

Easter 2C
Revelation I

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¹The revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show his servants what must soon take place; he made it known by sending his angel to his servant John, ²who testified to the word of God and to the testimony of Jesus Christ, even to all that he saw.

³Blessed is the one who reads aloud the words of the prophecy, and blessed are those who hear and who keep what is written in it; for the time is near.

⁴John to the seven churches that are in Asia:

Grace to you and peace from him who is and who was and who is to come, and from the seven spirits who are before his throne, ⁵and from Jesus Christ, the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth.

To him who loves us and freed us from our sins by his blood, ⁶and made us to be a kingdom, priests serving his God and Father, to him be glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen.

*⁷Look! He is coming with the clouds;
every eye will see him,
even those who pierced him;
and on his account all the tribes of the earth will wail.*

So it is to be. Amen.

⁸"I am the Alpha and the Omega," says the Lord God, who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty.

⁹I, John, your brother who share with you in Jesus the persecution and the kingdom and the patient endurance, was on the island called Patmos because of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus. ¹⁰I was in the spirit on the Lord's day, and I heard behind me a loud voice like a trumpet ¹¹saying, "Write in a book what you see and send it to the seven churches, to Ephesus, to Smyrna, to Pergamum, to Thyatira, to Sardis, to Philadelphia, and to Laodicea."

The role the book of Revelation has played in the life of the Christian church is full of contradictions. For some the message of the book is fairly clear and simple. For others, its visions of heavenly throne rooms and strange creatures make it the most difficult book in the Bible to understand. For some, Revelation is a very popular book. They spend more time studying Revelation than they do reading the teachings of Jesus in the gospels. Many others will confide that they think the church would have been much better off if Revelation hadn't made it into the New Testament – which it almost didn't. The church debated the merits of Revelation for about 250 years before it was finally accepted into the collection of writings we call the New Testament. Martin Luther included it in his translation of the New Testament, but with reservations, calling the book "theologically inadequate".

Many pastors will tell you that when they ask a group what book of the Bible they would like to study, the most frequent response is Revelation – not because it is central to understanding the good news about Jesus, but simply because it is so puzzling to understand. But when people read it, they discover that many of the passages are quite familiar because the church has found Revelation to be a rich treasure chest of images and words to enrich our worship.

- “Worthy is Christ, the Lamb who was slain, whose blood set us free to be people of God.”
- “Holy, holy, holy, all the saints adore thee, casting down their golden crowns around the glassy sea.”
- “The kingdom of this world has become the kingdom of our Lord, and of his Christ, and he shall reign for ever and ever.” (*Hallelujah Chorus*)

Our lectionary, the schedule of readings we use for Sunday worship, does not give us much opportunity to hear from Revelation – mostly just All Saints Day and Christ the King Sunday. But every third year we read from Revelation six Sundays in a row during the season of Easter, and this year is the year. Pastor Chris and I preached on these texts six years ago and we have decided to do it again. One reason for this is that over 300 of our members, a third of our congregation, were not members in 2004. Another reason is that references to Revelation keep popping up in the news. Two weeks ago, seven members of a so-called “Christian militia” in Michigan were arrested by an FBI Terrorism task force. The members of this group describe themselves as Christian soldiers preparing for the arrival and battle with the anti-Christ.

In February, the state of Virginia passed a law prohibiting a company from forcing their employees to have microchips implanted in their bodies. On the principal of privacy, I am in total agreement that tracking devices should not be implanted in my body (though I could perhaps be convinced about the merits of implanting them in my children). But the sponsor of the bill, Mark Cole, wasn’t just concerned about privacy. He says he drafted the legislation because he is concerned such implants would turn out to be the “mark of the beast” mentioned in Revelation. Cole was quoted in the *Washington Post* as saying, “My understanding – I’m not a theologian – but there’s a prophecy in the Bible that says you’ll have to receive a mark, or you can neither buy nor sell things in the end times.” With news stories like that, it’s a good idea for all of us to be knowledgeable about the purpose and content of Revelation.

I realize it is quite presumptuous to read six brief excerpts from a 22-chapter book, follow each reading with a 12-minute sermon, and think that Pastor Chris and I can give you a sense of what Revelation is about, but we’ll give it our best shot. You can help us out if you will take it upon yourself to sit down and read the whole book in the next few weeks. Read a chapter a day or the whole thing at once. And if your curiosity is piqued a little and you have Tuesday mornings free, you can dig a little deeper into Revelation these next six weeks by attending my Pastor’s Class.

This morning I'd like to give a little background about the context in which Revelation was written and its purpose. It's about A.D. 95. 65 years have passed since Jesus' death and resurrection. The church has spread throughout the Roman Empire thanks to the efforts of missionaries like Paul, Barnabas, Peter, Apollos, and many more whose names are lost to history. They started Christian communities throughout the Mediterranean area, composed of both Jews and Gentiles. The Roman authorities thought the Christians were a strange little religious sect, but there was as yet no widespread persecution of Christians. In the year 64, the Roman emperor Nero had put many Christians to death in gruesome fashion, blaming them for starting a fire that destroyed most of Rome, but that persecution was short-lived. This was not an era when Christians were wholesale being thrown to the lions, but in some areas they were considered outsiders and were often subject to social and economic discrimination and sometimes were victims of mob violence.

