is concerned primarily with the End; and, in the End, God is fully revealed, to John of Patmos, and God reveals himself to the entire world by destroying most of it.¹ So the half-hour silence is a mark, a warning, of what is to come; and a “half hour” is not very long. It is as though the inhabitants of Nagasaki (which was bombed three days after Hiroshima) had a foretaste of what would happen to them.

Is Rev. 8:1 a seedbed of meaning, as Fr. Berrigan says in *Nightmare of God*? Perhaps; that is a rich description.

Intrigued by this verse, and seeking a seedbed of meaning, I revisited the acclaimed Ingmar Bergman film, *The Seventh Seal*. Set in 14th century Sweden, Antonius Block and his squire, Jons, have just returned from the Crusades, disillusioned. The Black Plague is claiming the lives of about a third of the population. Nearly everyone believes that the Plague is a punishment from God; that the End Time has arrived in the form

¹ For example, in 16:3, the second angel destroys “every living thing in the sea.”

of the Plague; and that they are experiencing the very kind of retribution described in the Book of Revelation. The title of the movie, *The Seventh Seal*, comes directly from Revelation (the seven seals are first introduced in 5:1).² At the beginning, the male narrator says “And when the angel opened the Seventh Seal, there was silence in Heaven about the space of half an hour” (subtitle). Bergman thus sets the stage for the unfolding of the plot. Death, in the form of a most sinister man dressed in a black robe, tells Block that his time has come. Block cleverly makes a bargain with Death. They will play a game of chess, during which Block will have a respite,³ a reprieve. Block, in a most sober and unrelenting manner, seeks “Knowledge” about belief in God: are the Scriptures believable? Does God exist? What is the meaning of the horrors of the Plague? In what or whom can a person believe? This is his quest throughout the film. Jons, his squire (servant) often tells him that there is nothing to believe in. Block is the idealist, while Jons is the cynic.

Death, posing as a priest taking confession, tricks Block into revealing his strategy for defeating him in the chess game. Meanwhile, the Plague is taking everyone except a charming family: traveling players, whose names are Joseph, Mary, and their one year old son. This family is depicted as being innocent and happy, in contrast to everyone else, since all are suffering.

Meanwhile, monks, clothed in dark robes, lead processions of dying victims of the Plague, chanting the *Dies Irae*. Soldiers

² There were seven seals because no unauthorized person could open the scrolls. See 5:1, 3 and the accompanying note in the NRSV. Thus the high drama when the Seventh Seal is opened by the Lamb.

³ This is the word used in the subtitles.

seize a young woman, accuse her of having carnal knowledge of the Devil, and prepare to execute her by fire.⁴ She is a scapegoat, as it is believed that she brought about the Plague. Block and his squire cannot save her from her cruel death because they are outnumbered by the soldiers. As she is about to be consumed by the flames, Block and Jons argue about what will happen to her after she dies. Jons exclaims that she is making a discovery: that beyond death lies only “emptiness.” Block loudly disputes this. Jons (who is never afraid to contradict his master in matters of philosophy) demurs and says, in a telling line, “We see what she sees, and her terror is ours.”

Eventually, Block is reunited with his wife, Karin, who welcomes Block and his friends, and as they are eating dinner she reads, slowly and with fine articulation, Rev. 8:1 (the first words we hear as the movie begins) and verses 2 through 11a). The film is thus framed by Rev. 8:1, and by reading verses 2 through 11a, Karin sets the stage for the imminent arrival of Death. Verses 10 through 11a read:

*The third angel blew his trumpet, and a great star fell from heaven, blazing like a torch, and it fell on a third of the rivers and on the springs of water. The name of the star is Wormwood.*⁵

Just as she reaches that point in reading the text, Death appears silently, as he always does, and the entire group of seven realize that death is imminent. Karin, Block’s wife, is calm, but Block cries out to God for mercy. Quickly, Jons

⁴ In the Middle Ages, heretics and witches were considered to be so dangerous that they had to be burned, to eliminate any possibility of “infection.” Thus Servetus met his death with his books strapped to his leg.

⁵ Wormwood is a plant noted for its bitter taste.

harshly tells him that, in the darkness which he feels, there is no one to listen to his lament. Jons closes by proclaiming that, rather than chasing after the knowledge he seeks, Block should rejoice in being alive. Throughout the film Death always has something to say, but during this last scene, he is totally silent as his victims grope for the meaning of death.

How does *The Seventh Seal* help us interpret Rev. 8:1? It seems to me that Bergman understands the verse as an announcement of the coming devastation (whether by the plague, or another form of death); and, at a subtler level, the “half hour” is Block’s respite. Bergman shows us how man searches for meaning in the midst of devastation; he takes a close look at the human condition; and he examines how man deals with death. Block’s search for meaning is congruent with Berrigan’s urging us to “listen -- and to grow silent.” Block has searched, and he has done some listening. Though he never gets the answers he craves, he is glad for the respite.

In the end, we can affirm that this one seemingly simple, yet complex verse, about the “silence in heaven for half an hour,” is indeed, following Berrigan, a seedbed for meaning. When we reflect on this verse in the context of Bergman’s brilliant film, we see that the verse is fertile ground for looking at the themes of time, silence, hope, and exploration for meaning in an existential sense. The silence interrupts the extraordinary events of the Apocalypse; the very silence makes the rest of the story all that more dramatic. Moreover, Berrigan’s admonition that the verse calls us “to listen -- and to grow silent” appears to be very appropriate. Squire Jons’ admonition to Block at their end -- that there is nothing after death but emptiness -- seems at

first to be pessimistic, but the pessimism is immediately rebutted by the squire's argument that the realization of emptiness gives one the opportunity to be more fully alive.⁶ So the silence is a silence of awe and veneration; a silence which mankind may use to seek to achieve some degree of calmness; a beacon of hope or, in more prosaic terms, an opportunity for spiritual respite.

⁶ The implications of their dialogue for existentialism -- a movement which was taking shape during the time when the film was made, and a movement which is still influential -- are beyond the scope of this paper. However, Victor Frankl's *Man's Search for Meaning* comes to mind.