

Revelation 1:1-3

Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost (Series B, Proper 19)

Lessons for the Day: Isaiah 50:4-10; James 3:1-12; Mark 9:14-29

Comfort From Christ

September 16, 2018

“The revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show to his servants the things that must soon take place. He made it known by sending his angel to his servant John, who bore witness to the word of God and to the testimony of Jesus Christ, even to all that he saw. Blessed is the one who reads aloud the words of this prophecy, and blessed are those who hear, and who keep what is written in it, for the time is near.”

Dear Friends in Christ, and fellow redeemed:

Some time around 95 or 96 AD, on a rocky, desolate, six-by-ten mile island in the Aegean, on a Sunday—the Lord’s Day (Rev. 1:10)—a miraculous thing happened. St. John, who through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit wrote the beautiful Gospel that bears his name, tells us: *“I, John, your brother and partner in the tribulation and the kingdom and the patient endurance that are in Jesus, was on the island called Patmos on account of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus.”* (Revelation 1:9, ESV) That day he may have been walking alongside the ocean, or lying in a crude hut that served as his home, when the majestic voice of God spoke from heaven, bringing a message of cheer to believers who, like John, had been struggling with the harsh burden of persecution from the Roman Emperor Domitian. The aged disciple looked heavenward to see the clouds part and God revealing an amazing vision of His plan for the Church throughout the ages.

This last book of the Bible is a wonderful testimony to the glory of Christ, who has defeated the devil. It comforts us with the assurance of all that Jesus has prepared for His people in the glory of His Kingdom. It declares, in no uncertain terms, that the powers of sin and darkness that surround us, and all that brings pain to us, will be swallowed up by the victory we have in Christ. John was given this revelation of Jesus Christ *to show to his servants the things that must soon take place*—and not all of it is pleasant. Yet this prophecy is our guarantee of what Paul also said: *“For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor 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.”* (Romans 8:38–39, ESV)

It is unfortunate that through the years Revelation has come to be seen as a scary book, filled with confusing and even terrifying things. We read about the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse. There is the battle of Armageddon, when all the powers of darkness in the world, along with all the supernatural powers of darkness do battle with the saints and with Christ. Who hasn’t heard of the mark of the beast? Here, in this prophetic book, the devil is referred to as the great dragon, *“that ancient serpent, who is called the devil and Satan, the deceiver of the whole world.”* (Revelation 12:9, ESV)

As Pastor Ken Klaus points out in a Lutheran Hour Ministries bible study, the revelation given to John wasn’t as scary as the world in which God’s children were living, suffering, and dying. God wants His Revelation to prepare all of us for the suffering we might see and experience, but to make it absolutely clear to us that Jesus already has won the victory and that *“the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us.”* (Romans 8:18, ESV)

This is the 3rd time this summer that I’ve preached on Revelation as part of our series on your requests—and yes, it is a singular, “Revelation”, not a plural “Revelations”. I’m not surprised that there are so many questions about this book. After all, there are a whole host of beliefs, views and interpretations of this book. Many people have been obsessed with this book, looking for secret codes that establish a time line for Christ’s return and the end of the world. That is not why the book was written. There are things in code, if you will, but that code was not so much hidden as simply not understood by those who hadn’t read and believed God’s Word in the rest of Scripture. I say it is like reading the fine print in your insurance policies, or some sort of legal report. If you understand the lingo, if you know the terminology, then it is easy to see what is meant. Otherwise, it can seem like gobbledygook.

We also need to know that this isn’t a special revelation of some deep, secret, hidden and unknown wisdom from God. There is nothing new here that is not clear in the rest of Scripture. If anything, it simply sums up and stresses what has been said again and again in the pages of God’s truth. Yes, it is a special message to inspire God’s people, who are hated and despised in the world. God wanted His children, who were suffering because of the cruelty of the Roman rulers, and because of the prejudice and hatred of the unbelieving people around them, to know He hadn’t forgotten them. He knows what they are facing, and He will vindicate and save His people.

