

Easter 4 C 2022

Dove of Peace Lutheran Church

Pastor Stephen Springer

May 8, 2022

Revelation 7:9-17

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Dear Friends:

Do you have a crazy person in your family? Like a crazy aunt, or a crazy uncle, or a crazy grandfather? And do you enjoy having that crazy relative around at the holidays? Are they kind of fun and provocative? Like Granny on the old television show “The Beverly Hillbillies”? You like having them around sometimes. But you wouldn’t want to live with them. Crazy relatives. They are family. They can be nice to have around. But you wouldn’t want to live with them full time.

Well, that’s pretty much how I feel about the last book of the Bible. Revelation. It’s this crazy member of the family whose companionship I enjoy sometimes. And I can’t imagine the family without it. But I wouldn’t want to live with Revelation on a full time basis. Revelation is sort of like crazy Uncle Jack from Fayetteville. Part of the family, and easy to love on a limited basis. But difficult if you have to arrange your whole life around him.

The Church overall seems to agree with me. Which is why Revelation is only brought into worship on a few occasions. And only *selections* from Revelation are presented in worship. And we’re in that season. About five Sundays of Easter this spring with readings from Revelation. And after May ends, we’ll put Revelation back on the shelf. Two weeks from today, at our 9:30 a.m. worship, the handbell choir will play “Shall We Gather at the River.” And that will be aligned with our reading from Revelation on that day, which forms the scriptural basis for that hymn. It will be nice. Crazy Uncle Jack from Fayetteville can be a really nice addition to the family. On a limited basis. And the lectionary gives us highly curated selections from Revelation on a limited basis.

The book of Revelation— which is sometimes referred to by its Greek title, the *Apocalypse*— contains visions. It’s a report of visions. It’s a book of visions, it’s a “revelation.” By coincidence, today is the church’s commemoration of Julian of Norwich, a nun. She is famous for her book which she called “Showings,” written in the 1370s. It is the first surviving book in the English language that was written by a woman. She called it “Showings.” It’s commonly titled “Revelations of Divine Love.” Vision that were given to her. Visions— revelations— about the nature of God’s love. Which she wrote down. And it’s a big deal, and so she is commemorated today on our calendar. Likewise, the last book of the Bible presents itself as a series of visions. A “revelation.”

The last book of the Bible has not been universally received and recognized as the Word of God. From the earliest decades of the church, Christians argued about whether Revelation should be part of the Bible or not. As late as the 1500s, this debate continued. When Martin Luther translated and published the Bible, in the 1500s, Martin Luther placed Revelation and a few other books in an appendix to the Bible. Luther's chief objection to Revelation was that it was encoded. Luther felt that God's message should be plain and clear. The good news should be transparent. Our message about God and God's love should be simple and clear. It should not be concealed in a mysterious code. Said Martin Luther.

I am convinced that Revelation is a fierce and formidable critique of the Roman Empire. Revelation was necessarily written in a code because if Revelation had named names, then many Christians could have died, and the message would have been destroyed. The Letter of Revelation itself might not have survived. The last book of our Bible was encoded not to be mysterious or difficult, but because it was written in opposition to the Roman Empire. It was encoded to protect the lives of Christians.

So whenever we read from Revelation, we should understand that it is a forceful critique of the empire. It is anti-Roman. The Jews had been persecuted by many empires. The Egyptians. The Assyrians. The Babylonians. The Persians. The Macedonians. And ultimately, the Romans. The Roman Empire has the distinction of being the empire that executed Jesus of Nazareth in an act of capital punishment. Jesus was not killed by the Jews. He was a Jew who was executed by Rome. That fact is cemented into history and is cemented into the church's confession with three words: *under Pontius Pilate*. Forty years after executing Jesus, Rome destroyed the city of Jerusalem and its temple. And in the decades that followed, Rome persecuted Christians. Most scholars believe that Revelation was composed during the persecution by the Emperor Domitian in the nineties. Many scholars believe that one of the beasts referred to in chapter 13 is the emperor Nero. And the number 666 is someone's name, perhaps Nero's name. It depends on which language and which alphabet is used to decode 666. It could be Latin, Greek, or Hebrew. The point is, Revelation uses code because it is opposed to the Roman Empire and the Roman emperors, and as such, Revelation would have been illegal, treasonous, and seditious. Keep in mind that the book is being written by a prisoner who has been exiled to a remote island probably by Rome, probably because of his Christian faith.

