

No Left or Right; Only Up or Down

Sermon, May 15, 2022

The Fifth Sunday of Easter

Text: Revelation 21:1-6; 22:1-5

Each of these past five liturgical Sundays after Easter has included a lectionary selection from the enigmatic final book of the Bible, Revelation. Someone once said that when it comes to the book of Revelation, there are two types of Christians - those who really like it, and those who are scared of those who really like it (*if you've been part of the Adult Sunday School this year, though, you are probably fast becoming part of that first group as you watch the excellent presentations and teaching of my former seminary professor Dr. Robert Godfrey via his video curriculum Blessed Hope, the Book of Revelation; I've not watched all of them yet, but so far what I've watched is simply the best presentation on Revelation I've ever seen!*). If you had trouble understanding this book, rest assured you are in good company. Dr. William Barclay introduced his commentary on Revelation with these words: *"The study of Revelation either finds or leaves a man mad."* Martin Luther would have denied Revelation a place in the canon of Scripture; he really didn't think it belonged there (*but I'm told he later changed his mind, but I haven't yet found a reference for that*). Even John Calvin, the founder of Presbyterianism, never attempted a commentary on it ... I have one and a half shelves in my library taken up with Calvin's twenty-two thick biblical commentaries, but none of them are on Revelation.



"CHRIST AT HEART'S DOOR"
WARNER SALLMAN, 1953

We can readily grasp and understand some things in this book, though. Who here hasn't heard the words of Jesus in Revelation 3:20 featured during the Time With the Children? *"Behold, I stand at the door and knock; if any one hears My voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and eat with him, and he with Me."* I've mentioned this before, but just about every time I see that classic picture of Warner Sallman depicting Christ knocking at your heart's door, I have a 50-year flashback to a talk given by a youth leader when I was in high school, a speaker who didn't particularly care for the rather gentle depiction of Jesus in this portrait. He pictured a bloodied, powerfully built ex-carpenter with a HUGE wooden cross, holding that cross in both burly arms and using it to BOOM, BOOM, BOOM pound on that heart's door, as if to say, *"Can't you see what I've done for you?! I love you, I want to come in and fellowship with you, I want to show you the way to Life, LET ME IN!"* By the way, "letting Jesus in" is not a "once and for all" decision; deciding to let Jesus in to fellowship with us in all areas of our lives is a decision we need to make countless times each and every day! He wants to come in, and be a part of everything in our lives, and I do mean everything, but in too many life situations we reply as Smiley Lewis did in 1955 two years after Warner Sallman's picture was produced: *"I hear you knocking, but you can't come in; I hear you knocking, go back*

where you been!" (*Fats Domino also made that tune popular in 1961, as did Dave Edmunds in 1970, both hitting number one in the charts*). No ... Jesus wants to come in, and He is patiently knocking, even when (*and perhaps ESPECIALLY when*) we may not want Him to "come in" and be a part of what we are doing ... but that's another sermon.

Today's readings from Revelation are about the new heaven and earth, where the way to the Tree of Life is now open and clear. Access to that Tree was barred in Genesis 3, when our first parents sinned ... now, in the new heaven and new earth, the Way to the Tree is open, because the curse is no more. Amidst all the fantastic and at times baffling symbolism of Revelation, three general overall things are made clear: 1. *God is in control*, in spite of how things may seem on Earth; 2. *Jesus will return*, physically, visibly and really ... and when He returns, history as we know it will end; and 3. *God will fully redeem and restore His creation*. Paradise will be restored. That's the end of the story ... rather, it's the end of the Beginning of forever!

Revelation takes us on a journey through a series of at-times horrific images, depicting the hardest of times with great persecution, tribulation, bloody battles and unimaginable suffering. It's important to know that these were already the conditions under which the early church was living when John wrote down this vision he received while in exile on Patmos (*which we talked about briefly last week*). The emperors Nero and Domitian could compete for the title Antichrist. All of this heartache and difficulty the early Christians experienced heightened their great hope that soon Jesus would soon return and establish His kingdom on earth. Oh, that wonderful kingdom of heaven! Jesus had nurtured a passion for it in the hearts of His disciples. He told parable after parable to them describing this kingdom. It had now been over a generation since He planted those dreams and then He left, promising to come back and make the dreams come true. With their world crumbling to an end, the first readers of Revelation had to be wondering, *"Where is this coming Savior and the kingdom of heaven?"*