In every generation of the church, people have seen the message of this book come to life in the reality of their lives. There is an ongoing truth to the suffering, the persecution and the struggles of the church in this world. Of course, we know that Jesus told His disciples: ***“Beware of men, for they will deliver you over to courts and flog you in their synagogues, and you will be dragged before governors and kings for my sake, to bear witness before them and the Gentiles. When they deliver you over, do not be anxious how you are to speak or what you are to say, for what you are to say will be given to you in that hour. For it is not you who speak, but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you. Brother will deliver brother over to death, and the father his child, and children will rise against parents and have them put to death, and you will be hated by all for my name’s sake. But the one who endures to the end will be saved. When they persecute you in one town, flee to the next, for truly, I say to you, you will not have gone through all the towns of Israel before the Son of Man comes.”*** (Matthew 10:17–23, ESV) Jesus never said that being His disciples would be easy, but it is always a blessing.

We see the message of Revelation being displayed in our day and age, too. People are dying for their faith. In many parts of the world, Christians are despised and treated with the greatest of cruelty. We don’t see the physical persecution, but we can’t deny that there has been a change in the way the church and its members are viewed. Sometimes, as in the abuse crisis in the Roman church, we have no one to blame but ourselves. But, as I’ve noted before, we are viewed as unthinking, abusive and narrow-minded individuals. We are considered intolerant by people who have no tolerance for the faith we confess. When our Supreme Court can admit they are violating our right to freedom of religion, and yet consider it to be justified, we see the reality of what it means to be a Christian in Canada today. We sometimes worry about the aging of the church, or even the declining number of people who claim to be Christians in our society. It is not uncommon to hear people say that the church is one generation away from extinction. This can all make us feel frightened or hopeless.

But the message that John is given to declare to the church is that the Lord of Hosts continues to be the Lord of the Church. Again and again in this book, we are encouraged to cling to Jesus, who assures us: ***“Fear not, I am the first and the last, and the living one. I died, and behold I am alive forevermore, and I have the keys of Death and Hades.”*** (Revelation 1:17–18, ESV) In this less than perfect world, and in our less than perfect lives, we have the blessing of forgiveness because the Living One died for us on the cross, and lives forevermore to free us from sin and death. In the face of suffering, we look forward in hope to the heaven that is our home through faith in Jesus Christ. Even though the message we have to share is not appreciated by many of our world, we are encouraged to reach out, to speak out and to face whatever may come, for we are serving the risen Christ, who is always with His church.

I looked back at the times I have preached on Revelation in the past. Most of the time, it has been to declare the glory of heaven, because the Bible’s most beautiful pictures of heaven are in Revelation. The pearly gates and the streets of gold—those are images from the revelation given to John. Of course, like so much of Revelation, John sees and describes things that are beyond description. Rather than always trying to decode things, we simply look to the hope we have, as we join with the whole host of heaven in singing, ***“Worthy is the Lamb who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing!”*** (Revelation 5:12, ESV)

Revelation is a fascinating book, but I imagine that after having spent two years studying Revelation in our Sunday morning bible study, most people are ready to set it aside. Yet its message cannot and should not be set aside. It is more and more relevant to our lives all the time. When you read it, the scary stuff can be scary. It is hard to see God’s church suffering. The scenes of judgment can feel overwhelming. They show us where human history is heading because of sin and unbelief. But again and again God reveals here that Christ was born, suffered, died and resurrected to restore the glory of God’s creation. We see the darkness that sin has caused, but we see the greater victory of our God, so that we join with John in declaring: ***“To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood and made us a kingdom, priests to his God and Father, to him be glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen.”*** (Revelation 1:5–6, ESV)

There are a few basic thoughts that you should always remember when reading the book of Revelation. First, don’t read it as a chronology—that first, this will happen, then that, and then something else. The message of repeated in different ways, to make the message clear. It is no different than my trying to say the same thing in different ways, to help people who may be struggling to understand it. Also, remember that this Revelation is given to tell us what will happen, and to give us courage and faith for these days. God has a plan for His creation. He is in control. He knows His people will suffer, but He calls to keep our eyes fixed on Jesus, confident of the victory we have in Him. All we really need to know is this: ***Blessed is the one who reads aloud the words of this prophecy, and blessed are those who hear, and who keep what is written in it, for the time is near.*** Yes, we are blessed through the crucified, risen and victorious Lord, Jesus Christ! Amen.