“A Vision of Christ” September 6, 2020

Daniel 7:11-14; Revelation 1:9-20 Series: Revealing the Revelation

Daniel 7:11-14, *New Revised Standard Version*

11 I watched then because of the noise of the arrogant words that the horn was speaking. And as I watched, the beast was put to death, and its body destroyed and given over to be burned with fire. 12 As for the rest of the beasts, their dominion was taken away, but their lives were prolonged for a season and a time. 13 As I watched in the night visions,

I saw one like a human being coming with the clouds of heaven.
And he came to the Ancient One and was presented before him.
14 To him was given dominion and glory and kingship,
that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him.
His dominion is an everlasting dominion that shall not pass away,
and his kingship is one that shall never be destroyed.

**(Series slide)** Well, it’s a new month, and we’re starting a new sermon series this morning on the Book of Revelation. Over the past few months, a few of you have specifically requested a series on this amazing and often confusing book. And, considering the escalating planetary disasters and violence driven by political and racial tension and our ongoing COVID pandemic, it’s no surprise that some of you are wondering if we’re seeing the fulfillment of end-times predictions coming to life.

Our primary book for the series, of course, is the last book of the Bible’s New Testament, called the Revelation to John. **Our companion book** is the one we’ll be reading for our discipleship study on Tuesdays. It’s called *Life Lessons from Revelation* by pastor and author Max Lucado.

In the Introduction to that book on the Revelation, Pastor Lucado shares a good story that helps set the context for our series. He writes:

**[PHOTO] An ancient legend** tells of a general whose army was afraid to fight. The soldiers were frightened. The enemy was too strong. Their fortress was too high and weapons too mighty. The general, however, was not afraid. He knew his men could win. But, how could he convince them?

The general had an idea. He told his soldiers that he possessed a magical coin. A prophetic coin. A coin which would foretell the outcome of the battle. On one side was an eagle and on the other a bear. He would toss the coin. If it landed eagle-side up, they would win. If it landed with the bear up, they would lose.

The army was silent as the coin flipped in the air. Soldiers circled as it fell to the ground. They held their breath as they looked and shouted **when they saw the eagle.** Their army would win.

Bolstered by the assurance of victory, the men marched against the enemy fortress and won. It was only after the victory that the general showed the men the coin. The two sides were identical. There never was a bear, only an eagle on both the front and the back.

While the general in the story had to trick his army to give them their sense of assurance, God doesn’t need to trick us that way. **By giving us the Bible**, God has handed us the coin to show us that our victory with Him is assured. If we flip to the front side of the Bible, the victory of God’s army is assured by the message of Genesis, where we see our eternal God’s power over chaos in creation. If we flip to the back side of the Bible, the victory of God’s army is assured by the message of the Revelation, where God tells us of His triumph over sin and evil for the rest of eternity. And, God’s victory is assured by every part in between, pointing to Christ in whose sacrifice that victory is won. The message of the Bible is not a magical illusion like the general’s coin. Instead, it is our most powerful and prophetic source of God’s truth. And the bottom line of God’s truth in the Revelation is that God wins. That’s good news for us to remember in our time! Amen?

So, this morning, we’re going to start by **looking at Revelation 1**, verses 9-20. This message was written for the believers in Christ by a man named John, who was a follower of Jesus. Scholars much smarter than me continue to disagree whether or not this is the same John who wrote the Gospel of John and the New Testament epistles of 1, 2 & 3 John. Either way, in this morning’s passage, John is going to describe where he was and what he heard and saw in a vision of Christ given to him by an angel of the Lord. Let’s go to God’s word together. Revelation 1, starting at verse 9:

**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. 10 I was in the spirit on the Lord’s day, and I heard behind me a loud voice like a trumpet 11 saying, “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.”** Let’s pause there for a few reflections.

Working backward through this section, it’s valuable to understand that **the seven churches mentioned in verse 11 were meant in part to represent the worldwide body of Christ in John’s day.** Though only seven congregations are specifically mentioned, any congregation could read this message and apply God’s message to their situation.

As you probably know, the Revelation is filled with symbols, and the number **seven is used symbolically a lot throughout the book**. As pastor and professor Stephen Witmer reminds us, seven is a number in the Bible that represents completeness. For that reason, then, scholars suggest that God revealed things in groups of seven that so that people who read the Revelation would see God’s perfect design in it and know that it’s truths could be applied to all believers in all times and places.

In that way, we could justifiably read verse 11 as if the Lord said to John, **“Write in a book what you see and send it to the seven churches, to** East Woods, to First Vancouver, to Columbia, to Crossroads, to Hillsong Australia, and so on...” So, even though the context of the Revelation is rooted in 1st Century Asia Minor, the truths of the Revelation are just as much for the *here and now* as they were for the *there and then*.

