

## March 10, 2021 Homily Manuscript

### THE FIRST LESSON: Revelation 1:1-11

#### *New International Version*

<sup>1</sup> The revelation from Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show his servants what must soon take place. He made it known by sending his angel to his servant John, <sup>2</sup> who testifies to everything he saw—that is, the word of God and the testimony of Jesus Christ. <sup>3</sup> Blessed is the one who reads aloud the words of this prophecy, and blessed are those who hear it and take to heart what is written in it, because the time is near.

<sup>4</sup> John,  
To the seven churches in the province of Asia:  
Grace and peace to you from him who is, and who was, and who is to come, and from the seven spirits before his throne, <sup>5</sup> and from Jesus Christ, who is the faithful witness, the firstborn from the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth.

To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood, <sup>6</sup> and has made us to be a kingdom and priests to serve his God and Father—to him be glory and power for ever and ever! Amen.

<sup>7</sup> “Look, he is coming with the clouds,”  
and “every eye will see him,  
even those who pierced him”;  
and all peoples on earth “will mourn because of him.”

So shall it be! Amen.

<sup>8</sup> “I am the Alpha and the Omega,” says the Lord God, “who is, and who was, and who is to come, the Almighty.”

<sup>9</sup> I, John, your brother and companion in the suffering and kingdom and patient endurance that are ours in Jesus, was on the island of Patmos because of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus. <sup>10</sup> On the Lord’s Day I was in the Spirit, and I heard behind me a loud voice like a trumpet, <sup>11</sup> which said: “Write on a scroll what you see and send it to the seven churches: to Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia and Laodicea.”

### THE SECOND LESSON: Revelation 20

#### *New International Version*

<sup>1</sup> And I saw an angel coming down out of heaven, having the key to the Abyss and holding in his hand a great chain. <sup>2</sup> He seized the dragon, that ancient serpent,

who is the devil, or Satan, and bound him for a thousand years. <sup>3</sup> He threw him into the Abyss, and locked and sealed it over him, to keep him from deceiving the nations anymore until the thousand years were ended. After that, he must be set free for a short time.

<sup>4</sup> I saw thrones on which were seated those who had been given authority to judge. And I saw the souls of those who had been beheaded because of their testimony about Jesus and because of the word of God. They had not worshiped the beast or its image and had not received its mark on their foreheads or their hands. They came to life and reigned with Christ a thousand years. <sup>5</sup> (The rest of the dead did not come to life until the thousand years were ended.) This is the first resurrection. <sup>6</sup> Blessed and holy are those who share in the first resurrection. The second death has no power over them, but they will be priests of God and of Christ and will reign with him for a thousand years.

<sup>7</sup> When the thousand years are over, Satan will be released from his prison <sup>8</sup> and will go out to deceive the nations in the four corners of the earth—Gog and Magog—and to gather them for battle. In number they are like the sand on the seashore. <sup>9</sup> They marched across the breadth of the earth and surrounded the camp of God’s people, the city he loves. But fire came down from heaven and devoured them. <sup>10</sup> And the devil, who deceived them, was thrown into the lake of burning sulfur, where the beast and the false prophet had been thrown. They will be tormented day and night for ever and ever.

<sup>11</sup> Then I saw a great white throne and him who was seated on it. The earth and the heavens fled from his presence, and there was no place for them. <sup>12</sup> And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Another book was opened, which is the book of life. The dead were judged according to what they had done as recorded in the books. <sup>13</sup> The sea gave up the dead that were in it, and death and Hades gave up the dead that were in them, and each person was judged according to what they had done. <sup>14</sup> Then death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. The lake of fire is the second death. <sup>15</sup> Anyone whose name was not found written in the book of life was thrown into the lake of fire.

