

The Cosmic Christ, part II

Revelation 21:1-6 and 1:9-20

This morning I'm trying something different, and I'm both excited and a little nervous about it. I'm going to preach from the opening chapter of the book of Revelation, and it's an unusual experience reading from Revelation, let alone preaching from it—and listening, I'm sure. I need to make some introductory comments before reading it. Now, you didn't come here this morning for a lecture on the background of the book of Revelation, so I will attempt to keep this part short, and get into the meat of the sermon (which will be even shorter).

I confess, I love the book of Revelation! When we get the right equipment and understanding for reading it, it's a beautiful book. And I'm going to try to give us some of that equipment and understanding this morning. And if this sounds boring to you, I get it. There's nothing worse than a preacher who excitedly nerds out on a topic that isn't interesting to you.

However, even if you've never read this last book of the Bible and never intend to, know that we are all affected by *other peoples'* interpretations of various parts of this book. If you read novels or even non-fiction, if you watch television, or movies, or listen to certain Christian politicians or pastors who are cut from a certain cloth, you will have heard all kinds of material about things like

the end times, the battle of Armageddon/the apocalypse, the mark of the beast, or 666, or who the antichrist is, or prophecies about China taking over the world, and whatnot.

The book of Revelation has been the most abused, misused and misunderstood book of the Bible, which is a shame because it's amazing, and gives us, in an unusual way—using apocalyptic symbols and images—another view of the cosmic Christ—the risen Christ. Apocalyptic literature is literature of hope, and comfort, and it encourages us to remain faithful disciples amidst turbulent times—to not give up and throw up our hands and say, “It's all hopeless.”

In your bulletin there is some background and guidelines for reading Revelation, and I'm not going to go through all that. I'll touch on some of those things, then read part of Revelation chapter 1, and share a brief word of hope and encouragement.

I have heard the comment made in various places by various people that the last couple years feel apocalyptic in nature (whatever that means to people). And I'd just like to say that by preaching from Revelation today I am not suggesting that I believe the end of all things is near and we'd better get ready for

it. My goal is to help us see Jesus the Christ, the big, cosmic Christ, as present to us, strong and faithful, amidst a turbulent world.

So, here is some background and a couple suggestions for reading and understanding the last book of the Bible.

The historical context of the writing of Revelation is the persecution of Christians under Caesar Nero, around 60 A.D. The persecutions came, in part, because Nero, like other Caesars, saw himself as God, and the Christians would not worship him. They stayed true to Jesus and the worship of one God. When people entered the pagan temples, they had to say the words “Caesar is Lord.” The Christians rephrased that and said, “Jesus Christ is Lord.” It’s the earliest creed of the church, if you will, and it made Nero furious.

The persecution was intense, and severe, as Christians were hunted down and subjected to a kind of cruelty that I don’t feel comfortable even mentioning from the pulpit. The point is, the book of Revelation is grounded in a historical time and circumstances. It did not come out of the clear blue sky, detached from what was going on in the world. It speaks to people who are suffering and struggling in a real place and time.

Therefore, it's a pastoral book. The apostle John is receiving this vision and writing it down from an island prison called Patmos, and he is writing it to the churches that he oversees in that region. The goal here to encourage the Christians, to remind them of the faithfulness of Jesus amidst their suffering. John is suffering with them! Revelation is a book written to people who are suffering, who are being hunted down and tortured and killed because of their faith in Jesus, to remind them that the crucified, risen, and ascended Christ is still Lord and is aware of their suffering, and is present with them. Christ also suffered at the hands of the authorities and was killed. And then was resurrected to life! This is the great hope ("Lives again our glorious king; where, o death, is now thy sting?" "Death in vain forbids him rise...")

Interesting, when we go back to early church documents, the early church didn't come up with elaborate timetables for the return of Christ, or the rapture, or of future events, and all that. They understood it as a proclamation—in apocalyptic language—that Jesus Christ is still Lord and that their salvation is secure. And that they are called to remain faithful in the midst of hardship. Again, it's a message of hope, not a prediction of future events.

As Revelation is grounded in history, it is also grounded in the Old Testament. Especially the books of the Old Testament where the people of Israel were in Babylonian exile (in other words, suffering!). Books like Daniel, Ezekiel, parts of Isaiah and Jeremiah. The book of Revelation quotes the Old Testament more than any other book in the New Testament. Again, this tells us that the book is grounded. It's grounded in the history and tradition of God's people. And again, it isn't a vision out of the clear blue sky, a completely new revelation that is separate from or inconsistent with God's ways and purposes in history. It is completely consistent with God's covenant, and with the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Therefore...

It's a Christ-centered book. Duh! I need to say that, though, because people who play with or misuse Revelation try to tell us it's about China, or Russia, or figuring out who the antichrist is now, or being prepared for battle because somehow they think Revelation tells us that, as a sign of the end times, the government is coming after us to take all our stuff away and microchip us in order to control us. That kind of fear mongering is actually the antithesis of what Revelation teaches. We'll see in the next reading that the cosmic Christ's first words to John are "fear not."

