

Sermons at First Church

A Ministry of the Word

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First Presbyterian Church

Clarksburg, WV

Revelation 7:9-17

... and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes. (Revelation 7:17 N.R.S.V.)

The Real Message of the Book of Revelation

I am a child of God. I believe in Jesus Christ as my Lord and my Savior. And I believe he has the power to change my life.

Does the last book of the Bible have an “s” on the end of its name? Is it Revelation or is it Revelations? It has become common in our culture to refer to the last book of the Bible as Revelations. But actually there is no “s.” It is The Revelation to John. There was only one dream or vision.

I suspect that part of the reason for the name confusion has to do with the way people try to interpret this book of scripture. There is a huge interest in trying to predict when the end of the world will come, using passages from the Book of Revelation. The idea is that there are a number of steps or things that have to happen and then the end of the world will come. So first A, then B, then C, and right on up to Z and then the end of the world. There is a tendency to talk about each of these steps or things as a separate revelation, thus the name Revelations.

Hollywood has produced a number of movies with this scary theme and there have been no end of books on when the end of the world will come. Each time we have been told that we are at X, Y or maybe even Z so watch out! Hollywood loves this sort of thing because it makes for a scary movie and scary movies sell. There is a large portion of the population that likes to be scared, and an end of the world movie is at least as scary as a good vampire movie. (If a vampire movie can ever be said to be good!)

There are at least two major problems with this kind of interpretation. First it doesn't work. The Book of Revelation was written at a time when early Christians were undergoing severe persecution and thus much of what is said, is said with symbolism. And we have lost the code, we are no longer sure what these symbols meant to the first readers. And beyond that it is not clear that there is any set order such that “A” must happen before “B” and so on.

Yet the books and movies keep coming. A best seller in the 70's was “The Late, Great Planet Earth” by Hal Lindsey. He said in his book that the birth of modern Israel signaled that we were in the end times. Lindsey predicted that Christians would soon be raptured. It has been 40 years now and nothing predicted in Lindsey's book has happened.

There have been lots of books since then. Each author claims to have cracked “the code” of Revelation. Lately the “Left Behind” series by Tim LaHaye have taken up the chant. The rapture

is near at hand, and here is how we know. But I think my favorite title for these kind of books is one that came out in the 80's. It was called, "88 Reasons why the Rapture Will Be in 1988" There was even an 1989 edition of that one, go figure.

The first problem is that every such book that has been written has in time been proven wrong. That in itself might not be a reason to discard this style of interpretation, after all the next one might be right. And they are exciting and fun to read. However as serious Christians we also have to take note that this approach to the Book of Revelation is unfaithful.

Jesus himself said that no one but God knows when the world will end. "But about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father." (Mark 13:32) Jesus also rebuked those who kept asking him for signs. "An evil and adulterous generation asks for a sign, but no sign will be given to it except the sign of Jonah." (Matthew 16:4)

The people had been pressing Jesus, "How do we know that what you tell us is true? Give us a sign." And Jesus had refused to do something miraculous to prove his message. As for the sign of Jonah, that simply means that the emergence of the prophet and the message of God which he speaks is enough. It is true that Jonah was swallowed by a great fish and survived for three days in it's belly. But Jonah did not tell that to the people he preached to. The people of Nineveh did not know about that, and Jonah never told them. He simply appeared, preached the message of God, and they repented. The prophet and the message were enough. So it needs to be with us. We are not to demand proof that the last days are coming in order to believe in Christ and his message. Christ and his message are enough by themselves.

So enough about that, if the Book of Revelation is not a step by step prediction of when the end of the world is coming, what is the real message? I'm so glad you asked, cause now I am going to tell you.

There are at least three great themes that run through this special book. The first theme is that we have a limited amount of time to respond to God. We are not told the exact time and hour when Christ shall return, but that event is surely closer now than it was 2,000 years ago. And even if that event does not happen in our lifetimes, we still have a very limited time. None of us knows how long we are going to live. Someday we are going to be standing before the throne of God, giving an account of our lives. So we need to be prepared at every moment.

I remember the shock that I experienced the first time I heard of someone I went to school with dying. Tim died in a car wreck, he was just 18. As a teenager myself, I thought I was immortal. Oh, at some level I knew that death could come anytime, but it wasn't real until Tim died.

All too often we put off spiritual matters for another day. But not even the patience of God lasts forever. We need to get into a right relationship with God now, so that we are always prepared for whatever happens. For those who are living in Christ Jesus, the end of the world is no cause for panic. We look forward with joy to the return of our Lord.