### Part 1: Reading Revelation Responsibly

Continuing with our series of mid-week Wednesday homilies based upon topics suggested by parishioners, I am looking at the final book of the Bible, Revelation, in response to the suggestion I

preach on its thirteenth chapter, which talks of a dragon as well as two separate beasts, and is also where we find the infamous number 666. But as I mentioned Sunday, I aimed to cover that, as well as a brief primer on the book of Revelation as a whole, as it is critical to understand how Revelation is meant to be read in order to avoid some of the frequently erroneous and sensationalistic interpretations that are out there. But as I was continuing to prepare over the past few days, I ultimately decided it would be best to split this venture into two weeks - particularly because I intended for my teachings on Wednesday nights to actually be homilies and not so long-winded. So tonight, I'll do a primer on how not to approach the Book of Revelation responsibly and next week we'll do chapters 12 & 13. But for both weeks - parts 1 and 2 - I will be drawing primarily on the work of Craig Koester<sup>1</sup> and Charles Talbert.<sup>2</sup>

While the letter of Revelation is itself not dated, for many reasons scholars are fairly confident it was written after the destruction of the Second Jerusalem temple by the Romans in 70 A.D. and likely in the final decade of the first century, perhaps around 95. A.D. And as we can see from our first lesson taken from the beginning of the letter, was written by St. John. Although, throughout church history there has been some debate over whether *this* John was the disciples and apostle of Jesus (son of Zebedee) who wrote the Gospel of John or if it is someone else, an elder in the early church. Therefore, we call him St. John the Divine or St John of Patmos, which is the island in the mediterranean where he wrote this. But what the letter contains are visions revealed to him by an angel, who instructed him to write down what he saw and send it to seven Churches in what was at the time known as Asia Minor, but is now Turkey. This letter was meant to be read aloud in the Churches at "Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia and Laodicea."

And while the content of the letter is complex, the overall structure is fairly simple. Chapter 1 is John's greeting and explanation of how this letter came about. Then chapters 2 & 3 feature individual letters written to each of the seven Churches. Then, this is followed by Seven Visions. There is...

- 4-7        The Opening of the Seven Seals
- 8-11      Blowing the Seven Trumpets
- 12-13     The Lamb & The Beast
- 14         Seven Angels of Judgment
- 15-16     Seven Bowls of Wrath
- 17-18     The Great Harlot & Babylon's Demise
- 19-22:5   Seven Scenes of Consummation (The End of All Things)

And most of the final chapter, 22, is an epilogue, wrapping up the letter.

But, of course, it is the seven visions and their vivid imagery that have captured the imaginations of so many over the past 2000 years. However, this imagery has also led to a wide variety of interpretations and speculations, which are outside of the intent or the authority of the text, and consequently have borne much bad fruit and done harm to the witness of many a believer. So what I



<sup>1</sup> Koester, Craig. *Revelation & the End of All Things*. Second edition. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2018.

<sup>2</sup> Talbert, Charles H. *The Apocalypse: A Reading of the Revelation of John*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1994.

want to do is a brief overview about how Revelation has been read and contrast the soundness of these approaches so we can recognize why many of the more popular approaches are irresponsible.

As Craig Koester explains, one of the key questions to answer is whether the vision in the book of revelation are describing the details of future events or does it by drawing on past history, in particular events experienced by or familiar to the original audience (the seven churches) so as to communicate timeless realities in a manner that John's first century audience would have been able to understand. And the test case for distinguishing between these two positions is how they interpret the early verses of Revelation 20, which is why I had Jolene read it tonight. This vision draws on the imagery of the beast, who first appears in Revelation well before chapter 20 - and is especially featured in chapter 13, so we'll get a lot more into the beast next week - but suffice it to say the beast is not good and is opposed to God. Well, having just described Satan being bound by an angel (20:1-2) for a thousand years, this passage describes those who did not worship the beast as being raised to life and reigning with Christ

for those 1000 years, a millennium.