The book of Revelation *is* an extraordinary vision, and that vision takes us to extraordinary places, and actions, and images. But Jesus Christ is always present, sometimes taking center stage, sometimes in the background, sometimes appearing as a lion, sometimes as a lamb, sometimes as a bright light. But always there. And always, always, to bring comfort to those who are suffering. We'll see that in this morning's reading.

Now, a couple guidelines for reading and study.

Let the book give you its own clues for interpretation. Like a lot of the Bible, it will explain itself. We'll see an example of that in today's reading. When John (or Jesus) wants you to understand something, he'll explain it. And if he doesn't tell you what it means, then you're not meant to know; usually it's there for dramatic effect (I'll explain more in a moment).

So, let the book speak for itself; you'll get more out of it. Don't read into it what isn't there. The dragon-like beast with 10 horns and 7 eyes and smoke coming out of its nostrils is not your obnoxious uncle. Nor is it Joe Biden or Donald Trump. That beast is there for a reason.

The images are not to be taken literally. There are vivid and strange images, lots of numbers used, there are creatures and people doing mysterious

things. It's moving and dramatic action—cinematic in many ways. But this imagery is not to be taken literally. It's there, largely, for effect.

If you remember anything, remember this, when reading Revelation (or any apocalyptic literature): stand in awe of the images, interpret the speeches and songs. Stand in awe of the images, interpret the speeches and songs. There are several short songs and speeches in Revelation, or explanations of what's going on, and they are easy to understand. The images are there for effect. Like in the passage Linda read... Don't get sidetracked by trying to figure out the images.

Here is a great example from our lives. Anybody ever attended a wedding? Especially a traditional church wedding. Picture this: There are people in the audience dressed in fancy and colorful clothing; music begins to play and a group of guys sequestered behind a door off to the side begin to emerge, and file in, looking like unrecognizable creatures all cleaned up, in outfits that they've never worn before.

Then women begin to process down the aisle one by one in sensational technicolor display. Perhaps a flower girl follows behind, a little cherub/angel, tossing petals left and right. There are flowers, there are candles, and then the music changes, and dramatic music begins as the bride comes down the aisle,

adorned in a dress that makes her look amazing and otherworldly. And of course, the people are oohing and aaahing, or they are moved to tears at the spectacle and the joy. And on the ceremony goes, right up to the end. Can you see it? Have you been there?

Ok, now, let me ask you: what is the most important part of the wedding ceremony? The vows! The covenant of love and commitment that is made, which is then affirmed by the officiant as two people are pronounced a married couple. The vows are the most important part, and they are easy to understand. The rest is there for effect. And to enhance that central act of reciting vows, and affirm the covenant that is being made.

That's what Revelation is like: the songs and speeches are like the vows; they are easy to understand, and they are central. Pay attention to those! Everything else is there to enhance those central messages. And—spoiler alert!—the central message of Revelation is: Jesus wins! Love wins. When all is said and done, suffering doesn't have the last word. Death doesn't have the last word. The vow, the covenant, that God keeps with us, in love, is the central message. Which is why, in many passages, like the passage that Linda read, wedding and marriage imagery is used.

I attended a wedding years ago, where I sat in front of someone who was obsessed with the 3rd groomsman from the right: “Is that Johnny? I didn’t recognize him; I’ve known Johnny since he was in second grade. Did he get a haircut? It’s about time! He always looks so grubby; he cleans up okay, but that tuxedo, it doesn’t fit him right...” and on it went, this running commentary about Johnny, the 3rd groomsman from the right. And this person missed the central part of the drama!

It’s the same with Revelation: don’t get fixated on one of the side characters; focus on the central theme and message of hope and comfort. Stand in awe of the images, interpret the songs and speeches.

And read it with all your senses; take in the sights, the smells, the sounds, the feel; it’s meant to be a sensory experience, felt and experienced as a word of hope from the risen and victorious Christ; the cosmic Christ who is with us always.

With all that in mind, let’s read Revelation 1:9-20. So, put your seatbacks and tray tables in the upright and locked position. Here we go!

Revelation 1:9-20

9 I, 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.'

12 Then I turned to see whose voice it was that spoke to me, and on turning I saw seven golden lampstands, ¹³and in the midst of the lampstands I saw one like the Son of Man, clothed with a long robe and with a golden sash across his chest. ¹⁴His head and his hair were white as white wool, white as snow; his eyes were like a flame of fire, ¹⁵his feet were like burnished bronze, refined as in a furnace, and his voice was like the sound of many waters. ¹⁶In his right hand he held seven stars, and from his mouth came a sharp, two-edged sword, and his face was like the sun shining with full force.