So Revelation was written to encourage churches in the Roman Empire to remain faithful in a time when their faith was criminal and put them in danger. Over the last two thousand years, there have been plenty of attempts to identify the Antichrist and other figures from Revelation, and to plug them into contemporary events. For me, the fact that people have been doing this for two thousand years and no one has ever gotten it right discourages me from thinking that the book is a map of our own time and our own current events. But those who try can certainly make a lot of money.

But Revelation gave a gift to its original readers, and it is a gift that we ourselves receive. In the opening chapters, Revelation describes heaven as it is now. And in the closing chapters, which

we will get to next week, it describes a new heaven. When it describes heaven as it is now, the inhabitants of heaven are engaged in worship. And their worship is tied to earthly worship. Their worship of God looks like ours. And they do the things that we do, and sing and praise and kneel and give acclamations. Revelation seems to be saying that worship is going on all the time in heaven, and when we come together in worship on Sundays, we are temporarily joining with heaven. That connection is stated in the liturgy of holy communion when the leader says, *and so with the church on earth and the hosts of heaven, we praise your name and join their unending hymn*. It is an unending hymn. And we, We step up and join in the hymn for a while. And that concept comes to us from the book of Revelation.

The most regular and the most prominent musical connection is that one. The preface and sanctus of the communion liturgy. However, another great piece of Christian song, the *Te Deum*, is also inspired by Revelation, and this concept of an unending song of praise being carried on by various segments of the heavenly population: cherubim, seraphim, apostles, prophets, martyrs. If you look at today's reading from Revelation and last week's reading, you find the foundations of the canticle "*This is the feast of victory for our God*" which is sung in many Lutheran churches, especially on communion Sundays. "*Sing with all the people of God,*" goes the song. "*And join in the hymn of all creation.*" That all comes from Revelation. The most famous movement of George Frederick Handel's *Messiah* oratorio is the Hallelujah chorus. Which comes from the nineteenth chapter of Revelation.

All of which leads me to conclude that Revelation is not a newspaper or a podcast to explain current events. Revelation is more of a hymnal, or an original Broadway cast album. It is poetry and lyrics that take us beyond ourselves and up into the heavenly places and connects us to our heavenly companions. Revelation was written for Christians who were afraid of persecution. Its vision helped Christians transcend their fears and their sorrows by connecting them to heaven.

There is plenty of persecution of Christians still going on in the world. Both in places where there is an established religion that is opposed to Christianity. Like Pakistan and Afghanistan. And in places where atheism is established. Like North Korea. There is not much persecution of the Christian faith in the United States. I think Peter and Paul would probably laugh out loud at spoiled American Christians whose idea of religious liberty is when they take away the religious liberty of their fellow Americans.

But if we are not begin arrested and put to death for our faith, we do live in a society that exhausts our spirits, cheapens things that ought to be sacred, sells us stuff that we don't need, and threatens the security and future of the planet and all who will come after us. The world is harsh. And the world is still hostile to the Spirit, even if Christians are not being thrown in prison. For that, the Church still needs to offer worship that restores our souls, lifts our spirits, transcends time and space, and connects us to something much bigger and better than the grim facts of life that are daily all around us. We need a reminder of heaven, perhaps a taste of heaven. We need to share the knowledge and the vision of the Lamb who has paradoxically

become the Shepherd. We need to meet those who are aching and tired in soul and in body, and to tell them:

“the sun will not strike them, nor any scorching heat; For the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of the water of life, “and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.”

Amen.