

Sermon 6-7-20 Finding hope in the Book of Revelation

Based on a sermon by Adam Hamilton

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Today, we conclude our series of sermons on finding hope. Let me remind you that we started our series by looking for hope in the Psalms, then in the Prophets, then in the Gospels, and last week we looked for words of hope in the Epistles. Today, we will move to the last book of the Bible as we look for words of hope in the Book of Revelation.

I believe we have saved the best for last, because, at least for me, there are no more hopeful words in all the Bible than those found in Revelation. Many of us need words of hope. Oh, some of us are doing OK. We have largely adjusted to the “new normal,” as many call it. Still, others of us are struggling. I have heard from those who are feeling hopeless; who are tired, depressed, frustrated, questioning. I am disturbed that the suicide rate in the Tri-Cities is double what it was last year. We need hope. And that is what John offers in the Book of Revelation.

You may not have thought of Revelation as a book about hope, but it is. Too often we think of Revelation as a road map to the end times, and though it is that, that was not its primary purpose. First and foremost, Revelation is a letter written to seven churches to encourage them in a difficult and confusing time. John wrote encouraging them to endure; promising them that if they held fast to the promises of God, they would make it through. More than that, he was telling them that as hard as their journey might be, those hard times would not be the final word.

I went to school with a friend who had an unusual way of reading books. He would start, like the rest of us, by reading the first chapter. But, then he would flip to the back of the book to read the final chapter. When I asked him why, he explained that he became deeply attached to the characters. Which meant that he experienced their pain and hopelessness. He said that he could enjoy the book much more if he knew that the story ended well for them. Knowing that allowed him to read the book differently.

That is what the Book of Revelation provides, not only for the churches John was writing to, but for us, today. Once we have read Revelation, once we know that God wins, we can experience the twists and turns of our lives differently. We can go through hard times with hope because we know how the story ends.

Don't get me wrong. I am not saying that the Book of Revelation is not a highly symbolic, even confusing, book. The early church Fathers struggled with it. The Protestant reformers struggled with it. Contemporary scholars continue to wrestle with it. I have read nearly a dozen books claiming to explain its symbols and signs and the one thing that they all have in common is that each is sure that the others are wrong. I am not going to pretend to be an expert on prophecy or what the more enigmatic passages mean. That said, I think as we move through this book, we will find a clear theme of hope.

But let me begin by setting the stage. John was writing to seven churches in what is now Turkey. Because John was in exile on the Island of Patmos, he couldn't go to them. So, he wrote this letter to the churches in Ephesus, in Smyrna, in Pergamum, in Thyatira, in Sardis, in Philadelphia, and in Laodicea.

John was writing in a style which scholars call apocalyptic. This genre had become popular in the Middle East, beginning a couple of hundred years before the birth of Christ. Apocalyptic literature made use of powerful, visual images designed to move the listener to deep emotions. Using such images, Revelation tells a story about the power of God over the evil forces of sin and death.

But, as Gerry Griffin says, to understand Apocalyptic literature, we have to think like a Hebrew. If we read it in that way, we discover that Revelation was never meant to be read as a factual history or a contemporary news report. It was symbolic, and designed to make its point through vivid images to powerful to ignore.

A contemporary example might be Picasso's great work of art, Guernica, which he painted shortly after Franco invited the Nazis to invade Spain. During the invasion, the city of Guernica was destroyed. Many of its people were slaughtered. Guernica was Picasso's impression of what happened. It is not a literal picture of the event. Indeed, some of the images don't make much sense. Still, they tell the story disorientation, evil, cruelty, and senselessness in a way that a photograph of Guernica simply cannot. Picasso's painting was meant to move the observer in ways that a more literal photo could not. That is how the book of Revelation was written. It was not written to depict literal plagues and beasts, it was written to move the hearer into a deeper level of truth, a truth that is felt more than understood.

Christians have historically read the Book of Revelation in four different ways. First are the Futurists. This was how I first read and studied the book. Futurists

understand the words of Revelation to be a literal descriptions of the last days. Futurists are constantly reading the book alongside the newspaper looking for correlations that might point to the coming end times.

