

Revelation 1:3-20 (NRSV)

³ Blessed is the one who reads aloud the words of the prophecy, and blessed are those who hear and who keep what is written in it; for the time is near.

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.

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.”

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.

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.

Mapleton Feb 1 2009

Today I have decided to venture into what most would consider the strangest, the bizarrest, and the most controversial book of the Bible ... John's Revelation. It is, of course a book fraught with rich and vivid ... and even grotesque imagery. A book which speaks of death and destruction --- the wiping out of great swaths of creation and of humanity. A book which pictures an epic struggle between good and evil fought out on cosmic proportions. A book featuring angels, dragon, horrendous beasts, the whore of Babylon, and frog-like demons. What can such a book tell us ... sitting comfortably if a little chilly in Mapleton, Ontario in 2009?

Well, to try and explain the book of Revelation in the time allotted for a sermon is irrational. So what I propose is that we talk about the opening section of Revelation today ... and the closing section next Sunday. However, that leaves out most of the vivid, cosmic images we associate with Revelation ... so to try and understand that imagery, we will have Revelation as the basis of our Adult Bible Study beginning in March.

The rationale for this is not only a question of time ... but also of focus. It is so easy to lose ourselves in the vivid imagery of this work ... so easy while lost in that rich and bizarre landscape ... to lose focus on what this work was all about.

The book of revelation is essentially an apocalyptic letter. A letter that was sent to all the churches of Asia Minor. A letter that was intended to be read aloud within the context of worship – “Blessed is the one who reads aloud the words of the prophecy, and blessed are those who hear and who keep what is written in it”.

A letter that begins with the same salutation that Paul used in many of his letters ...

Grace to you and peace.

It is a letter – but an apocalyptic letter. The word apocalyptic means that it speaks about the end-times. The time in which God’s divine plan will reach its conclusion. God’s plan began in Genesis – the first book of the bible in the creation. And here it culminates in Revelation – the last book of the Bible – in the recreation of all things new. God’s plan culminates in Christ who is the one who speaks to John. Christ the Word who was there in the beginning. Christ enfleshed as Jesus of Nazareth, Our Risen Christ who will usher in the end. Christ the Alpha and the Omega – the first and the last. Christ who has been there throughout.

So what has prompted this revelation? This concern? Well, as with any letter, a lot depends on who the intended audience is. And let us never forget that just as Paul’s letter to the Corinthians was intended for those early Christians in Corinth ... so too John’s letter was intended for those early Christians in Asia Minor ...

modern day Turkey. It spoke to them in their time ... meant to warn, cajole, reward or encourage a groups of people who found themselves in uncertain times.

For this letter was written just before persecutions of Christians became common.

Up until this time ... just a couple years before the turn of the first century...

Christians had not met with any systematic persecution. As long as they didn't stir up trouble the Roman authorities were content to let them be. This had begun to change about 30 years prior when Nero had cause a hugely destructive fire in Rome and blamed it on the Christians. Following this there were increases in trouble ... but usually it varied from place to place – Governor to Governor. But now a new Emperor was in power – Domitian ... an Emperor who insisted on everyone honouring him as a god. Clearly this was going to cause trouble for Christians.

So what happened? Well some Christians turned away from their faith out of fear – embracing the cult of the Emperor and the other pagan gods worshipped in the Empire. Some Christians lied about their faith – holding one face to the public and another in private. Some Christians hide their faith so that it never became an issue. And some recanted under torture ... or died firm in their faith --- the earliest martyrs.

These Christians, struggling with their reality were the intended audience of the letter. Christians who were being asked to choose between the Emperor of Rome or the One True God of Israel. Christians who were being tempted by many different faiths and practices. Christians who were starting to question --- how can it be that evil has befallen us? Certainly 7 churches are specifically named ... but there were more churches in the area --- these were simply the biggest and most influential. The 7 messages to these churches contain distinct messages with some common elements. There is an acknowledgement that Christ knows them. He commends them for their good work but rebukes them for their failings. He calls them to repent ... warning what may happen if there is no repentance ... but promising heavenly rewards for those who do. Each of the 7 messages is distinct and tailored for its specific church but the letter was to go to ALL the churches --- there are not 7 separate letters but one. One revelation! One letter to all the churches! One central message that continues through the book.

And that message? That Christ is with you --- that is why in the vision he is walking amongst the lamp stands. Christ has not left his people – left his churches – he still walks among them. Christ is with you ... and in control! In the vision Christ holds the 7 stars in his hands. The cosmos... the stars... the heavens... do not control humanity ... Christ does. God does.

This is made evident in the imagery of that vision. Christ has the Golden sash – a symbol of his kingship --- over the world. Christ has head and feet white as snow – images associated with his prophetic voice. He calls all to the truth. He is truly awesome and powerful. And from his mouth the two edged sword ... the Word of God. That is who was there to comfort and protect his church ... even in the face of earthly trials and tribulations... Christ who is and who was and who is to come. That is the message to those early Christians in Asia Minor ... and that is the message to us today.

For we too are a church – a lampstand whose light is threatened. Do we not see some parallels between the experience of those ancient Christians and ourselves? Are there not times we are asked to turn from our faith for expedience sake? To fit in better in our societal norms? Do some of us have a two-faced approach to faith pretending to the world that we are not ... because it is easier. Do some of us compromise our values and feel tempted to worship other gods ... power, luxury, money?

But we know that Christ walks among us. That he still holds the cosmos in his hands. That he is the King of kings... the Great High Priest ... the beloved Prophet

Mapleton Feb 1 2009

... the son of God. That is the message to the early churches ... and it is still the message to us. God is with us. Christ is with us. To warn us. To call us to repentance. To challenge us. But ultimately to protect us. To comfort us. To forgive us ... and to love us.