	Visions in Revelation are about...	Interpretation of "first resurrection" in Rev 20:5&6	Interpretation of the "millennium"	Adherents
<b>Amillennialism</b>	Past history, communicating timeless truths	Spiritual (conversion)	Not literally 1,000 years. Refers to the spiritual kingdom of God occurring now between Jesus' first and second coming.	Tyconius, Origen, Dionysius, Eusebius, Jerome, Augustine. Dominant interpretation of Revelation in Church history
<b>Millennialism</b>	Details of Future Events	Physical	A period of 1,000 years in future history that has not yet occurred.	Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, Tertullian
Premillennialism (Premillennial Dispensationalism)*			Christ will return before the 'millennium'	John Darby, Tim LaHaye's Left Behind series, Scofield Bible
Postmillennialism			Christ will return after the 'millennium'	Widespread in Colonial America; Jonathan Edwards

\* Premillennial Dispensationalism is pre-tribulation, but there is a post-tribulation version of premillennialism whose adherents hold we are presently living through the tribulation/

### Millennialism

Well, from as early as the second century there were Church Fathers - such as Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, & Tertullian - who read Revelation as describing details of future events. Therefore, they took this passage to be predicting a literal 1,000-year reign in future history. On your insert of the slide, you can see that this view is broadly referred to as Millennialism.

### Amillennialism

However, there were others who rejected the notion that the millennium was a future period to come. Instead, they viewed the imagery of Revelation as symbolism related to events in first century history familiar to the original audience (the seven churches) that taught timeless spiritual truths. Therefore, they contended that the Millennium described in Revelation was *not* to be understood as predicting an *actual* thousand year period of history. We call this "spiritual reading" of Revelation Amillennialism. And in support of this spiritual reading of the passage in question, most notably a figure named Tyconius pointed out that other parts of scripture indicated Satan had already been bound through Jesus' earthly ministry (Mt 12:29). Accordingly, he explained that the first resurrection mentioned in verses 5 & 6 is understood to refer to the spiritual dying and rising that takes place for believers through baptism and conversion.

Another count against reading Revelation as a description of future events is an observation made as early as the second century (AD)<sup>3</sup> that rather than following a chronological sequence, the visions in Revelation "lead readers through overlapping cycles of visions, such that certain specific events occur more than once - like the heavenly lights being darkened and the sea turning to blood, which both occur in chapters 8 and 16. In other words, the book repeats the same message in different ways. So the

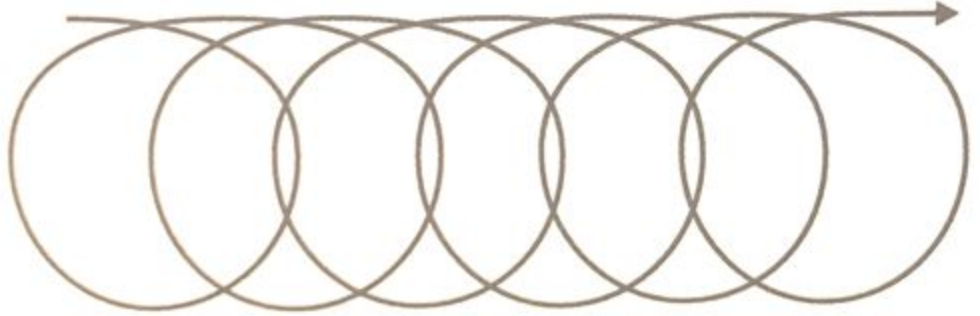
<sup>3</sup> by a bishop named Victorinus

vision of the seven trumpets in chapters 8-9 is re-told in chapter 16 in a different way as the seven bowls of plagues.

### Overlapping Cycles of Revelations Visions

#### Postmillennialism

But turning back to the Millennialist position that takes the millennium referred to in Revelation 20 as a literal 1,000 year period in the future, in subsequent centuries two primary positions emerged from this.



One is called Post-millennialists. Now, you don't need to remember all of these terms, but understand that what people think about revelation has all sorts of implications in the present day, on people's political views and so forth. To that point, post-millennialism was extremely popular and widespread in Colonial America of the 1700s. Those adhering to this position believe that the kingdom of God or millennium would commence after widespread conversion and social reforms. So, for example, Jonathan Edwards was the premier theologian in America during that time and he reckoned it would take about 250 years to convert all the nations to Christ, after which the millennium would begin around the year 2000 (y2k). Needless to say, at least that part of his position proved incorrect.

