

Summit Presbyterian Church
Preached by Rev. Sue Cyre
1/8/12

Title: The Beginning and the End
Text: Rev 1:1-8, 22:6-21

As we stand on the brink of a New Year, we wonder what the year will hold: who will win the Presidential election? Will Iran acquire nuclear weapons? Will they close the Straits of Hormuz and precipitate a war? How will the new leader of North Korea Kim Jong Un flex his muscles on the world stage? Will our economy get better or worse? Will the world end on 12/21/12 as the Mayans predicted? What will happen in our own lives? Will we live or die?

I'm beginning a sermon series this morning on the Revelation of Jesus Christ, the last book in Scripture. In Revelation, God parts the curtains and lets us see the end of the story. He lets us see into heaven and what is happening right now.

The Book of the Revelation of Jesus Christ—not the Revelation of John—is the only book in Scripture which promises a blessing to those who read it and heed its message. In fact, it promises a blessing seven times throughout the book.

It opens with a blessing in verse 3, “Blessed is the one who reads 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.”

The word “Revelation” is from the Greek “apocalypsis” —apocalypse means the taking off of a covering, an unveiling, a disclosure. It may seem strange that a book which is so steeped in imagery that it seems to obscure the message is in fact, unveiling, or uncovering the message.

The word apocalypse is first used in the NT in Luke 2:32, by Simeon describing the Messiah. It says, “Simeon took him [Jesus] in his arms and praised God, saying, ‘Sovereign Lord, as you have promised, you now dismiss your servant in peace. For my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the sight of all people, a light for revelation (or apocalypse) to the Gentiles and for glory to thy people Israel.’Jesus, was the light which unveiled to the Gentiles the glory of God.

Apocalyptic literature has a number of unique features. For example people are represented in the likeness of animals—thus the Lamb and the beasts. Historical events are represented as events of nature—thus earthquakes and floods. Colors and numbers have meanings. Thus three, seven, 144,000 two —and-one-half, 1,000—all have significance.

It is at times difficult to understand the meaning of the imagery. Even John did not always understand the unveiling and he would ask the angel “what is that” “who are they.” And we may struggle some as we look closely at the book.

There is a story of some seminary students who used to go to the local high school gym and play basketball for a few hours every afternoon. When they did they would toss their jackets and books and Bibles off to the side. Each afternoon while they played, the janitor would come and pick up a Bible and read.

One day one of the students asked what he was reading and he said the book of Revelation. With a condescending air the young seminarian asked the janitor, “do you understand what you are reading?” “Oh, yes,” the janitor said.

Chuckling the seminary student said, “well tell me what it all means.” The janitor looked around the room, leaned into the seminarian’s ear and whispered, “It means, Jesus is going to win!” Exactly. The last book of Scripture emphatically announces, “Jesus is going to win!”

We may not see Jesus winning as we look around us. We see wars and rumors of wars. Good people die unjustly and evil people prosper. The church declines and idol worship increases. Jesus is maligned by governments and ridiculed by individuals. People dedicate their lives to acquiring material possessions and power and turn their backs on self-sacrifice, duty, and love of neighbor. Where is it all going to end? It ends with Jesus winning.

It may SEEM that the beast is winning. But the Lamb overcomes. It may SEEM that Babylon will survive but it is Jerusalem that is the eternal city. It may SEEM that all is hopeless, but in the end Jesus wins. God has unveiled for us the last chapter. He has shown us that what SEEMS to be the case, is not. What we see with our eyes is not reality. Instead, God parts the curtains and shows us a glimpse of reality.

Forty times in “The Revelation” John says, “I saw.” Thirty-two times he says, “I heard.” What John sees and hears opens up, discloses and unveils the unseen realities of the present.

God discloses the unseen to John and to us. God opens to us a window into the unseen.

4:1—“I looked, and there before me was a door standing open in heaven...”

11:19—“Then God’s temple in heaven was opened.....”

15:5—“I looked and in heaven the temple, that is, the tabernacle of the Testimony, was opened...”

19:11—“I saw heaven standing open...”

That is why the exhortation of “The Revelation” is not to trust and obey, but to “listen” and “look.” Nineteen times we are told to see or look!

Revelation 1:7—“Look! He is coming with the clouds.”

1:18, “Behold! I am alive forever and ever! And I hold the keys of death and Hades.”

4:2—“Look! A throne and one sitting on it.”

5:5—“See, the Lion of the tribe of Judah,”

14:1—“Then I looked and there before me was the Lamb...”

John had this experience that he tells us about in “The Revelation” somewhere between 92 and 96 AD, most likely in 96AD. In 92 AD already difficult times became more difficult.

Persecution had begun in 65 AD under Emperor Nero and continued when Vespasian became emperor in 67AD. Jerusalem was destroyed in 70 AD.