The first theme is we have a limited time, so be prepared now. The second theme is about living into the kingdom of God. Our lesson from chapter 7 gives us a glimpse of what things will be like

when God finally has his way. Heaven is just another name for that place or time when everything will be perfectly according to God's will.

Now I want you to note that our lesson begins with these words, "After this I looked, and there was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and people and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, robed in white. . ." And all of these greatly diverse people were worshiping God.

Here is the challenge for us. If this is going to be the way it is in heaven, shouldn't we start living that way now? After all if someone wants to be a professional football player he is going to want to start playing football even as a youngster. Pee Wee football, middle school, high school, college- those who want to be professional football players start early.

If someone wants to grow up to be a doctor, she will want to start working on that early too. Taking extra science classes, maybe volunteering at the hospital.

So if we know that someday we will be worshiping with this huge multitude from every nation and people, what does that suggest to us now? It suggests to me that we need to be broadening our circle of friends now. Instead of just hanging out with the people who look like us, sound like us, and think like us- we need to be reaching out to those who are vastly different.

One man was telling about an exercise that he engaged in while sitting in airport waiting on his flight. He did a lot of flying in his line of work, and so he spent a lot of time in the airport. While he waited he would study the people going by and ask himself to reflect on the question, "Is this a person that Jesus died for?" He found it really helped him be more open and welcoming of those different from himself.

But I can push this even closer to home. In one of my previous churches, I had two very dear older ladies. They were both very faithful Christians, and they lived on the same street with only about 30 feet between their two houses. They also didn't get along with each other.

One of these ladies said to me, "You know I really don't mind if Wilma makes it to heaven too. Just as long as her house up there is on the other side of heaven from mine." I couldn't help but tell her that knowing God's sense of humor, their houses would probably be side by side in heaven too, and that they better start practicing getting along with each other now, because they were going to be doing it for all eternity.

The first great theme is that we have a limited time to get right with God. The second great theme is that we are shown what things will be like when God's will is perfectly followed, so that we can start living into that state now. And the third great theme is that evil will be defeated.

The Book of Revelation has some terrible things happening. There are wars, earthquakes, disease, and suggested horrors beyond our imagination. I want to stop for a moment and ask you to reflect on what people say every time something terrible happens in the world. Remember what people said after 9-11 and after major natural disasters like Hurricane Katrina? Well, of course someone always says it's the end of the world. But beyond that, people always ask, "Where is God?"

The question behind the question is, “Has God deserted us? Does all this pain and suffering and death and chaos mean that the world has slipped out of God’s control?”

And the answer from Revelation is that God is still in control. There will be terrible things happen in the world. These do not mean that God has abandoned us. These things did not take God by surprise. God has long known about these things and has built his plan accordingly. God will be able to bring good out of even the worst things that happen. In the end, God is going to win, and he will wipe away every tear from the eyes of his children.

This was a really important message for the early Christians. They were a small struggling group and they had to endure intense persecution. One of the Roman Emperors decided to get rid of a slum area in Rome by setting it on fire, with the people still in it. That way he could go forward with his plans to rebuild that part of the city. When a public outcry was raised, the emperor blamed the fire on the Christians and had many of them tortured and killed. The Christians were a handy scape goat for his evil.

Year after year this kind of persecution went on, the Christians feared that God had abandoned them. But God spoke through John the message of Revelation. These things will happen. Evil will seem to be in control for awhile. But rest assured. Evil will not have the last word. God will set things right in the end. That hope burned bright in the hearts of the early Christians and kept them going.

Some of you may remember what happened 10 years ago when the Czech Republic overthrew its Communist government. The revolution started in Prague with a group of students who protested. The world watched as the protesters chanted to the Communist party leadership, “You have lost already! You have lost already!”

Theoretically the Communist party was still in power, but their days were numbered and the students knew it. “You have lost already! You have lost already!”

And that is the good news that each of us carries in our hearts whenever we are confronted by the forces of evil. No matter how much the evidence says that evil has the upper hand, we Christians know their days are numbered. With sure hope and confidence in our hearts we can say to all the forces of evil, “You have lost already.” It may be a dread disease that is stealing our strength. It may be family troubles that are tearing you apart. It may be frustration, or depression, or exhaustion, or injustice. But these things will not have the last word. They have lost already whether they know it or not. We know it. God is still in control and God will have the last word.

The promise is sure and worthy of full acceptance, “They (the children of God that is) will hunger no more, and thirst no more; the sun will not strike them, nor any scorching heat; for the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of the water of life, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.” (Revelation 7:16-17)

Amen.