However, the Futurist approach is not the only way scholars read Revelation. There is also the Historicist approach. If you read church history you will find that this is the approach most Christians took up until the 1800's. This approach argues that the writer of Revelation was not just talking about the last days, but all the days leading up to Christ's return. Thus, they analyze history, both past and current, asking to who or what the symbols might point.

Many scholars today argue for the Preterist approach. The Preterists point out that this book was a letter written to a particular group of people, going through a particular set of circumstances. Thus, the issues it addresses were the issues of that place and time. That said, they believe it is still an important book, because, even though it was written to a particular people in a particular time, like the words of the Prophets, every generation since has seen themselves in the story and derived hope from John's words.

The fourth school of thought comes from the Idealists. They understand Revelation to be a general story, addressing the perennial struggle between good and evil, between God and Satan. It is a morality tale celebrating that in the end, good and God win. Personally, I think that the truth probably includes a bit of all four schools. But no one knows. No one knows. The thing about prophecy is that it is only understood in hind sight.

At any rate, John's letter was written somewhere in the last third of the first century. As a backdrop to what he wrote, let me share a bit of what was going on at the time. It was about this time that the Emperor Nero sought to remove public scrutiny from his failed policies by burning a large part of Rome. Nero was seeking to shift people's focus toward the rebuilding of Rome. Moreover, he pointed the finger of blame at a small Jewish sect called Christians. Nero accused the Christians of being atheists who had angered the gods. He also accused them of other atrocities like cannibalism and wanton sexuality. Not only did Nero blame the Christians, he had many of them put to death. Christians became the object of blood sports. They were thrown to wild dogs, burned alive, nailed upside down on crosses, and slaughtered in the coliseum. Among those killed, were the Apostles Peter and Paul. Not long after that, the Jews living in Jerusalem rebelled and Nero sent Roman soldiers to burn the city, destroy the temple, and slaughter over one million Jews. If all this was not enough, the Emperor insisted on being worshipped

as God. Which meant that if you were a good Roman, if you wanted to prove that you were not like those Christians who were being slaughtered, you had to regularly offer sacrifices at the temple of the Emperor. Those who refused were viewed with suspicion and declared enemies of the state.

Which left the Christians, John was writing to, in a hard place. They could not offer sacrifices to the emperor. They worshipped Christ and Christ alone. Which led to trouble with the authorities. One of their members, Timus, had been put to death. Others were suffering persecution. They had heard the stories of their heroes being martyred in Rome and of the million Jews slaughtered in the Holy Land. They were afraid. None of it made sense. Where was God? Where was hope?

In the face of this, some made compromises. Others gave up on their faith. The Book of Revelation was written to these struggling Christians, urging them to stay strong, to endure, to have hope, because in the end, God would win.

Let me read one of the messages that John wrote to the churches. In chapter 2, we hear Jesus speaking to the Angel of the Church of Ephesus. “I know your deeds, your hard work and your perseverance. I know that you cannot tolerate wicked people, that you have tested those who claim to be apostles but are not, and have found them false. You have persevered and have endured hardships for my name, and have not grown weary.” — Rev. 2:2-3

As John addressed each of the churches, he began with a word of encouragement. You have persevered and endured. Good for you. But in most of the letters, John then turns and says, “Never-the-less.” In the case of Ephesus he says, “Yet I hold this against you: You have forsaken the love you had at first. Consider how far you have fallen!” - Rev. 2:4-5

John is saying, “Yes, you are faithfully enduring, but you have lost your spiritual passion. You are just going through the motions.” Each of the churches received a different word, usually of praise followed by correction. If you have time, read them. Many of them speak to the church of today just as powerfully as they did then. We continue to struggle with the same things.

Then, beginning with chapter 4, the book describes a number of strange visions that would be hard to paint, even if we could. It describes Jesus as a lamb with seven horns and seven eyes. Jesus is also described as a lion and with a sword coming out of his mouth. These are not meant to be literal depictions of Jesus.

They describe things about Jesus. He is the innocent lamb who was slaughtered as well as the powerful lion of Judah. He sees everything. His words have the power to defeat his enemies and so on. John is painting pictures with words of a reality that is too deep to see, but is never-the-less true, and can be felt. Revelation is full of word pictures designed to transport their listeners into deep places. They depict a time when God will be in control and all will be right.

