

## Season after Pentecost

August 12 & 13, 2017

Haven Lutheran Church Hagerstown MD

Readings: John 17: 1-5; Revelation 4: 1-11

*Grace to you and peace from God - who was and is and is to come. Amen*

We know there is power in a story. A story can transport us to another world. A story can give words to things we didn't realize. A story, like music, can bypass the limits of our thinking to reach the heart. A story can paint a picture that taps into our imagination and carries us beyond reason, beyond what is to what could be. Why do we tell our children stories of angels rolling bowling balls in heaven when the thunder scares them? Why does the child come running to a parent's bedside saying, "Tell me again about the angels bowling in heaven," when the thunder rattles the windowpanes? Stories have power. Some people have particular movies that are slipped into DVD player when they need a pick-me-up. For others it may be a book or photo album that brings alive times that were kinder or circumstances that went from bad to good. There is power in a story as it reveals truth beyond our usual understanding and realities beyond our limits.

As we start four weeks in the book of *Revelation*, that is the first thing I suggest we keep in mind. There is power in *this* story we call *Revelation*, told in a letter from "John [of Patmos] to the seven churches that are in Asia: Grace to you and peace..." To most of us, the images and pictures in Revelation are wild, often frightening, and mostly incomprehensible. We might be tempted to put it aside like a fantasy or science fiction that loses us in the first scene. Four horsemen, mutant locusts, multi-headed beast, oh my. But here it is in the Bible — God's Word for us. Maybe it shouldn't surprise us that we have trouble understanding Revelation. After all, "we're reading someone else's mail."<sup>1</sup> John wrote it some 2,000 years ago to Christian churches under the thumb of the Roman Empire — an Empire that demanded worship of the Emperor... an empire that destroyed Jerusalem and its temple in 70 AD to make it clear who was to be boss and king and recipient of honor and glory. To these seven churches of Asia, John told of a vision he

received from God. We call it weird. The first hearers would have thought otherwise.

“Those countless Christians in situations of tyranny and oppression”<sup>2</sup> would have heard the story and vision of *Revelation* as a message of hope. That is another thing to remember as we make our way in *Revelation* — there is power in a story and the message of this story is one of hope.

One more obstacle we may trip over when we wander into the story of Revelation is its very style of literature. “The first word of this book also is the traditional title assigned to it — *apocalypse*, usually translated in English as “revelation.”<sup>3</sup> “As a literary genre, apocalypses were written in order to pull back a curtain, to unveil or reveal some deep truth about the world. As Brian Blount<sup>4</sup> explains, “a truth enables its hearers and readers to see the present in a new light. But that truth is so powerful, so overwhelming, that John’s words cannot properly convey it. He therefore appeals to symbols and codes that must bear the weight his language cannot.”

Pastor and Professor Barbara Rossing wrote, “Such dramatic literature many not be familiar to us, but when *Revelation* was written, apocalypse was a popular type of literature for Jews, Christians and others. Often written at a time of crisis, ancient readers had a high regard for apocalypses and the visionaries who wrote them. They were familiar with their fantastic imagery, exaggerated colors and numbers, and mysterious symbolism. They loved the dramatic visionary journeys up into heaven or down into the underworld, out into the future or back into the past. They were drawn to the way apocalypses pulled back the curtain of everyday life to reveal a deeper spiritual reality — God’s reality.” It is not surprising then that we readers of another time and place in history may not “get it” as the original hearers would have.

Not only is *Revelation* apocalyptic, it is also prophecy. In the Bible, prophecy is not a prediction of the future but a proclamation of God’s message for God’s people. Prophets were God’s truth-tellers. “They spoke truth to power. They denounced injustice [,delivered urgent warnings]... and opened peoples’ eyes to see the world in terms of God’s vision.”<sup>5</sup>

The symbols, words and action that were so very clear to the original audiences may not be so clear to us. I say this all about apocalyptic and prophetic literature so that we might be patient with the selections of Revelation we will read this month. What may seem so very strange, bizarre and incomprehensible to us had great and deep meaning to the early Christian church. We may not “get it” as clearly as they may, but there are truths God has for us all the same. In a way, *Revelation* can be like looking at abstract art. Someone tells you this sculpture or painting is the artist’s rendition of chaos, childhood or seeds of trees. And if, like me, you do not have the artist’s imagination, you may stand there looking at it for a long time and see nothing. You may come back and stand there some more and still not see it or you may suddenly say, “Oh... oh... I get it.” So let’s be gentle and kind to ourselves. There may be parts of *Revelation* you or I just don’t understand when we read or when we read the way scholars may now explain it. This is what we hold onto when we wander into Revelation: It is a powerful story written in often baffling apocalyptic and prophetic imagery that pulls back the curtain on a message of hope from God. We look for the story it is telling *beyond* and *beneath* the confusing images. We, most importantly, look for the message of hope that was and is particularly aimed at those faithful followers of Jesus who find themselves in a world that seems to be spinning out of control... in which it seems evil is powerful and peace illusive. Since that could describe our world, too, we look to Revelation for God’s message of hope to us, as well.