I also think it’s important for us to **note the central role played by angels as messengers** in the Revelation. Beginning in verse 1 of Revelation, John makes it clear that there was quite a relay that took place in order for us to read the words we’re reading. John declares that the visions originated with God. God gave them to Jesus. Jesus sent his angel to give them to John. And John wrote them down to give them to the churches, who then shared them with other congregations. At times, it gets a little tricky trying to figure out exactly which source is speaking as we work our way through the book, but what’s clear is that angels are really important in the transmission.

Speaking personally, I don’t think about angels as often as I should. They come up at Christmastime or if I’m reading Frank Peretti or talking with someone who collects Precious Moments figurines. But that’s about it. But, as John wrote, it was the angel of Jesus who was primarily responsible for what John saw. And, as we’ll see, the message given to each of the seven churches was addressed to the angel of that congregation.

So, if each of us has an angel – like Jesus did – and if East Woods has an angel for our congregation – like the seven churches did – I think we should be **praying for a strong relationship and for healthy communication with our angels**. Though we live in an age of Do-It-Yourself, direct-order efficiency, we better not write off the importance of these middle-men as messengers, assuming God is still choosing to employ His angels.

Another way to apply this first part of the Revelation to your faith journey is by **trusting God to use restrictions purposefully in your life.** We are in the seventh month of COVID restrictions in our world. Many of us have felt the strain of prolonged isolation and limitations of certain freedoms we counted on before this virus took us captive. I hope you are finding some new freedoms and opportunities under our current circumstances, but I know this has been really hard for a lot of us. Some of you have wrestled with fear and loss and uncertainty and loneliness in ways you never have before. I grieve with you, and I know that God grieves with us, too.

My encouragement to you this morning is to be inspired by what God did through John in the midst of John’s season of restriction. As we learned from John in verses 9 and 10 of the Revelation, God provided this remarkable message to him while he was a prisoner on the island of Patmos. **Patmos was like the Alcatraz of the 1st Century** Roman Empire, and John told us he’d been sent to Patmos as a form of persecution because of his faithfulness in sharing the gospel, the testimony of Jesus. To connect with his readers, he described his experience as sharing in patient endurance with them. Has any of you ever had to patiently endure something before? Many of us feel like we’re in a season of patient endurance right now, with patience as a daily variable.

But, please don’t lose heart. God used those circumstances in John’s life for a remarkable and unique purpose. I believe John may have been like a Martha apostle or evangelist before he was sent to Patmos. He may have been constantly busy or hurrying or hustling all the time to get the good news of Jesus out to the Roman world. **But, on Patmos, he had to become more of a Mary.** Just like the Mary in the gospels who sat at Jesus feet while her sister Martha hustled with busy work for the Lord, John suddenly had no choice but to sit longer, listen harder, pray more fervently, and trust more patiently. And, in his season of restriction, John may actually have been more open to receiving and writing down God’s message for the worldwide church.

Christians in that time were struggling under persecution. The Roman Emperor Domitian was not a supporter of Jesus or the church. The idolatrous emperor cult of the day was a like a sin pandemic for the empire, and God’s people needed just the word of encouragement and direction that the Revelation provided.

Brothers and sisters, this may be a season of slowing down under restriction for you. And, I want to encourage you to use this season as a way of **remaining open to what God may be communicating to you and asking you to communicate to others.** Even in his captivity, John remained faithful. On the Lord’s day, he was in the spirit, having set time aside for worship and for connection with the spirit of God. Since you’re here already, this is preaching to the choir a bit, I know. So, thank you again for remaining faithful in your worship under these restrictive circumstances. The Spirit of God can reach you anywhere, anytime; but I really respect that each of you has continued to faithfully set weekly time aside on our version of the Lord’s Day so that you can worship God and remain open to what the Spirit of the Lord is saying to you and to us.

If God provides you messages that may be of benefit to the world or to the church in this time, I hope you will allow God to lead you in writing those messages down and sharing them, as God directs you. You never know how your message may serve as an encouragement or a lifeline of hope for someone, just as the revelation John recorded has continued to be for us. We are always under the charge of the Great Commission, to go and make disciples of the nations and to teach them what Jesus has taught us. So, perhaps COVID restrictions will bless you by keeping you from getting too busy with other projects or too distracted by other priorities. Maybe this is meant to be the most fruitful and productive season of your gospel journey, just as John’s season of captivity was for him.

Let’s get back to the text and see where it goes from here. We left off at the end of verse 11, so let’s pick back up at verse 12. And as we do, listen for how many times John uses the word ‘like’ as he wrestles to find the right language to describe what God revealed to him. Verse 12:

**12 Then I turned to see whose voice it was that spoke to me, and on turning I saw seven golden lampstands, 13 and 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.**

**14 His head and his hair were white as white wool, white as snow; his eyes were *like* a flame of fire, 15 his feet were *like* burnished bronze, refined as in a furnace, and his voice was *like* the sound of many waters. 16 In 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.**

Again, let’s pause for a moment to look at this part of the passage. How many ‘likes’ did you catch? I counted like five ‘likes’ in four verses, which sets the tone for the pattern of poetic, descriptive language we’re going to see in the Revelation.

