Sermon, May 8, 2022

Revelation 7: 9-17

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

Without looking at your bulletin, was our second reading from the book of Revelation or Revelations? I would like you to be sure, because if you are ever on Jeopardy, you will need to be correct. If you answered Revelations, you would lose on Jeopardy. I’ve seen it happen more than once.

Revelation is the final book of the Bible, though not necessarily written last. John certainly didn’t write it as the big finish to the Bible. This Christian prophet wrote it to the churches in the area around and in present day Turkey. It was meant as a pastoral letter to his people. It was not in John’s frame of mind to be writing to future generations, and most certainly not to us in the 21st century.

Revelation has always been a controversial writing. In John’s day, many of his readers would have related to the imaginative language of apocalyptic writing. For many people today, it seems pretty bizarre. Even in John’s day, some found it too wacky to support. John writes it to the seven churches, but not every one of them supported it.

Modern interpretations of Revelation vary widely. Some like to point to John’s writing as a map to our present and near future. That has gone on for centuries. Whoever is reading it finds ways to see their world as prophesied by John. Again, it wasn’t John’s intent to offer advice or to warnings to those in the 5th or 10th or 15th or 21st centuries.

It has caused panics over bar codes on products when they were seen as the “mark of the beast” with 666. Cult groups have studied this book to come up with the date that Jesus will come again. Somehow, those dates always come and go and no, Jesus did not come again. Hmmm…must have miscalculated. Back to the drawing board.

Today’s reading from Revelation contains a vision that is much less frightening than beasts with multiple heads or dragons with tails that can sweep down stars or plagues that kill off large groups of humankind. (No, COVID is not predicted in Revelation, either!)

John’s vision has taken him to the throne room of God. He has seen 144,000 from the 12 tribes of Israel. (That is another number people love to use to limit how many will be saved.) And now he looks up and there is a great multitude. The people are so numerous no one could count them. (So much for limits placed on the number of those in heaven!)

They are from every nation of the world. Standing before God and the Lamb, they are robed in white and waving palm branches. Their white robes indicate their new righteousness before God. They wave palms to acknowledge the kingship of God.

They are a multitude from all tribes and peoples and languages. When they raise their voices in praise of God, they say in unison….Salvation belongs to our God who is seated on the throne and to the Lamb!”

Here is a reversal of the separation of people by language that occured at the Tower of Babel. When the people of Babel tried to save themselves by building a tower to heaven, God instilled different languages in them so they would no longer be able to work together to elevate themselves.

However, in heaven, all people praise God with one voice. They are no longer trying to elevate themselves to God, but acknowledge that it is God who have given them their place before his throne. Salvation belongs to God and it is only God who is able to give it to his people.

This multitude is not the only ones who are praising God. All the angels surround the throne and the elders and four living creatures. The elders in other places in Revelation number 24. Perhaps this signifies the 12 tribes of Israel joined with the 12 apostles. They are never named, so there are other interpretations that are feasible. That is the one I personally like the most.

And what or who are the four living creatures? They are described six other places in John’s book. They are said to be full of eyes in front and behind. They look like a lion, an ox, an eagle in flight and a man. As some angels are described, they have six wings. Their usual words of praise to God are….holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty, who was and is and is to come.

However we see these 24 and 4 beings, they accompany God and the Lamb at the throne. The angels direct their song to God. It is a seven-fold praise to God. Seven is another favorite number for John.

Ascribed to God are blessing, glory, wisdom, thanksgiving, honor, power and might. They begin and end their song with amen….let it be so. God is deserving of all these things forever.

One of the elders speaks to John. He asks who these people before the throne are and where do they come from? In the midst of his vision, John realizes he is not the one with the answers. Only those in God’s royal court will know.

He answers John about their identity. They are the ones who have come out of the great ordeal. John was writing to the churches that were experiencing persecution. People had to make decisions about their faith.

What would happen to them if they confessed their faith? Would they be ridiculed, beaten or even killed? What if they denied their faith? John isn’t easy on those who chose this option, any more than he was easy on those who lied about being Christian to those who were not. He reserved the lake of fire for them.

For John, those who are rewarded with robes of white to stand before God, are those who were willing to die for their faith. John uplifts those who stand firm in their faith, especially in the face of persecution. He is encouraging the church to stand firm and to carry forward the gospel. Those who do will find their reward, if not in this world, in the next.

They have washed their robes to make them white. It is not clear water, but blood. When washed in the blood of the Lamb, they will be cleansed.

It is because of the blood of the Lamb, the blood of Jesus shed on the cross, that they are able to stand before the throne of God. Jesus became the Passover Lamb, sacrificed to save God’s people from death. It is his sacrifice that leads to victory.

Salvation belongs to God and the Lamb for it was won on the cross. Those dressed in white, singing God’s praises, are there because of Jesus. Now the Lamb becomes the shepherd.

In God’s presence, they are not longer in the great ordeal of life on earth, but where there is no more hunger or thirst. They will no longer be burned by the sun. The light of the Lamb illuminates this heaven. The water they will drink is the water of life, just as Jesus promised a Samaritan woman at a well.

The final note of our text for today is one of comfort and care. In heaven, there will be only shepherd providing for every need and taking away any grief or sorrow. This is a picture that I’ve heard many people describe when asked what they believe heaven is like. Add in streets of gold, and you have my grandmother’s vision of her life with God.

When I was in seminary, one of our professors always had us sing a hymn before our worship class. He would pick a hymn that enhanced the topic for the day. He said this particular hymn was one he wanted sung at his funeral.

Let’s look briefly at this hymn that is number 314 in our green hymnal. This hymn is a direct interpretation of our text from Revelation. In the newer red hymnal, they changed the first line to….Behold, this host arrayed in white.

This hymn’s tune is from a 17th century Norwegian folk tune. It’s not the easiest to catch onto, but maybe one day we can give it a try. Many Norwegians were laid to rest with this hymn. I also would like this hymn to be sung at my funeral. But take note, I want the Who is this host version.

In our green hymnal, it is put into the category of Christian hope hymns. In the red hymnal, it is put into festivals and commemorations section. Both are appropriate, as the hymn speaks of our hope of heaven and eternal life.

We need to be careful as we read Revelation. It’s been said that the book is like a lock to which we have lost the key. The symbolism that may have been clear to those in John’s day are locked in mystery for us. With all the bizarre critters and happenings in Revelation, it’s sometimes difficult to relate to.

If we keep John’s motivation in mind—to encourage the seven churches—it helps us to look at Revelation differently than many do. It is not a book of doom and gloom meant to frighten us into faith. It is not a book of signs that we are to look for in our present day to show us how to look for the anti-Christ or destruction that will come before Jesus returns. In fact, the term anti-Christ never appears in Revelation!

It is a representation of the ordeals that the people in John’s churches were going through. There is where we can start. There are certainly ordeals in our world today. We often must choose which way to go as we live out our Christian lives.

We need hope for a better future, even if that future is only found in death. John’s revelation moves us beyond the finality of death to the continuity of life. God offers us salvation through the death and resurrection of Jesus.

With our salvation assured and our place among the host arrayed in white promised to us in our baptism, we face the challenges of life as John did and as all Christians after him did. Some are small and some may be overwhelming.

May we travel our journey of life with the Lord as our shepherd. The shepherd who makes us lie down in green pastures beside still waters, who guides us along right pathways, who walks with us at all times to comfort us, who provides for us with abundant blessings and who is with us now and forever. Amen.

7: 17 paradox of the sheep as the shepherd

 --the one sacrificed opens the way to life