Peter was crucified, Paul was beheaded and Timothy murdered.

But in 92 AD things got worse. Domitian became the emperor. He was a profoundly insecure man and to compensate for his insecurity, he ordered all citizens and subjects of the Roman Empire to worship him as Lord and God, *Dominus et Deus*.

He changed the name of the Roman Empire to the “Eternal Empire” and called himself “Everlasting King.” All citizens and subjects were to go to a temple built in his honor, take a pinch of incense, throw it on the fire of the altar and say “Caesar Kurios,” “Caesar is Lord.”

Domitian didn’t care what ever else people believed as long as they did this “little act of worship,” an act of worship which was the glue that held his empire together and insured the loyalty of his subjects.

Most people saw that as no big deal. They were polytheistic anyway, worshipping many gods and lords. So one more god didn’t matter.

But for John there was only one Kurios, only one Lord, only One who commands absolute undivided allegiance, Jesus Christ.

John would not bow to a human leader. So, according to the state, John was therefore a troublemaker. The unity of the empire depended on the worship of Caesar. Not worshipping Caesar was an act of insurrection, disrupting the unity. It would have been much like a German citizen under Hitler, refusing to give a “heil Hitler.” It was treason, punishable by imprisonment or death.

John was arrested and exiled to the island of Patmos, ten miles off the coast of modern-day Turkey, not far from Ephesus. Patmos was only 10 miles long and 6 miles wide at its broadest point. It was made of volcanic rock, was almost treeless, had volcanic hills rising as high as 800 feet. The Romans used Patmos as a rock quarry, where enemies of the state were sent to mine volcanic rock for the remainder of their lives.

It is here that God parts the curtain for John into the unseen reality. John writes what he sees in a letter, the longest letter in the Bible, to the persecuted churches.

The churches are being persecuted and need the encouragement that only a vision of things as they really are can provide. The greatest danger to the churches is not the persecution by the Romans but their own complacency and compromises in the face of persecution.

Under the pressure of persecution Christians were compromising with the values of the world, with the seductive power and benefits of Babylon. The book of Revelation then is a call to radical, committed discipleship.

John could have written a book that simply said, "The janitor is right, Jesus wins." But, instead, God pulls back the curtain and gives John images, pictures of how things really are.

I decided to preach through Revelation for several reasons. The first because we need to know the end of the story, that Jesus wins. We don't know what 2012 will hold for us individually or for America or for the world. We need to know what is true and real. As the conductor says in the children's Christmas movie the Polar Express, "Sometimes the most real things are the things you can't see." Scripture says, "Faith is being certain of what we do not see." We need to know the real reality and how the story ends, so that we can live as disciples now.

I also decided to preach because 12/21/12 is supposed to be the day the Mayans have predicted the world will end. They aren't the first to make a prediction on when the world will end. Many people throughout the ages have made predictions on when the world will end. I'm sure we'll hear lots more about their prediction as the year moves on. Are the Mayans right?

As we read this morning in Mark's Gospel, Jesus said that neither he nor the angels knew when that day would come. Only the Father knows when the world will end. If the Father didn't tell the Son, I don't think he told the Mayans. Don't wait to do your Christmas shopping next year.... But, the world will end if not this year, someday. We need to know how the story ends.

Third, we are living in an age where everyone is telling us to compromise our faith. We're told it's intolerant to say that Jesus is the only Savior. We're told to go along to get along. We're told we can believe anything we want as long as we're not too serious about it all.

Dietrick Bonhoeffer remember was a Lutheran pastor who was hanged by the Nazi's days before the concentration camp he was in was liberated.

Bonhoeffer was part of the German Confessing Church that rebuked Hitler with the Barmen Confession. At one point members of the Confessing Church wanted to back off, take it easy, compromise...and many of them did. Bonhoeffer's answer was, "If you are a Christian, there is no room for expediency." We worship the One who is the Way, the Truth and the Life. We can't deny what is really, real.

As human beings, we are prone to compromise, expediency, slothfulness, in the face of persecution, pressure, and temptation. Individuals have struggled with that since the Garden of Eden. The believing community has struggled with it since the golden calf during the Exodus.

Drawing back the curtain of heaven to see the reality of the here and now allowed the early Christians and now us to see the unseen truth of what is going on in the world. This is God's gift to us, to help us resist temptation and stand firm. It is God's call to us to radical discipleship. It's God's bold pronouncement, "Jesus is going to win"

There are no new truths presented in the Revelation of Jesus Christ. It is all in Scripture in other books, in the Pentateuch, the historical narratives, the prophets, the Gospels, the Acts, the Epistles. It is clear throughout Scripture that Jesus wins. But, for a moment the curtains are parted we see what is real; we get to SEE the final chapter.