With that introduction and advice, we step into chapter four. John has been pulled from the earthly into the heavenly realms. There he sees the Almighty on a throne. We may see the throne as a mere detail but to those under the thumb of the Romans, there was a different message. It is not the Roman Emperor on the throne over heaven and earth --- it is God. The Romans may think they are in control, but it’s the Almighty God who has the ultimate control. It is God, not an earthly emperor that is deserving of our praise and honor. The vision of God is so glorious, all John can use are images that reflect the

beauty and brightness ---- gems, rainbows and a sea of glass. Lightning and thunder confirm the power of the one on the throne.

Who else is in the throne room? There are 24 elders – in honored positions, wearing crowns and white robes. Twelve representing the 12 tribes of Israel and the other the twelve apostles. “These 24 in a sense represent all redeemed humanity of every time and place.”<sup>6</sup> This is the picture in God’s reality — humanity united as one in their love and praise of God.

The seven flaming torches represent the seven churches to which John addressed his letter. In Christ, the church triumphant is already in heaven before God’s throne. And what of those strange beasts at each corner of the Throne? A lion – a wild beast; an oxen, a domesticated animal; a human; an eagle – a bird. They are all “categories of creatures that breathe.”<sup>7</sup> What do the creatures of creation do? “Day and night without ceasing they sing, “Holy, holy, holy, the Lord God the Almighty, who was and is and is to come.” (4: 8) They “give honor, glory and thanks to one seated on the throne, who lives forever and ever.” (4:9) And when creation worships, the elders toss aside their crowns and bow to worship the Lord, singing, “You are worthy, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power, for you created all things, and by your will they existed and were created.” It is a hymn that says it is *not* false gods, like a Roman Emperor, but the One Almighty God who is on the throne and worthy of honor and glory. To those living with the threat of persecution and death, it was a dangerous belief to profess. But John has pulled back the curtain of “how it seems” to reveal, “how it is.” And this picture of the heavenly throne room would have been one of immense comfort: Despite how it may seem, God is the only true ruler of all time, space and creation. As someone once proclaimed: “I don’t know what the future holds, but I know who hold the future! *There* is the message of hope for the churches who first heard John’s letter... and it’s a message of hope for us, too.

There was no gym on the seminary campus, so the seminarians played basketball in a nearby public school. The elder janitor would wait patiently until the seminarians had

finished playing so he could lock up the building. Invariably he sat there reading his Bible. One day one of the students went up to him and inquired, "What are you reading tonight?" The man answered, "The Book of Revelation." With a bit of surprise and a bit of unintended condescension the student asked, "The Book of Revelation? Do you understand it?"

"Oh yes," the man answered. "I understand it."

"You understand the Book of Revelation?! What does it mean?"

Very quietly that old janitor answered, "It means that Jesus is gonna win."

God is on the throne. That doesn't mean we sit idle, apathetic or unconcerned.

*While* we work with God to deal with the problems and injustices of our world, we "hold on to this picture [in *Revelation*] of all creation bowing in praise before God. We hold that scene in our heads when we are tempted to fear; when we are tempted to discouragement; when we are tempted to seek joy and satisfaction"<sup>8</sup> apart for God. Instead, "join the elders and living creatures in giving glory, honor and thanks to God. Marvel at the might of God!... the creative power of God!... the holiness of God. God is not a weak old man [or woman] desperately seeking attention from anyone who might bless him/her. [No matter how it may seem] God is mighty, powerful and holy. God is at the center."<sup>9</sup> We put God in the center of our lives and worship." These are among the things we learn as we consider John's vision of the spiritual realm in the fourth chapter of *Revelation* and this, too: "No matter how the future will unfold in the details of our lives, this is our assurance and hope:"<sup>10</sup> God is on the throne, the future is in God's hands and without a doubt, "Jesus is gonna win." Amen

Linda M Alessandri 8/11/17

## ENDNOTES

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1. Barbara Rossing, Journey Through Revelation: Apocalyptic Hope for Today Horizon Bible Study, Volume 23, number 3, 2010 Horizons Presbyterian Women, Inc.

2. Barbara Rossing, Journey Through Revelation: Apocalyptic Hope for Today p.3

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3. Barbara Rossing, Journey Through Revelation: Apocalyptic Hope for Today p. 7
  4. Barbara Rossing, Journey Through Revelation: Apocalyptic Hope for Today p. 8
  5. Barbara Rossing, Journey Through Revelation: Apocalyptic Hope for Today p. 8-9
  6. Coty Pinchney, "God at the Center" preached 4/17/2005 as posted on [www.expository.or/rev4a.htm](http://www.expository.or/rev4a.htm)
  7. Coty Pinchney, "God at the Center" preached 4/17/2005 as posted on [www.expository.or/rev4a.htm](http://www.expository.or/rev4a.htm)
  8. Coty Pinchney, "God at the Center" preached 4/17/2005 as posted on [www.expository.or/rev4a.htm](http://www.expository.or/rev4a.htm)
  9. Coty Pinchney, "God at the Center" preached 4/17/2005 as posted on [www.expository.or/rev4a.htm](http://www.expository.or/rev4a.htm)
  10. Rudy W. Ouwehand, "The Throne of Power" preached 3/17/10 posted on [www.crcna.org](http://www.crcna.org)