And for the last two thousand plus years, a generation hasn't passed that someone hasn't noticed how harsh the world has become and said, *"This is it. It can't get any worse. This is the end of the line for history. Surely Jesus will return very soon."* From the first century AD on, there were people in every generation who passionately believed theirs would be the last generation. You may remember that Christopher Columbus in 1501 wrote a book called **The Book Of Prophecies**. He wrote *"... there is no doubt that the world must end in one hundred fifty-five years."* 1656 came and went, and the world is still here. Some said the end was near when the genocides of the twentieth century gave us modern examples of Antichrists in Hitler, Stalin, Mao, Pol Pot. Others were sure it was the end when we invented nuclear weapons that could make a fiery world-wide Armageddon a reality. 22 years ago, when the calendar flipped over into year 2000, those who believe God only works in round numbers were certain that was when the kingdom of heaven would come down to earth, after "Y2K" was going to wipe out all the computers and everything that depended on them.

In the words of the church historian Martin Marty, the world is always coming to an end. He said that not to be flip, and not to critique the end times enthusiasts; he said it for pastoral reasons. Yes, of course, in a sense the world is always coming to an end. Just as the world of the first century came to an end, just as the world of the 20th century came to an end, just as your world as you know it comes to an end when you die, or when someone you love dies. Especially when you stand by the graveside of someone you love, what you most want to believe is that the end is *not* the end. You want to believe there is something else beyond this life we know. You want to believe Christ has indeed gone ahead to prepare a place for us. In other words, we want to believe in the kingdom of Heaven. One of the most important things Revelation proclaims is that Heaven is real. Our belief in heaven is found in the God Who is revealed to us in Jesus Christ, who says about Himself, *"I am the Alpha and Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end."* When you get to the end, you are not at the end because Jesus Christ is waiting for you beyond the end with the gift of life that never ends, in Heaven.

The purpose of the book was not so much about events at the end of all time; it was primarily written to encourage believers who faced tribulation and death as they approached the end of *their* time. John's primary readership were real people dealing with real tribulation and real difficulty and real death. I think John wanted them to lift up their eyes to this holy vision of what was going on behind the "seen," to look above, to see with the eyes of faith that reality which was beyond the end. And at the conclusion of this vision it is clear that God will one day dwell visibly and tangibly among His people. In that passage I read at every funeral, John sees God is visibly there, and He is busy wiping every tear from His people's eyes, and death will be no more. Mourning and crying and pain will be no more. When God wipes away tears, that means it's the *end* of tears. That is heaven. That's how the story, the biblical drama of redemption, ends. And that is how your story will end if you have placed your faith and trust in Jesus Christ before the end. If you have done that, if you really believe that, then it can't help but change your perspective on the chapter of the story you are living in today.

Our hope is not just for this life. Our hope is for heaven. Heaven which exists, by the way, not just at the end of earthly life. It's not like after we've used up all the days down here, then we deal with heaven up there. Rather, it's for Heaven which exists above us and which regularly invades and intersects our present lives here on earth. We live *under* heaven with the high *hope* of heaven as *citizens* of heaven. It's been said that throughout all of our earthly lives we are constantly being called. We are called primarily by two voices, and we must constantly and deliberately choose which voice to heed: the voice that calls from the balcony, or the voice that calls from the basement. And in the few moments left, here is where I'm finally coming to my sermon title, which is paraphrased from probably my all time favorite quote of a political figure, a line from Ronald Reagan's classic 1964 speech, "A Time for Choosing" -- *"You and I are told we must choose between a left or right, but I suggest there is no such thing as a left or right. There is only an up or down."*

It's not about left or right, it's about up and down. It's about what will lift us up, elevate us, ennoble us, make us better and more whole, or what will take or tear us down and/or degrade us, dissipate us and make us bitter, not better! God is in heaven calling us to look up, calling us to rise above the basements of our conflicting desires, calling us to measure our lives and to make our life choices by the high and good and holy and lofty standards of heaven, not those of a corrupted world around us, and to live on earth as citizens of heaven. God is calling to us because He loves us; He knows how we are designed and He wants the best for us. In fact, He loves us so much that in Jesus Christ He came down from the Balcony and lived among us to show us the best Way, the highest Truth and the vibrant Life. The Gospel proclamation is that we have a risen Savior Who has bridged heaven and earth to bring the high hope of heaven into our world right now, and Who tells us in no uncertain terms that God loves us, so much that He sent His Son that we might have life and have it to the full.

And all the saints who have gone on before us are leaning down over that heavenly balcony and are cheering for us, rooting for us to *get* it, to see the high and holy purpose of life, which is to live under heaven with the high hope of heaven ... until that grand day we live and reign with them IN heaven, forever.