

## 12<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost, Year C

7 August 2016

The Rev. Dr. Brian C. Wyatt, Pastor

*Revelation 1:1-20*

In 1981, I was Wallace's age, which meant I was in that in between time of still growing up, but growing old enough to pick up on the tenor and angst of the world around me. The threat of nuclear war loomed large as we practiced drills in elementary school in case of a Soviet attack. That same year, Secretary of the Interior James Watt, appeared before the U.S. House of Representatives and was asked

about his goal of preserving the environment for future generations. Watt's reply was, "Absolutely, [but] I do not know how many future generations we can count on before the Lord returns."<sup>1</sup>

Watt's theology about the timetable of Christ's return is known in theological circles as dispensationalism. I'm not going to quiz you on that word when we're done talking about Revelation, but in more colloquial

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<sup>1</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/James\\_G.\\_Watt](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/James_G._Watt)

terms, it's the theology we find in books like Hal Lindsey's *Late Great Planet Earth*, or Tim LeHaye's more recent *Left Behind* series. Many of us have probably come across it in books or movies, and it makes for exciting, salacious entertainment, much of it inspired by the biblical books of Revelation and Daniel.

Of course there are other ways to read Revelation as well, ways that don't give us a timetable for the end of the world, but no matter how you read this letter penned by John of Patmos, it's filled with wild and confusing imagery, strange promises, and forebod-

ing tales. And the greatest irony, I think, is that the letter was originally penned to bring clarity and comfort to Christians who were struggling to make sense of their lives, and most of what we find in it now is fear and despair.

The late Princeton New Testament professor Bruce Metzger gave one of the best analogies to reading Revelation that I have encountered. He wrote that, "*Revelation contains a series of word pictures, as though a number of slides were being shown upon a screen. As we watch we allow ourselves to be carried along by impressions created by these pic-*

*tures. Many of the details of the pictures are intended to contribute to the total impression, and are not to be isolated and interpreted with wooden literalism."*

We'll spend 5-6 Sundays, probably with a break or two in between, hopefully studying, admiring, and learning from those word pictures we get. But before the first slide, a little background may be helpful. First, the author of the letter names himself in several places as John, and indicates that he is in exile on the island of Patmos. Patmos is a small Greek island that sits off the west coast of Turkey. And John probably authored the

letter around 95 CE. He address it to 7 churches located around Asia Minor, some of whom he is more unhappy with than others.

But all the churches, like John, were facing a similar challenge. The Roman emperor at the time was named Domitian, and he was notoriously cruel to followers of any foreign religion who would not also assimilate the Roman gods into their tradition. And that included Christianity. So John accuses some of the churches of becoming a little too friendly with Rome, while others struggled to keep the faith while hoping not

to end up in exile like John, or worse.

So with all that in mind, let's take a look at what John has to say in chapter one. And maybe this is a sermon for which you'd find it helpful to have your Bibles out and follow along. In verse 3, John offers the first of his seven beatitudes, or blessings. Of course 7 is one of those numbers we'll encounter a lot in Revelation, but what's important to remember about it is that 7 represents wholeness or completeness. Seven days make a week. Seven churches to which John addresses this letter.

Next, just like with most of Paul's letters, we have a doxology, or a blessing. "Grace to you, and peace, from him who is and who was and who is to come." Then John offers the first of the visions that we encounter. And that vision bears a striking resemblance to some of the things we read in Daniel last year.<sup>2</sup>

And in John's vision, it is Christ who speaks to him – the Son of Man clothed with a long robe and a golden sash. His head and his hair were white as snow. Does that image call to mind any stories

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<sup>2</sup> In particular, Daniel 10:5-10 and Daniel 7:13-14

about Jesus in the gospels? When he was transfigured before Peter, James, and John on the mountain, Matthew writes that “his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became dazzling white.” (Mt 17:2).

But what really strikes me about this vision is not just the magnificent image of Jesus standing before John in glory, but what Jesus does. He placed his hand on John and said, “do not be afraid.” Do not be afraid. The same words the angel spoke to Mary when he announced that she would be the God-bearer of Christ. The same words the angel spoke to the women at

the tomb the morning of Christ’s resurrection. Do not be afraid.

Don’t gloss over that promise when you read this. Do not be afraid. When a messenger of God speaks these words, they do not precede tribulation, death, and destruction. Angels do not show up to speak these words and then follow them with “everyone else around you is going to suffer as the world is destroyed, but you, and really only you, should not be afraid.” No! These words are spoken when God is doing something new and wonderful and life-giving and creative. They are spoken when God is about to bring Jesus

into the world, or to show the world through Jesus that life is stronger than death.

Do not be afraid. So why should we think that this time God is about to do something awful, even if just to some of the people and the world that God has created? That is not how God works. And Jesus in this fiery and majestic image even still begins with a word of comfort and promise to John. And to those who will read this letter, to the seven churches in Asia Minor, and to us. Do not be afraid. Don't forget that as we read through this letter, because the lens through which we view these images will affect

what we see in them. If we begin with fear and dread, we will no doubt find more of it in this book. But if we remember that God gives us the proper lens through which to read this book, we may find in it a powerful message of hope and promise for our lives today, whatever we may face.

Not in fear, but trusting the one who was and who is and who is to come, we may echo the words of hope offered by John, as we pray "Come, Lord Jesus." Amen.