17 When I saw him, I fell at his feet as though dead. But he placed his right hand on me, saying, 'Do not be afraid; I am the first and the last, ¹⁸and the living one. I was dead, and see, I am alive for ever and ever; and I have the keys of Death and of Hades. ¹⁹Now write what you have seen, what is, and what is to take place after this. ²⁰As for the mystery of the seven stars that you saw in my right hand, and the seven golden lampstands: the seven stars are the angels of the seven churches, and the seven lampstands are the seven churches.

This is the word of the Lord!

Story about a seminary professor who grew up in a small upper Midwest town, where everybody knew everybody. One of his earliest memories was of his parents taking him to get his picture taken with Santa Clause. He was on sensory overload with the lights and music and people dressed up, and a live reindeer. When he got to the front he was terrified. His parents made him sit in Santa's lap anyway. While freaking out on Santa's lap, he heard a voice behind him: "Pssst,

Richard, it's me, Mr. Johnson." Mr. Johnson, the local grocer, had pulled the fake beard & moustache down to reveal his face, and he recognized him. He felt assured that everything was going to be okay.

John had a similar experience. He was terrified, but Jesus assured him: "Pssst, hey John, it's me, Jesus. Everything is going to be okay."

John needed this type of vision of the risen Christ to assure him. And, it doesn't hurt if we have extraordinary moments like this, that lift us out of the ordinary, from time to time, to get a glimpse of the power and authority and majesty of our savior. Maybe not as dramatic, but we all need moments where we are both startled and assured, and shown a glimpse of the eternal, Cosmic Christ, who is bigger and stronger and more loving than we normally imagine.

What's going on here? It seems like a lot, but it's very simple: Jesus the Christ is alive, Jesus the Christ is strong. And, Jesus the Christ boundaries history—he is eternal. That's why he says I am the alpha and the omega—the first and last letters of the Greek alphabet; in other words, I am the A and the Z—beginning and end, the first and the last.

Jesus stands at the beginning of our world as creator. He stands at the end as the One who will eventually bring history to fulfillment. Jesus is in charge, not

the Romans. The persecuted Christians needed that assurance. And it will be repeated again and again throughout the book. They needed to know that what was going on in the Roman empire was not out of Jesus' awareness or involvement. He is not indifferent to their suffering. He is alive, and present. In fact, he walks among them. He is in the midst of the lampstands (the churches; and notice the churches hold the light; they themselves are not the light).

The message here is: nations can rage, but Jesus is still Lord. Nero lives for a short time, but Jesus lives forever. He is eternal. Jesus the Christ boundaries history.

And, Jesus Christ boundaries our lives. He stands at the beginning of our lives as our creator, and he stands at the end of our lives as the One who prepares a place for us and welcomes us into our eternal home (where there is no more pain, no more death...). The persecuted Christians needed to hear that too. We need to hear that. We need to hear the words, "Do not be afraid; I am alive, and in your midst. And, *I'm* in charge of life and death here. No one else has authority over your life, ultimately.

What John saw, initially scared him; but ultimately it assured him. And what he saw, to summarize, was a figure of authority and strength. Of wisdom

and of love and compassion. The One who, to pull in last week's passage from Colossians, is above and below and behind and before all things, and in whom all things hold together and find their fulfillment.

There is an assurance here that we, and the world, are in his hands. Notice that in this vision, the risen Christ holds the 7 stars (angels) in his right hand, but then that same strong and authoritative right hand gently lands on John's shoulder and assures him: "Hey John, don't be afraid. It's me!"

We need that assurance today, don't we? We may not be hunted down and thrown in prison, or persecuted for our faith. But we live in unusual and uncertain times—apocalyptic to some people—and it helps to step back & away from it from time to time to catch a vision of a bigger picture.

In Celtic Christianity (to pick up on the Irish theme, since we're about to sing Be Thou My Vision) they call this "the otherworld." Where the veil between this world and the spiritual realm is occasionally pulled aside, and we get a glimpse of the spiritual realities behind the material world. To experience, with all of our senses, in dramatic fashion, the power of God, who *is* in charge, despite evidence to the contrary, who *is* the ultimate authority.

Jesus himself knew this. As he himself was being unjustly detained and, well, persecuted at the hands of the authorities, Pontius Pilate said to him, “Do you not know that I have power to release you, and power to crucify you?” To which Jesus replied, “You have no power over me, unless it has been given to you from above.” Jesus knew who had true authority over his life.

And we are reminded who has ultimate authority over our lives.

Rosa Parks, to the bus driver, who said, “I can have you arrested and thrown in jail”: “You may do that.” In other words, you have no real power or control over me. You can throw me in jail, take away my possessions, or even take my life, but I belong to Jesus; he is in charge of my life and I’m going to do what is right. So, do what you will.

Friends, take heart. Have courage. Jesus the Christ is with you. In light of all this hear these words from the apostle Paul from Romans 8:31-f

If God is for us, who is against us?... ³⁵Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? ³⁶As it is written, ‘For your sake we are being killed all day long; we are accounted as sheep to be slaughtered.’

³⁷No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who

loved us. ³⁸For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, ³⁹nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.