The times we live in are not so different from other times and other ages. The questions for us today are no different than they were for John's readers, Who will I worship—the principalities of this age or Jesus Christ? Who is stronger—the beast or the Lamb? By which values will I live—Babylon or Jerusalem? What city will I live in—the city of rebellion or the City of God?

The purpose of the book is to make disciples of us; to give us courage and a sure witness and hope in Jesus Christ for all times. In the weeks ahead we will see with John the Revelation of Jesus Christ.

Finally, a couple of specific things we can notice about this morning's text.

This morning's text is the Prologue—the "Pro" meaning "before" and Logos meaning "the word" and the Epilogue—the after the word of the book.

John's whole vision is bracketed by the prologue and the epilogue. The prologue and epilogue put the rest of the vision in a particular context or framework. They set the rest of the vision against three great unseen realities of the present.

First, Jesus is Coming.

1:7—"Look, He is coming."

22:7 – "Behold, I am coming soon!"

22:12—"Behold I am coming soon!"

22:20—"Yes, I am coming soon."

Jesus, the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world, is coming. The King of Kings and Lord of Lords is coming. Not "will come" but "IS coming." The process is happening at this very moment.

Jesus Christ is not sitting on the throne passively anticipating some future date when He will get up and move toward us. He is moving even now. He IS coming.

As we make our way through "The Revelation of Jesus Christ," it is the process of His coming that accounts for the upheaval in the world. Jesus is pressing in on the world....and the pressing generates great upheaval. That is why John uses the word "MUST."

1:1 –"to show his servants what must soon take place,"

22:6 "to show his servants the things that must soon take place."

The invasion of the cities of the world by the City of God cannot but result in great upheaval. Jesus is coming...even now. I know we can't see it. That's why we have an apocalypse, an unveiling, a revelation.

The second unseen reality of the present is "the time is near."

1:3—"because the time is near." 22:10, "because the time is near." Near???? 19 centuries, two millennia have passed. This is Near?

The word John uses is the same word Jesus uses in His first public proclamation. Mark 1:15—"The time has come," he said, "the Kingdom of God is near." The Kingdom of God has come near because the King is near.

Because the King is always near, the time for the final in-breaking of the new creation is always near. For the NT the end, even if many years away, is always near. As John says in 1 John 2:8, "the darkness is passing, and the true light is already shining."

That's why in revelation 22:16, Jesus calls Himself "the bright Morning Star." The morning star is the star that only appears when the night has reached its greatest darkness. And although it is still dark, and will be for some hours yet, when you see the morning star you know that the night has ended. "The time is near." The star has appeared, the night for us, for the world, is almost over. The dawn is about to break.

The third unseen reality of the present is the “I am” sayings that bracket the Revelation. The prologue ends with Jesus saying in 1:8 “I am the Alpha and the Omega, who is, and who was and who is to come, the Almighty.”

The vision itself in 1:17 opens with “I am the First and the Last.” The vision closes with Jesus saying in 21:6, “I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end.”

The epilogue begins with Jesus saying in 22:13, “I am the Alpha and the Omega, the First and the Last, the Beginning and the End.”

“Alpha and Omega” are the first and last letters of the Greek alphabet—the A to Z. “First and last.” Jesus is everything. All in All. Jesus is the Alpha and Omega...the beginning and end and everything in between. He is all.

In Greek, the word for “Beginning” is “arche.” It means first in a sequence. But its more basic meaning is “I am the arche” --I am the archetype—the pattern, the source of everything...of creation, of humanity, of history, of salvation. Everything has its beginning in Jesus and takes its shape from Him.

“End” in Greek is “telos.” It means the inherent destiny of a thing. The telos of an acorn is an oak tree. Jesus says “I am the end—the telos” of what? Of everything! “I am the inherent destiny.”

Jesus Christ is the beginning, the archetype and the end, the source and the destiny of all creation.

Paul writes in Colossians, “He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. For by him all things were created; things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things were created by him and for him. He is before all things and in him all things hold together.”

When creation and us turned away from Jesus, we turned away from our source and our destiny and we groan and suffer because of it. We were made to live for him and in Him and his way. At the heart of our anguish is the going away from or against his way.

But Jesus’ claim in Revelation gives us tremendous hope. Jesus is going to have it His way. We are going to become like Him. You and I are going to be like him. The janitor is right: “Jesus is going to win.” Because everything begins in Him and ends in Him.

Look back before the world was created, Jesus is there. Look forward to after the world as we know it is gone, He is there. Look anywhere in between before or after. He is there. “I am coming.” “The time is near.” “I am the arche and telos”—the Alpha and the Omega; the beginning and the end.

When he comes, then the reason for which creation came into being will be fully realized. Then the reason for which you and I came into being will be fully realized. “Even so, come Lord Jesus.” Let us pray.