Then come a series of chapters depicting the judgment that would be released on the earth. We read them and think, “Wow, that seems awfully harsh.” But remember, John was writing to a people whose Apostles had been burned to entertain Nero’s dinner guests. Whose relatives in Jerusalem had been slaughtered. Who were undergoing persecution and living in fear for their lives. For them, it must have felt about time that God finally brought justice to the earth.

Indeed, most of the symbols, which seem so confusing to us, would have pointed clearly to Rome and the emperors and other events of that time. The people John was writing to would have understood John’s words as descriptions of the evil that was going on around them and of what God was planning to do to set things right. Revelation depicts God destroying evil. First God sends his angels. As the end nears, Christ rides in on a white horse, binds the devil, destroys the beast and the harlot, at which time a thousand year period of peace ensues. Following that, the Devil is unleashed once more, and finally the end comes.

Then comes a description of eternity. Let me read to you from chapter 21:
Then I saw “a new heaven and a new earth,” for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea. I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “Look! God’s dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. ‘He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.’” — Rev. 21: 1-4

Can you imagine how good this news sounded to a people who were struggling to survive in the midst of the great battle between good and evil depicted in Revelation? Can you imagine how important this hope was to a persecuted people who were watching their brothers and sisters being slaughtered?

These were not just pie in the sky words. Revelation didn't pull punches. It acknowledged that the Romans and their neighbors were doing horrible things. It was clear that there would be more horrible things to come. But, just as the people in the time of the Prophets were promised that a time would come when they would return to Jerusalem, John gave the persecuted churches in Asia the promise that "a new heaven and a new earth" were coming. They were promised that neither the Roman empire nor any other evil entity would have the final word. God would have the final word. There would come a time when God would be with his people, when there would be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, when all would be right with the world.

This was the vision that God gave to his people. God is saying that no matter what happens, you do not have to be afraid. Hang in there and you will make it through. For whether it is here on earth, or on the other side of death, all will be made right. It will.

Which is the perfect bookend to the Bible. You remember in Genesis chapter one how paradise was lost. Adam and Eve were kicked out of the garden and evil entered into the world. In Revelation, that evil is cast out and paradise is restored. Listen to Revelation describe what it will be like:

Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, as clear as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb down the middle of the great street of the city. On each side of the river stood the tree of life, bearing twelve crops of fruit, yielding its fruit every month. And the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations. No longer will there be any curse. The throne of God and of the Lamb will be in the city, and his servants will serve him. They will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads. There will be no more night. They will not need the light of a lamp or the light of the sun, for the Lord God will give them light. And they will reign for ever and ever. — Rev. 22: 1-5

God is giving his people a vision of what it will be like in heaven. It also gives us a picture of how we should live our lives. We are to live our lives knowing that that is what the future holds. And we are to work to make that future happen. That is why, when we pray, "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven." We may not get there in this life, but we work to approximate it until God makes all things right.

And Revelation promises us that that will happen. "Behold," he says. "I make all things new." Revelation is telling us, as dramatically as possible, with as vivid of images as the author could create, that evil and hate and brokenness and depression

and despair will not have the final word. God has written the story and God has written the final chapter. Like my friend who read the final chapter first, in order to see how the story turned out, we have been given the opportunity to read the final chapter before we get there. And how does it end? At the end, Christ returns and makes all things right. But, in the meantime, we are to roll up our sleeves and work to make things right ourselves. Our job, as Christians, is to embody the hope we find in the story.

Like most of the Bible, the Book of Revelation was written to a specific people to address their situation at the time, but it also speaks to us. It is a reminder to everyone who walks through difficult times, that the troubles of the present will not have the final word. It is a reminder that if we hang in there and persevere, God will win in the end. Thankfully, ours is one of those stories that ends happily ever after, at least for those who hang in there and persevere.

This is the message I share at every funeral and it is perhaps stated most clearly in our memory verse for today. Will you read it with me? It is Revelation 21:4: [God] will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death 'or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away. — Rev. 21:4

That is the promise of Revelation.

And the guarantee of that promise is the resurrection. At the cross, evil and death thought they had won, that they had had the final word. But in Jesus, God turned the table. On the third day, he was resurrected. Evil and death were defeated, not only for Jesus, but for all. That is what we remember when we celebrate communion together. Which is why I would like to invite you to join me in celebrating a love feast together, each of us in our own homes.