On that note, Max Lucado wrote this: **“What John wrote is not *what* he saw. What he wrote is *like* what he saw. But what he saw was so otherworldly that he had no words to describe it.... The human tongue is inadequate to describe Christ.”**

If you’ve ever had a hard time explaining your faith or a dream you’ve had, you’ll relate to what John was trying to do in writing the Revelation. This is part of what’s so wonderful about reading this amazing book, and it’s also part of the reason there are so many different interpretations of its message. Revelation is packed with symbols and language that imperfectly describe our indescribable God and that would have made much more sense to John’s readers in the 1st Century than they do to us now.

Imagine showing **a cartoon of a donkey and an elephant** arguing with each other to a group of people 2,000 years ago. It’s meaning would have been lost on them, but we understand today that those symbols aren’t to be taken literally. They portray a bigger political context. And, in the Revelation, we see God using that tool of symbolic language to bring the truth about Jesus to His people in that ancient context.

As an example of that, think back for a moment to the first scripture reading Susan read for us from the Prophet Daniel this morning. In Daniel 7, we heard that **God gave Daniel a vision of the messiah** almost identical to the vision given to John. In sharing the vision God gave him, Daniel described one *like* a Son of Man or *like* a human being whom God gave everlasting dominion and glory and kingship so that every nation should serve him.

Scholars call these Old Testament visions of Jesus ‘Christophanies’. They are visions of Christ appearing in non-physical form. We see a **Christophany in the** mysterious person who wrestled with Jacob in Genesis 32. We see **another in Joshua 5**, when a mysterious man appeared to Joshua, claims to be the Commander of the Army of the Lord, and receives Joshua’s worship. **In Daniel 3, we hear about a 4th man** in the furnace with Shadrach, Meshach and Abednigo, and his appearance is described as ‘like the Son of God’. Several of Isaiah’s chapters contain descriptions of the pre-incarnate Christ, the one who will suffer on our behalf. And, though each vision and Christophany is incomplete, when we put them together, we begin to see God painting a powerful and encouraging portrait of Christ.

This is one of the things that’s so wonderful about the God we serve. God has known throughout history how to speak to people across thousands of years so that we will see His connected story and be encouraged by the message of His salvation. In the 1st Century, John’s Revelation went out to Jewish Christians who would have recognized its descriptions of the messiah from the descriptions provided by the Hebrew prophets. And, in their seasons of persecution for Jesus, they would have been reminded that God was still among them, still speaking to His people, and still providing His assurance of victory to those who remain faithful in Christ.

**God is still speaking to us through these relatable descriptions of Christ**. When we read in the Revelation that Christ’s eyes were like flames of fire, we think of wildfires in California, and we’re reminded that our Savior sees all our struggles. Though our earthly fires will eventually be extinguished, God’s purifying and consuming love will never fade. As we read about the burnished bronze feet of Christ, we think of the strong foundation of the gospel and the beautiful feet of missionaries and evangelists who are, even now, taking that good news to the nations. The description of his voice like many waters makes me think of those who are digging water wells to provide safe water for needy people and those who are offering compassionate care to hurricane victims who have seen waters fall and rise against them. The words of our Savior are still the two-edged sword that pierces sin, that cuts through to our hearts, that divides faithful from rebel, and that transforms us from the inside out. This is our God.

And, I pray that these descriptions of him will encourage you in this time.

Let’s finish this morning’s passage starting at verse 17. John continues:

**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, 18 and the living one. I was dead, and see, I am alive forever and ever; and I have the keys of Death and of Hades. 19 Now write what you have seen, what is, and what is to take place after this. 20 As 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.**

Here, in these verses, the angel of the Lord confirms that some of what John is seeing is symbolic. The idea that the church is represented by lampstands should remind us of Jesus’ description of how God’s people are supposed to see ourselves. As Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount**, 14“You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid. 15No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. 16In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.” (Matt. 5:14-16)**

Brothers and sisters, we are the light of the world and should not hide our testimony about Jesus, no matter how unpopular or potentially challenging or confusing it may be. Just because we don’t have the perfect words to describe Jesus or our faith, we are still called to let our light shine before others so that God will be glorified.

The promise of Jesus in this passage and so many others is that we don’t need to be afraid – afraid of sharing our faith or afraid of what the future holds for God’s world. The resurrected Christ, who is the Head of the Church, still stands with and among the people who make up his body. Even in times when we feel persecuted or abandoned, the truth is that he is still in our midst in all his sovereignty and power and perfection.

**On Lord’s Supper Sundays**, we gather around his table to symbolize and remember that he is in our midst. Here at the table, God reminds us of his love and sacrifice for us and the grace that won the eternal and ultimate victory over sin. And here, we are gathered together again in the spirit and with saints in all times and places to receive God’s encouragement and grace. So, let’s pray together as we prepare to receive and remember.