

Revelation 22:1-9 – “Where’s the Hope?”

So last week, we talked about judgment and how judgment has more to do with setting things right than punishment. “Oh yeah? Have you read the book of Revelation?” Yes. Yes I have. “Well what do you have to say about Revelation?” Well, I know that it almost didn’t make it into the New Testament and that Christians argued about whether it should be included in the Bible all the way up to 1546. I know that Martin Luther didn’t think it fit in with the rest of the New Testament. He was afraid that people might get lost obsessing over how to interpret it and end up wasting a lot of time and energy better spent on actually doing the ministry Jesus called us to do. But in the end, it was included because it provided a great example of apocalyptic literature in the early church. I suppose the council that voted to include Revelation in the canon thought, “Clearly this is an example of the early Christians’ response to Roman persecution. Nobody’s going to think it’s some kind of coded, secret history of the future that will cause multiple church splits. It’ll be okay.”

So because this book *is* in the New Testament, we’ve got to visit it now and then. We can’t ignore it. Now we’ve got to deal with questions like, “Did God create a closed and pre-determined universe, or a free and participatory one? Is the future a movie that’s already been filmed, edited, and distributed and we’re just watching it play? Or is the future open so that we can invent, improvise, and help create the outcome as God’s coworkers instead of just resigning ourselves to the world’s inevitable destruction?”

Let’s make a deal. Even if you firmly believe that Revelation is a secret history of the future, would you take 20 minutes this morning to walk with me and consider the potential *hope* that exists if you look at the book from another perspective? Okay. Then let’s let that “secret history of the future” interpretation be “Left Behind” for now.

So, let's say this book is about the trials of the church under either Emperor Nero in the AD 60s or Emperor Domitian in the AD 90s. In either case, life was always hard for poor people in the Roman Empire. Most of Jesus' followers were poor, so you can imagine how tough life must have been for them to live under the reign of someone as vicious, paranoid, and mentally unstable as Nero or Domitian. Life got even harder when emperors demanded to be worshipped as gods, which the Jews and early followers of Jesus rejected. You can imagine the early Christians thinking, "Jesus has been gone for two decades now. The world doesn't seem to be getting any better. If anything, it's getting worse. Maybe Jesus was wrong. Maybe it's time for us to forget about this 'turn the other cheek and love your enemies' nonsense. Maybe we need to take matters into our own hands and strap on a sword to fight for our future. Or maybe we should just eat, drink and be merry because tomorrow we might all be dead."

So when the book of Revelation started circulating, it addressed the crisis at hand. Even if this ruler of the known world - this antithesis of everything Christ was - even if he is as crazy as he seems, it's not the end of the world. Even if wars rage, it's not the end of the world. Even if peace-loving disciples face martyrdom, it's not the end of the world. Even if the world as we know it comes to an end, that ending is nothing more than a new beginning. Whatever happens, God will be faithful and the way of Christ ... the way of love and compassion will win in the end. See? Revelation is the easiest book in the Bible to interpret. What is Revelation about? Simple. God wins. End of story. End of sermon. Let's go eat cookies.

But we humans like to complicate things. We turned 10 commandments into 615 tertiary laws. We let our obsessive observance of ritual get in the way of doing justice, loving mercy, and walking humbly with God. So we took this book that simply says, "God wins" and have turned it into a big puzzle that we obsess over because we think there's some secret, hidden code that we need to unlock so that we can avoid hell. But what about all the Jesus work we're commissioned to do? What

about feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, giving sight to the blind, going into all the world delivering good news, teaching and baptizing? Oh no! We don't have time for that because we've got to figure out the significance of the number "666" and who "the Beast" and the "Anti-Christ" are! But oh my word, what a temptation it is for leaders in the church to have their members focus on those kind of things. You gotta keep your members on their toes! You've got to keep 'em scared! Because if you keep them scared, you can get them to do all sorts of things to advance your agenda or line your pockets or buy your books! So you can understand why some preachers are so quick to denounce biblical scholarship -- because when you use biblical scholarship, you realize that the tactics you've used in the past to gain power over your people don't have much credibility anymore.

Here's what we know when we take biblical scholarship seriously – Apocalyptic literature was the literature of the oppressed. Literature of the oppressed arises among people living under dictatorships who have no freedom of speech. If they dare to criticize their dictator, they'll be squashed out of existence. And before they get squashed, they may be tortured so their oppressors can get the names of any others they should go after. No wonder people learn to be silent under a dictator! But being silent in the presence of injustice feels like cooperating with it.

