

November 24th, 2024

Revelation 1:4-8 “The King of Love”

Short passage there, Pastor Jesse. Indeed it is. Gary, Dave and Lori, who for some reason always seem to get stuck with the super-long, hard-to-pronounce, hard-to-digest passages are saying, “Why does Mary, who knows how to pronounce these names and places get the easy-to-read, easy-to-understand four verse passage?” Luck of the draw I guess. But that Psalm was a humdinger wasn’t it? Let’s not fool ourselves into thinking that this passage from Revelation is all that easy-to-digest. Especially since we’ve been talking about the upside-down reign of God for the last two months. This is the last passage in the series. This is the culmination of six weeks of Mark’s gospel and one week from the Book of Hebrews. We’re ending this series on what the church recognizes as Reign of Christ Sunday, or for some Christ the King Sunday. Reign of Christ Sunday always happens the Sunday before Advent begins which means next week when we gather for worship, the sanctuary will be decorated for the season. That means this is the last Sunday of the church year. Next week we get to start all over again as we prepare to celebrate and welcome the Christ Child. Reign of Christ Sunday was designed to end the church year on a high note. God’s kingdom is here in our midst. God says, “I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end.” What a great way to end the church year. “Christ is coming with the clouds. Every eye will see him. Even those who wounded him and killed him. On his account, all the tribes of the earth will wail.” So shall it be.

Except, this is at the *beginning* of the Book of Revelation. Starting in chapter two and going for another 19 chapters, there’s a lot of calamity which is a politely understated word to describe all the horrific things that happen between chapter 2 – 21. I will remind you that the Book of Revelation is not some portal used to predict the future. It’s a book about the early church learning to live under the persecution of the Roman Empire. You might say, “Yes, but have you been watching the news for the last ... I don’t know ... two decades? There are some shocking similarities here.” Yes, there are. But you can go back centuries before and after Revelation was written and see the same story being played out over and over. Or at least the same patterns. Same plot, different cast. History has a way of repeating itself. We see multiple examples of God’s people living under the pressure of despotic

rulers who seek to destroy those who dare to say that God is the only true ruler. Revelation tells the story of rulers and influencers who have been deceived by the forces of evil and in turn seek to deceive even the religious leaders into turning away from God's ways. The kings of the world cannot bear hearing their subjects say that anyone else's rule supersedes theirs. The word "Lord and Savior" was the title that the Roman Caesars laid claim to. When Christ's followers started saying, "Jesus is Lord and Savior," the Caesars did everything in their power to silence them. That's what we have here in the Book of Revelation. Some scholars say the Caesar in this book is Vespasian, and others say it's Nero. It really doesn't matter though. The point is that the writer was trying to encourage the church to live in both the expectation and the responsibility of their current situation. He also wanted them to live in the hope of the establishment of God's reign through Christ, and to live in the present reality of seeking and doing the work of Christ *in their day and time*. Yes, they are encouraged to live with their eyes fixed on the future, but there's also the expectation of having their hands active in the present.

When the church only thinks of Revelation as a book of future predictions, we get lazy. Especially when it comes to dealing with current issues that seem too overwhelming to bear. "Oh, we don't need to worry about being good stewards of our natural resources because Jesus is going to come and take us all away." Or worse yet, "Oh, we don't have to worry about all the violence, chaos, injustices and wars in the world today because Jesus is going to come back and beam us up and we won't have to deal with it." Do you see the appeal in that kind of thinking? If we don't have to worry about any of this, what's the motivation for the church to try to make anything better? If we believe that global poverty, climate change, diseases and other preventable things are just part of the end game of human history, then why make an effort to fight it?

Now, I don't know whether this is just my imagination, but in my lifetime, which is "only" 58 years, I can remember when the church had high standards when it comes to addressing and even solving the problems of the world. I remember a time when the moral character of our leaders mattered. I remember a time when the church made efforts to conserve and take care of the land and its people. Since the birth of the church in the first century,

Christian communities have been establishing hospitals and places of higher education that advocate for science and technology. Really? Yes! Believe it or not it was a Jesuit priest who proposed the Big Bang theory. In fact, quite a few discoveries in astronomy and physics came from priests. We would not have analytical geometry were it not for the church supporting scientific research in the universities that they established! Throughout history, we've been on the front lines of social change like advocating for abolishing slavery and standing up for civil rights for all. Believers like Dietrich Bonhoeffer were martyred for speaking out against Nazi Germany.

“What history books have you been reading pastor, because there have been plenty of times throughout history where the church *wasn't* doing any of these things! In fact, some were pro-slavery, pro-segregation, pro-genocide, anti-women's rights, anti-Muslim ... you get the idea.” This is true. But that's when saints who were serious about following Jesus took a stand to “say what Jesus said and do what Jesus did.” They sang, “Rise up, O saints of God! From vain ambitions turn; Christ rose triumphant that your hearts with nobler zeal might burn. Speak out, O saints of God! Despair engulfs earth's frame; as heirs of God's baptismal grace, the word of *hope* proclaim.” Hope! Imagine that. What's the opposite of hope? Despair. When we despair, we often give up. It takes effort to have faith and proclaim hope. When we are in despair we often let our standards down. We just want it all to be over, so heck ... why not shovel some coal on the fire and bring this train ride to an end. Jesus is coming soon? Not soon enough for us. Let's just sit back and be spectators and watch the world burn. Maybe Jesus will come beam us up sooner.

The problem is that God has not called the church to be spectators of global chaos. Instead, we are called to be agents of love, healing, hope, and justice over and against the forces of evil and destruction. The community to which Revelation was written was a community under intense persecution by the Roman Empire. There were people who died as a result of their profession of faith in Christ. They had to meet in seclusion. They gathered in fear. They lived out their commitment as disciples of Christ under the threat of death. This Book of Revelation is filled with veiled language acknowledging the terror of the empire. They called out Caesar, the Roman military, the government establishment, and the power-hungry religious leaders who

blessed it with colorful, dream-like, terrifying language and images. In contrast to this vivid imagery, a simple theme runs throughout the book - a theme that is applicable to the Christian Church in all times and places – Don't give up. Hope is coming. Have patience. Endure suffering. In the end, God wins. Always.

When read with this in mind, the book of Revelation becomes less a book about the “end of times” and more a word of comfort for disciples in all times. In a time when the forces of violence, injustice, and oppression assault us from all sides ... in a time when we are tempted to be silent of our convictions of peace, love, and forgiveness, and when prophetic words of justice and change become muffled and muted, the Book of Revelation calls the church to persevere as witnesses to God's gift of love through Christ.

This book contains a challenge for today's church and today's Christians: Do we identify more with the persecuted church or are we more like the Roman persecutors? Are we in a position of privilege, prestige, and self-made power, or are we in the position of self-sacrificial and self-giving love? On this day, the feast of Christ the King, let us not choose the path of least resistance. Let us instead choose the path of the early church. Let us stand up for the attitude, actions and values of God's reign and be the resisters. *God's kingdom come, God's will be done on earth as it is in heaven.*