The book of Revelation is full of striking images. To me, one of the most interesting is in chapter 18. John has just spent all this time painting this picture of the Great Harlot, Babylon, drunk on the blood of the prophets and martyrs and sitting astride a terrible, 7-headed beast. In chapter 18, John narrates the death of the Harlot. She is destroyed by the very beast upon which she rode, the source of all her power and security.

With all that has come before, one would expect that the people of the earth would join in the songs of the angels, rejoicing at her downfall and the end of her bloodthirsty reign. Instead, what follows is a dirge, a funerary lament of her death sung by all the kings and peoples of the earth who mourn her absence. We are left wondering what is wrong with these people, how they could love something so hideous and abominable.

The Harlot, we know, is intended as a symbol for Rome, the great world superpower of John’s day. With that in mind, it’s easy to figure out why John imagined all the people conquered and subjugated by Rome lamenting her downfall. For all the slavery and exploitation, for all the frivolous excess contrasted with the abject poverty, Rome was beloved for one thing especially: the Pax Romana, the Roman Peace.

The provinces may have grimaced at having to pay Roman taxes and having their sons and husbands conscripted into Rome’s legions, but at the end of the day, they fiercely coveted and appreciated the safety and order ensured by those taxes and soldiers. The Pax kept them safe from all the thieves and bandits lurking around every corner, protected them from the bad hombres on the other side of the borders. The Pax may have come with a heavy price, but it was a price they were willing to pay.

We still value our Pax. Ours is a Pax of law and order, of civility and decency. In these recent weeks, we have been chagrined to hear of the breakdown of that law and order. Of course, there have been the protests in the wake of the murder of George Floyd, but before that many cities saw groups of protestors demonstrating against stay-at-home orders mandated to combat the COVID pandemic.

Life has us all off-balance these days, and when mixed together with isolation, boredom and stress, that dis-ease has begun bubbling to the surface in public shows of anger and frustration.

These problems are not new, however. The stay-at-home protests have been organized by people worried about the economy, which means people worried about their ability to provide for their families and their future. That is a fear that has lurked beneath the surface of the American dream throughout our entire history, but which has become especially pronounced in these last few decades as the middle class has slowly stagnated and the ultra-rich have accumulated more and more wealth.

And, of course, I don’t need to tell you that George Floyd is only one in a long list human lives lost to the cancer of racism. American citizens have been demonstrating peacefully and otherwise for far longer than the Black Lives Matter movement has been around. Long before the Civil Rights movement of the 60s there were riots and demonstrations and the 14th amendment and John Brown’s rebellion.

All this is simply to say that for as much as we talk about the American Dream and pride ourselves on being the “land of the free and the home of the brave,” we have always been a people living in fear that somebody will steal away what is rightfully might: women demanding the right to vote, Native Americans fighting to defend their land from White Settlers, freed slaves hoping for the same rights and privileges as their former owners, Communists trying to undermine our freedom, refugees and immigrants taking away our jobs. The problems we are seeing now are nothing new; they are the same old neuroses that the first colonists brought with them over the Atlantic.

These days, we joke more and more that it feels like we’re living in the apocalypse; and you know what? We are. The word “apocalypse,” literally means a “revelation,” like the pulling back of a curtain to expose what is behind it. Jesus says to his disciples today, “Nothing is covered up that will not be uncovered, and nothing secret that will not become known.” Whatever confluence of events and circumstances has created this moment of protest and dis-ease in our world, one thing is certain: the curtain is being pulled back to reveal the ugly truth behind our beloved Pax: our freedom and our prosperity are made possible by the exploitation of God’s creation; both people and the environment. When we can no longer exploit those things, we see how quickly the system fails.

It is into this moment that Jesus makes a promise: that he comes not to bring peace, but a sword. It sounds more like a threat, and maybe it is that, too; but his words are words of hope. Unlike us, gathered in our homes, mostly safe and assured that we will make it through this crisis of public health and economic disruption, the people to whom Jesus was speaking were not comfortable. They were not middle class, they had no promise of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. Jesus is speaking to all the people upon whose backs the Pax was built, who bore its weight and fed its appetite.

To these down-and-out people, forgotten and ignored by the powerful and privileged of their day, Jesus promises that he has come with a sword to destroy this peace, this Pax; he has come to encourage them to defy a broken and oppressive system in the hope that something better was on the way.

His words frighten us because, like all people, we want peace. We want law and order, we want civility and decency. Our problem is that we believe we have that now. The voices of the people filling the streets say otherwise. The peace we have now is false. Jesus brings with him a sword, a weapon of destruction and death, to violently disrupt this false peace, to break it up and sweep it away so that a new peace can take its place. There can be no equity under the Pax Romana, for it is built on exploitation and fed with blood. It must be obliterated for the Pax Christi, the peace of Christ that passes all understanding, to be realized among us.

This is why Jesus comes bearing a sword. John pictures him carrying this sword not in his hand, but in his mouth. The sword Jesus brings is the Word of God, the gospel, the good news. It is the word that proclaims freedom to the captive and restoration of sight to the blind. It is the word, as the author of the sermon to the Hebrews says, which is “living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing until it divides soul from spirit, joints from marrow. “What I say to you in the dark,” Jesus says, “tell in the light; what you hear whispered proclaim from the housetops. That whispered promise of hope for God’s coming reign of justice and peace—true peace—is the sword. We are the sword.

We are the sword because we are the edge of Christ’s peace breaking into the world, cutting through the curtain of false peace to reveal the truth which lies concealed. We are the sword of God’s word, announcing a defiant hope that the established law and order will give way to something better, something that benefits all creation, not just the powerful and the privileged. Even as we fear the destruction of our false peace, we are the weapon Christ is wielding to destroy it.

These images of violence and death may make you uncomfortable. They make me uncomfortable. The God we know and worship is the God who gives life, who cares deeply for all creation, even the sparrows. And yet, we cannot deny that what Jesus has come to bring us is death: the death of the Pax, the death of law and order, the death of everything we have created to protect us from those forces and those people who would take what is rightfully ours—the death, even, of our very selves.

We have been taught to fear death, to run and hide from it, to erect walls—both symbolic and physical—to keep it out. And yet, as Paul reminds us, it is into Christ’s death that we have been baptized. Death is our weapon, used against a bad hombre who threatened to take away our Pax. And yet, somehow, death is also the very thing that God uses even now to bring us the peace that passes all understanding, to raise us up to new life. It’s not altogether unlike how a pandemic can help unmask our fears and lay them bear, creating the space for social change.

For all of John’s gruesome, gory images in the book of Revelation, it’s worth mentioning that all his images of God’s violence are actually parodies that undermine the violence of the empire. The Harlot steals and kills and destroys, but God invites the slain to get up and join in the feast that has no end. It’s ironic, then, that we should so often find ourselves so often lamenting the destruction of the Harlot by the beast that bears her, instead of craning our necks to catch a glimpse of the bride to whose feast Jesus invites us.