So let's look at Revelation as a book of the oppressed. Let's look at it as a way in which the early disciples found a way to give voice to the truth when freedom of speech didn't exist. Instead of saying, "The Emperor is a fake and his violent regime has to go," which would get them arrested and killed, let's tell a story about a monster who comes up out of the sea and is defeated. Instead of saying the Roman Empire is doomed, let's talk about a past empire – Babylon – and how it collapsed in failure. Instead of saying, "The religious establishment is corrupt," tell a story about how a sleazy prostitute worked with Babylon to deceive and seduce the rulers. Think of Revelation as their *Hunger Games* or *Brave New World* or *Fahrenheit 451*. Sci-fi with a message.

If we keep reading Revelation like a roadmap to a predetermined future, we might interpret people being thrown into a lake of fire as the work of a sadistic God who is into torturing people for eternity. And that might lead to us to think, “Well then that must be okay if we do it too!” If we look at Revelation 21, which makes it seem that the Earth will be destroyed, we might think, “Hey, why worry about taking care of our planet when it’s just going to be destroyed anyway? Let’s just burn through our resources like there’s no tomorrow!” There is a high cost to reading Revelation outside of its historical and literary context. This is why it’s important to have good Bible scholars in our churches!

Okay, two more examples, and I’ll shut up, otherwise I could go on for hours about this book. Okay, so what about this vision of Jesus who rides in on a white horse. His robes are stained with blood and he has a sword! That kind of crushes the image of Jesus riding into Jerusalem on a donkey and being “Mr. Peace and Love,” doesn’t it? He may have went out with a whimper, but he’s comin’ back, and boy-howdy is he gonna be pissed!” See, this doesn’t even seem like the Jesus of the gospels does it? That is until you consider the *symbolism*. And remember, apocalyptic literature is all about symbolism. When the author of Revelation describes Jesus, notice that the sword is in his mouth, not in his hand. Remember a few weeks ago when we looked at Paul’s letter to the Ephesians where he encouraged Jesus’ followers to put on the armor of God? Anyone remember what “the sword of the spirit” was? The word of God. Instead of predicting the return of a killer Messiah in the future, Revelation recalls how Jesus was the one who spoke the Word of God. The sword of the spirit. Coming out of his mouth. Not literally. Can you imagine how silly that would look? But as a symbol, it makes sense. Oh yeah? Well how about when it says Jesus will be wearing blood-stained robes!?! Okay, but why were his robes blood-stained *before* the battle even *begins*? Maybe the blood on his robes isn’t the blood of his enemies, but his own ... shed for us in self-giving love. In that light, Revelation reinforces, rather than overturns, the picture of Jesus we see in the gospels.

Here's my favorite one in Revelation. It's the inspiration for the tattoo I have on my right shoulder. In the passage that Georgeanne read, there's this beautiful image that's just as relevant today as it was back in the first century. It's not a scene where we're being evacuated from Earth *into heaven* as a lot of folks assume. It pictures the new Jerusalem descending from heaven *to Earth*. The new city doesn't need a temple because God's presence is felt everywhere. It doesn't need a sun because the light of Christ illuminates the city from within. The gates are never shut. They welcome people from all around the world to receive the treasure it offers and so that people can bring the treasures they offer. And from the center of the city ... from the very throne of God, a river flows. And along that river's banks is a Tree of Life. "Tree of life? Where have I heard that before?" The book of Genesis, chapter two ... in the second creation story. And in the same way that God created the heavens and the earth, God's proclamation in Revelation is, "Behold, I am making all things new."

Revelation isn't about a violent end to history. It's about a new beginning. It's not about escaping Earth to go to heaven. It's about God descending from the heavens to dwell among us. This was a message of hope for the early church. Being faithful didn't mean you waited around passively in a future that's already been determined. Faithfulness is about participating with God in God's unfolding story. God isn't a distant, terrifying monster waiting for vengeance at the end of the universe. God is descending among us here and now, making the tree of life available for us all. And that story continues today. Whatever chaos is breaking out, whatever madman is in power, whatever danger threatens us, the river of life is flowing *now*. The tree of life is bearing fruit *now*. True aliveness is available *now*. That's why Revelation ends with the sound of a single word echoing through the universe. That word isn't "Wait" or "Not yet" or "Someday." It's a word of invitation, welcome, reception, hospitality and possibility. That word is "Come." And we as Christ's followers echo it back. Together with God, we say it: "Come, Lord Jesus, come." The grace of the Lord be with you and all the saints.