

Revealing Revelation: Easter Worship Series

“Revealing Revelation”

Sermon Text: Revelation 1:4-8

FUMC, Arlington, TX 76011

3 April 2016

Hear the day’s lesson:

4 John 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, 5 and 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, 6 and made us to be a kingdom, priests serving his God and Father, to him be glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen.

7 Look! 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 (Revelation 1:4).

If we were to begin to reveal Revelation, then we might be prudent to ask: “What About the End?” When we think about Saint John the Divine and his book The Apocalypse we naturally turn to issues of the end. After all, for most of us the end is frequently a key element of an experience. The conclusion of a movie or television drama is likely the most important aspect of the event. In fact, the end of films, plays, or books are as important for us in everyday life as the end of a semester is for a student—or the end of an operation for a patient.

Revelation provides our texts for the Sundays in the season of Easter. Many mainline/old-line Christians consider Revelation a book to avoid at all costs. Other Christians, in opposition, metaphorically embrace Revelation to the near exclusion of the other sixty-five books. Yet to avoid extremism I suggest that this last book of the Bible is a type of summing up of the whole Bible. For although it is unusual that Revelation does not directly quote any other text of the Bible in its 404 verses, it just as remarkably echoes or alludes to 278 other scripture texts.

Revelation is an apocalypse. Apocalypse means “unveiling” or “disclosing” and scholars often use the description as a literary category or genre as they do “parable” or “psalm.”

Revelation offers a vision which on one level foretells the future, but more honestly it presents an

understanding of the past and the present. Revelation as apocalyptic literature tells of the struggle between good and evil, and Christ's ultimate victory. John writes in symbolic language, urging Christians to keep faith in times of persecution.

A first point this text makes reveals three messianic titles for Jesus. Jesus is the "faithful witness," which means Jesus is the one who by giving up his life and becoming a martyr (Greek word meaning "witness") both announced and brought to bear the eternal reign of God. Without this eternal reign of God we would easily have reason to lose hope.

Jesus is also "the firstborn from the dead," which means Jesus is God's chosen one who by his resurrection and ascension establishes God's new order of righteousness. A God who defeats sin and death, as Paul puts it, is a God worthy of our attention.

Third of all, Jesus final messianic title in this triad of designations is "the ruler of the kings of the earth." This claim for Jesus is difficult for us modern American-types to grasp. On the one hand, we are too democratic to believe in monarchy anyway. On the other hand, we wonder how can Jesus rule anything in 2016 when political order seems to be evaporating right before our very eyes. How can Jesus rule when countries with many Christians engage in ruthless political behavior? How does Jesus rule when no political power on earth is capable of stopping refugees or exiles yearning for freedom? These messianic titles for Jesus (the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth) help us not only understand Jesus. These titles also help us understand how God intends Jesus to function as messiah.

A key second point is that the beginning of Revelation tells us what the rest of the book details: God's rule has been and will be realized in Jesus Christ. After this note, the passage shifts rapidly into a doxology: "To him that loved us and freed us from our sins by his blood and made us a kingdom of priests be glory and dominion forever." For those who take God's rule seriously a fresh world of hope emerges. To those who have by their baptisms experienced this new order of forgiveness, the apt response to this "faithful witness" is a hymn of praise, the first of many in

Revelation.

Some knowledgeable people suggest that the book of Revelation is a first century worship book—something like our hymnal. Others say the book is about the just desserts of evil people. Some pundits say Revelation is a roadmap to the future. Some authorities say Revelation outlines for believers what comes next for those who are true disciples. Yet I want to add one more voice and this is our third point. More than anything this book of Revelation is a book of power—an ultimate kind of power.

There is a kind of power in this book that is different from the power of Egypt, Assyria, Babylon, Greece, or finally Rome. It is a power that God gives Christ's messenger John and to John's churches when they read or hear his letter testifying to God's glory. These churches are struggling, tempted, and experience an extremely hostile environment.

Not only that but John's message to the churches—and to us—is that suffering for the sake of the gospel should not come as a surprise. The entire New Testament is a steady witness to the conflict of Christians with all other idols that claim our loyalty. I would lie if I told you I was not amused when one of our better church members (a person that I hold in high esteem) was “all worked up” because “they” are taking our churches away from us! What are we going to do about it? I said nothing—as hard as that is to believe. But I do think no one has to take the church away from us because we are all too willing to simply give the church away. Each time we decide for something other than helping build up the church and the believers in it, then we give a little piece of it away. People have asked me “do you think our children will have faith?” Today my question resembles this one: “Will our faith have children?”

Many folks are enamored with Revelation. Yet an irony remains. Revelation is speech by and for the oppressed, those suffering under the sword of Rome, not for a successful, affluent, or powerful church. Perhaps soon we will be lucky enough to find our faith as an oppressed minority. There in our weakness is the real power of faith.

Perhaps you remember the small portion of 2 Corinthians where Paul is candid about his afflictions, writing, “. . . but he [the Lord] said to me, ‘My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness.’ So, I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me. Therefore I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities for the sake of Christ; for whenever I am weak, then I am strong” (2 Corinthians 12:9-10). So for the next several weeks we will explore what this odd and marvelous last book of the Christian cannon has to say to us.

“What About the End?” was our original question. What this means on the second Sunday of Easter in our Christian year is this: Despite all evidence to the contrary God rules and overrules God’s creation. We are not in charge and ultimately although we feel surrounded by evil and tragedy, eventually God will draw all things together and we will be God’s people for eternity. Human beings can exist in any circumstance as long as they recognize that within that circumstance there exists hope. God is our hope.