In some communities Christians struggled with the dilemma of how to be true to their faith in one God and still be seen as loyal citizens of the Roman Empire. On major Roman holidays, it was customary for animals to be sacrificed to the Roman gods and the meat served to the whole community in one huge party. If Christians ate meat sacrificed to a Roman god, were they not participating in idolatry? But if they did not eat the meat, the Romans looked at them as being unpatriotic. The question of assimilation was a major concern.

But there were also communities where Christians worshiped openly and were not persecuted. The issue that faced these Christians was complacency. They gave lip service to their Christian faith, but there was little evidence of that faith in their day-to-day lives.

Persecution, assimilation, complacency. Those were the issues that caused a Christian leader named John to take up his pen and write a letter to the churches of Asia. When we hear "Asia", we think of China and Japan, but in that era, Asia was the name of the Roman province that we now call Turkey. From clues we pick up in the letter, it is apparent that the writer is not the same John who was a disciple of Jesus. He simply identifies himself as John. When he writes this letter, he is on the small island of Patmos, about 37 miles off the mainland. Patmos was not a prison colony, but there is evidence that the Romans sometimes relocated people they considered to be troublemakers to this island. That was apparently the case with John, forced into exile for preaching about Jesus.

I've mentioned a couple of times that John was writing a letter. This is an important fact to remember. It begins in the standard format of letters in that era: "John to the seven churches that are in Asia: Grace to you and peace." This is not a book that is intended for a general audience. This is a letter written to a specific group of people – seven churches, Christian communities, in western Asia Minor. We will see that the number seven comes up again and again in this letter. The number often is used to indicate fullness or completion, like Genesis recounts God making the universe in seven days or seven days makes a complete week. Writing to seven churches likely indicates that this letter is intended for the whole church of John's area.

This letter was intended to be read aloud when the churches gathered for worship. John writes, "Blessed is the one who reads aloud the words of the prophecy, and blessed are those who hear and who keep what is written in it." We might envision a group of people gathered in a house, listening as someone reads the entire letter at one sitting.

This is not a typical letter, however. John calls it “the revelation of Jesus Christ”. The Greek word that is translated “revelation” is “apocalypse”. Apocalyptic writing is a special style of writing that was quite common in this era. Centuries earlier, Old Testament prophets like Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Amos warned people that if they were not faithful to the Lord God and did not keep the commandments, they would suffer the consequences. As much as we don’t like to hear that, it makes sense to us that if we don’t do what we’re supposed to do, there will be negative consequences. But what had been happening in recent generations was very different. Jews and then Christians were being punished or persecuted precisely because they were being faithful to God. How could this be? Did the suffering they experienced mean the God was unfaithful to his promises, or was incapable of keeping his promises?

The answer that apocalyptic writers gave to this question is that despite the evil they experienced in their situation, God is both the almighty creator and is faithful to his covenant promises. Yes, there is evil in this world, but the outcome of the struggle is not in doubt. God will bring his promises about by one day bringing this world to a fulfillment, an end – not as a gesture of divine frustration but as the means to redeem the whole creation.

John and most other Christians of this era expected God’s intervention to happen soon, probably in their lifetime. In his opening sentence, he says this will soon take place – the time is near. So the “prophecy” he writes in this letter is not prophecy in the sense of predicting events in the far future, but prophecy in the sense of the Old Testament prophets, speaking the word of the Lord to a particular situation in the present.

That particular situation is alluded to in the three terms used to describe Jesus in our reading this morning. Jesus is 1) the faithful witness, 2) the firstborn of the dead, and 3) the ruler of the kings of the earth. Jesus had borne witness before the Roman authorities just as John’s readers were being asked to do. It is possible that they might be martyred as Jesus was, but Jesus as the firstborn of the dead gives them the courage to be faithful witnesses – his resurrection assures a future beyond death. And the phrase “ruler of the kings of the earth” attributes to Jesus the title claimed by the Roman Caesars. John reminds them that the real Lord is not Caesar, but Jesus Christ.

The situation of John’s readers is more fully described in chapters 2-3, which you’re going to have to read on your own. He addresses each of the seven churches in turn, describing their particular problem or temptation. All seven fall into those three categories I mentioned earlier – persecution, assimilation, or complacency.

Revelation does not speak *about* our time. It is not a book to read to see what is going to happen in 2010. But Revelation does speak *to* our time. We in suburban Minneapolis may not face persecution because of our Christian faith, but the issues of assimilation and complacency nip at our heels daily. Over the next weeks, we’ll see what John has to say about that.