



The Revelation of John



A Sermon By
The Rev. Amanda Akes-Cardwell

September 1, 2019
The Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost

Grace Episcopal Church
Silver Spring, Maryland

An audio recording of this sermon may be found on the Grace Church website at:
<http://graceepiscopalchurch.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/2019-09-01-AAC.mp3>.

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1Revelation 1:9-19, 21:1-7
Psalm 93 John 18:33-37

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To most modern readers, the Book of Revelation can seem somewhat peculiar. It's quite unlike anything else that we read in the New Testament. It's full of bizarre symbolism, violence, imminent judgment, and admonition. And yet, at the same time, it sets a tone of encouragement and reassurance for the faithful. Paradoxically, it is meant to be both a warning and a comfort. Revelation is one of the most fascinating and the most misunderstood books in the Bible. And so, it is fitting that we end our summer preaching series, "Misunderstood Stories of the Bible" with this unique text.

What makes the Book of Revelation particularly unusual and captivating, is that it is an apocalyptic text. Apocalypses, as the name implies, are works that describe the end of the world. The early Christians believed that the end of the world was imminent. They believed that Christ would come again, soon, and judge all the earth. Apocalyptic literature focused on this idea. The works tended to offer odd accounts of happenings in heaven, bizarre descriptions of supranatural events on earth, and deeply symbolic visions of the end of time. These visions are described by their authors as given by God to a human prophet, who in turn writes them down and shares them with the faithful.

The author of the Book of Revelation identifies himself as John. For centuries, Christian tradition held that this John was none other than Jesus' own disciple, John the brother of James, and the son of Zebedee. However, several context clues within the writing and historical evidence suggests that this is not the case. Rather, the text was written by another Christian named John, a prophet known to several churches in Asia Minor.

John's Christianity was an oppressed and persecuted religion. He wrote Revelation during a time of great distress and suffering for the Christian community. The entirety of the book protested the present order of things and the powers that maintained it. In particular, John directed his anger against the political institutions of his day, especially the Roman government, which was responsible for the oppression and suffering of the people of God. The thrust of Revelation shows that despite the suffering experienced by God's people, God is ultimately in control and will soon intervene on their behalf.

The timing of this intervention - how soon God would do it - is a thought that has fascinated and consumed the Christian imagination throughout the ages. People have looked to the Book of Revelation as they might a treasure map, seeking to interpret signs and decode history in order to pinpoint when the end time will come. The Book of Revelation has been coopted by people hoping to decipher the exact moment of Christ's Second Coming. But to use the text in such a way is to miss its larger meaning.

The Book of Revelation, beneath its symbolism and visions, points to one overarching theme: God's relentless ever-present faithfulness. The Book of Revelation reminds us that despite the sin, evil, suffering, and persecution of our present age, God is with us and God has the last word. God, who created all things, is the same God who brings all things to their completion. God is the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end (21:1). The world's existence and our own existence are framed by the presence of God. God is with us in the beginning. God is with us throughout. God is with us in the end. And God is with us in the beyond. God is present. God is faithful. At the first. And at the last.

That theme – God’s faithfulness – has been present throughout each of the stories we have focused on this summer. From week 1 when we heard the story of creation. We heard how God created and it was good, but humanity, focused on our own selfishness, fell from grace. But God, did not turn from us. God knitted clothes for the humans, in an act of care, and walked with them as they roamed the earth. We heard how humans messed things up on the earth so badly that a flood came and destroyed the world, but God, saved a remnant of humanity – Noah, his family, and creatures from every species. These creatures didn’t do any better than the first creatures. Yet God stuck with them, saving them from slavery in Egypt, freeing them from Pharaoh’s yoke, accompanying them into a new land to dwell. God gave them kings and leaders, prophets and judges. God saved them from lions, whales, and enemies on all sides. God gave them Jesus and new life. God, the Alpha and the Omega, was at the beginning, is present throughout history, and will be at the end of all things. This God is faithful, come what may. All of scripture, from Genesis to Revelation, attests to God’s faithfulness and God’s desire to be in relationship with us. God is present. As today’s text reminds us, “...the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them, they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them.”

Earlier this week, my wife, Sarah, and I returned home from a wonderful two-week vacation. We flew to Houston to visit family. Then we rented a car and drove from Houston to Southeast Florida, our final vacation destination. The drive took about 21-hours. We drove through the humidity of Houston; the swamps of Louisiana; the flat, pine stretches of Mississippi; Alabama’s Gulf Coast; down the Florida peninsula, through scrubland bearing the evidence of hurricane damage, and finally to our destination, the tropical coast bordering the mighty and moody Atlantic Ocean. Through it all, we kept this on our dashboard.

This is a solar-powered Jesus. He sways side to side his arm raised in a sign of blessing. We traveled with this kitschy dashboard ornament, swaying in blessing as we traipsed through the vast terrain of the coastal southeast. To us, this little dashboard Jesus was a reminder that God was with us. As we traversed I-10 for over 1,000 miles, God was with us. When the sun blazed down on the roof of our rental car, God was with us. When rainstorms pounded us, God was with us. When we stayed on the beaten path and when we diverged from the interstate, God was with us. When we arrived safely at our beachside destination, God was with us.

This, this, is just a silly reminder of God’s presence. It was a fun way to keep ourselves grounded and reminded who we are and whose we are. It was a tangible, if somewhat crass, reminder that God; the Alpha and the Omega, was before us, behind us, and with us throughout our road trip, and more importantly, throughout all of life. Scripture serves a similar purpose. The entirety of the Bible reminds us of God’s great love for us. From Genesis to Revelation, from beginning to end, God is present. God is faithful.

My friends, we are not alone in this journey of life. Never. We are loved. We are precious. We are blessed and beloved of God. And we are called to live into that belovedness; helping others to realize their own belovedness as we partner with God to make all things new. If you take away one thing from our Summer Preaching Series, one thing from these last 11-weeks, let it be that. Know you are loved and that God is with you, come what may. Amen.