#### Premillennial Dispensationalism

The other position is known as premillennialism. In contrast to postmillennialists, who expected conditions on earth to improve, premillennialists expect conditions on earth to worsen until Christ returns, when he will establish a 1,000 year rule where things are a lot better. And some of the key beliefs of this position have been brought into the mainstream with words like "rapture", "tribulation", and "armageddon", particularly after the commercial success of Tim LaHaye's *Left Behind* book series, which began in the mid-1990s. That book series and those words all stem from system of thought that was developed by a man named John Darby in the 1800s known as Premillennial Dispensationalism.

Now, I won't get into all the details of Premillennialism, but because it's become so popular in some parts of the Church, let me explain a little bit about what Premillennial Dispensationalists believe that God has postponed the return of Jesus until certain Old Testament prophecies are fulfilled. But where most of the Church has believed these prophecies have or will be fulfilled in the Church, Premillennialists believe they will be fulfilled literally, not in the Church, but in the Jewish people's nation of Israel. Having pieced together elements from a number of biblical passages and paired them with parts of Revelation, they contend there will be something called the rapture, when believed are suddenly snatched from the earth to spare them (us?) from a 7 year period of tribulation that will then commence. In fact, they typically interpret Revelation 13, which we'll look at next week, to predict that during the tribulation a world leader will arise to form a single world government, which many believe will use computers to control the global economy and attempt to force all people to use the number 666 to conduct their transactions; others speculate that a computer chip with the code 666 will be inserted under people's skin (which I guess may be where the recent Bill Gates conspiracy theory has come from).

Anyway, Premillennialists believe that after this tribulation a cataclysmic conflict known as Armageddon will occur in a location known as Megiddo in northern Israel, and that the battle will culminate when Christ returns - the second coming. Now a lot of their fodder for this idea is taken from Revelation 16, but they understand this Armageddon to be when Jesus comes again and the binding of

Satan that we read about in Revelation 20, verse 2 will occur. This binding of Satan will end Armageddon and after that, they say, will come the millennium: a thousand year period of people living long and peaceful lives, before the last judgment, after which Satan will be released and defeated once and for all, and eternity will begin.

### **The Appeal of Interpreting Revelation as a Script of the Future**

Now, why do so many find this position to be attractive? Certainly, it can give people a sense of control in a changing world that may seem to them to be increasingly chaotic. But what makes it most attractive is that it follows a script. It encourages the notion that the book of Revelation and the Bible as a whole contains insider knowledge, not just that God will be victorious over evil, but about how God's purposes will be carried out and come together. Thus, Premillennialists often feel emboldened to interpret world events to be fulfilling what they view as biblical prophecies - some step in the script - that they believe must occur before the cataclysmic events they believe Revelation predicts will take place. Examples of world events that many have assigned such significance to include the formation of the state of Israel in 1948, the Israeli capture of east Jerusalem in 1967, the nuclear meltdown at Chernobyl, the fall of the Berlin Wall, the Gulf War, 9/11, and the rise of Isis. Premillennialists are prone to view these events as evidence that the rapture and tribulation and Armageddon they are awaiting are inching ever closer.

### **Reading Revelation Responsibly**

Now, in presenting these different approaches to reading the Book of Revelation - this is a secondary matter of the faith, not a primary one - so I am not going to tell anyone that there is one of these approaches they must adhere to. That's part of the freedom that the Anglican context is meant to provide. But just because this is a secondary matter doesn't mean that whatever approach we take can't have enormous consequences. So in the little time I have remaining, I would like to do is explain why I believe reading Revelation as a script detailing future events is mistaken - and this week and next I aim to show how these Millennialist approaches are prone to bearing what I believe is destructive fruit - and also to show why the approach to Revelation that has come to be known as Amillennialism has the greatest potential to bear good fruit in our lives and the lives of others.

First, I should explain what type of book Revelation is. The Bible has 66 books of various different genres: there are some books of history, some books of prophecy, there is wisdom literature like Proverbs, Psalms is a book of hymns or poetry, there are the four gospels, and so on. Well, the book of Revelation fits into a genre scripture that we call Apocalypse. And in Ancient Judaism, there were a number of such texts. Some, like the book of Daniel, made it into the canon - came to be viewed as authoritative scriptures - while many did not. Apocalypse was a common form of literature throughout the Ancient world where a revelation was given to a human recipient by an angel or otherworldly being of some transcendent reality, something they could not perceive without it being revealed to them. In the book of Revelation it is an angel giving this revelation to John. Well, it is important when reading anything to know what genre a text is, because that gives us a general idea of what we can expect that then informs how we read it. Just like if we were to begin reading Sherlock Holmes, by knowing it is a mystery we would read the text with certain assumptions -for example, that it is fiction - as opposed to if we were reading a biography or instructions for assembling a table. Well, for the ancient genre of Apocalypse, common elements included the use of symbolic language - for example, the book of Daniel represents nations with animals.

And the symbols in apocalypse are often characterized by vivid imagery, which is meant both to evoke emotions and to communicate multiple meanings at once. So in Revelation 5, which our first

canticle tonight was taken from, rather than Christ being described as he is in say the gospels, he is described symbolically as a lamb that was slain.

Additionally, apocalyptic texts are often written to an audience living in a difficult situation, where evil seems to be dominant. So rather than predicting events in the future, these texts are aimed at reassuring the reader of ways that reality differs from what seems to be the case, so they will be encouraged to remain faithful in the present.

And a responsible approach to Revelation takes seriously the audience it was originally written to and what was going on with them, as we should when interpreting any book of the Bible. In the case of Revelation, chapter 1 explicitly states that what the angel is about to reveal is intended for the seven churches in Asia, that it should be written down and sent to them (v11). And scholarship indicates that in the late first century these locations were under Roman occupation when believers were facing enormous pressure - both economically and the threat of physical violence - to abandon the principles of their faith and assimilate into the values of the culture around them. And so the Revelation draws from symbols and events that would have been meaningful to them in order to encourage them to remain faithful. But this doesn't mean the text is meaningless for us today. Rather, our task is to try to understand how the original audience would've understood these visions so we can then deduce what ternal timeless truths were being communicated to them. For example, one truth may be that no matter how much it seemed in their day like evil was reigning, but one theme of Revelation is to communicate the unseen reality that behind the scenes evil is not dominant, God is, and that evil's days are numbered, God will (ultimately) prevail. And this is a timeless truth that remains completely relevant today, as even today we may feel enormous pressure to compromise our principals and conform to the ways of the world. So I would contend that reading Revelation this way takes into account it's genre of ancient apocalypse and what its purpose was for first century readers. And it takes Revelation as being in service of our primary aim as disciples, which is to faithfully love God and our neighbors, to become more and more *like Christ*. #

But approaching Revelation like a script detailing future events fails to do this. As Koester says, instead of "John, to the seven churches in the province of asia", the script approach ignores the intended audience and instead treats Revelation like it opened: "John to the Chrisitians in North America, who live in the 21st century". This approach encourages believers to (narcissistically, in my opinion) read our own perception of current situations into the text. So elements that are meant to be symbolic are either taken literally or treated as a secret code. And the results have been damaging to believers' own journey with Christ as well as to their witness. Not only does it cause the reader to miss out on all that the book is meant to teach, which we'll talk about with more specificity next week, this approach also turns the eyes of believers away from God and onto newspaper headlines. Meanwhile, when the world around hears Christians pedalling fantastical ideas like the rapture and speculations about the tribulation the Church's witness is damaged. And finally, rather than encouraging us to love God and our neighbor, it encourages a tribalism that is suspicious of others and cynical about world events. And none of this is the good fruit of discipleship.

So in closing, the book of Revelation does most certainly teach (and promise) that no matter how much evil may seem to prevail in any age, God will win in the end. But what makes the visions of Revelation valuable for us is that they alternately warn us against conforming to the ways of the world and assure us that remaining faithful will be worth every bit of pain and discomfort it might require. And next Wednesday, we'll see how Revelation does this in chapters 12 and 13.

In the name of the father and the son and the holy spirit. Amen.