

A Sermon by Rev. Joann H. Lee  
November 22, 2015



St John's Illuminated Bible in Collegeville, Minnesota

**Revelation 1:4b-8**

*Grace to you and peace from him who is and who was and who is to come, and from the seven spirits who are before his throne, 5and from Jesus Christ, the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth. To him who loves us and freed us from our sins by his blood, 6and made us to be a kingdom, priests serving his God and Father, to him be glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen. 7Look! He is coming with the clouds; every eye will see him, even those who pierced him; and on his account all the tribes of the earth will wail. So it is to be. Amen. 8"I am the Alpha and the Omega," says the Lord God, who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty.*

**"THE END IS NEAR." (Rev 1:3)**

For many people, these words strike fear in their hearts. For others, it is reason enough to get up and walk away from the person spewing those words, and usually it is "spewing."

If that's the reaction you're having now, please consider staying because I get it. Ours is not a tradition that focuses too much on the "end" or the apocalypse. Nor do I think it necessarily needs to be.

Churches like Calvary tend to focus more on how to live our lives in the present, not on the what if's or the what may be's of the afterlife or the end times.

But for many, the violence and terrorism of our present day seem so much like the end; it certainly has been the end of the world as we know it for so many in Paris, and Syria, Nigeria, and Mali. And the Book of Revelation for most, is just a perplexing and frightening account of the end times.

Choosing not to engage it because it's scary or weird, or hoping that it'll just go away if we pretend it doesn't exist, doesn't do us any favors. Because, honestly, sometimes, the only book of the Bible that some people have ever heard of, is the Book of Revelation. It's one of the few books of the Bible that regularly makes its way into both Hollywood *and* that very Christian bookstore.

Unfortunately, chaos, violence, and fear seem to pervade the literature and the movies that are supposedly based on this book of the Bible. And, I have to say, while you can find some of that fear and chaos and violence in the verses of these scriptures, a lot of it is unfounded and completely counter to the spirit of this revelation given to John of Patmos.

See the English word "apocalypse" comes from the Greek word *apokalypsis*. That Greek word, however, doesn't mean "the end times" or "doomsday" or "fire and brimstone."

It means to remove the cover of something in order to reveal that which has been concealed; quite literally, it means a revelation, a moment of unveiling.

And according to M. Eugene Boring, a new testament scholar, at the time the Book of Revelation was written, apocalyptic writing was a common literary genre used to help reveal the mysteries of the transcendent world, a world that is beyond our seeing and knowing here on earth. It was much more familiar and commonplace back then than it is for those of us living today.

And I know that it's not exactly like this, but it does kind of remind me of these dystopian novels that have become so popular as of late, books like: *A Brave New World, 1984* (which are more classics) or *The Hunger Games* & *The Divergent Series* (which are newer).

These dystopian novels, often categorized under "young adult fiction" all tell a story of a warped and strange future, where some sort of end has already happened, but the final end still awaits. And the survivors are finding a new way to be. It is at times a frightening picture of the future, but also at times uncomfortably familiar and resonant.

And much like the dystopian novels of modern day, the apocalyptic literature of scripture wasn't written to predict the future or to provide some kind of code to be deciphered at the end of the world. Rather, it was written to shed light on the present day and to reveal, through symbols and imagery, a reality and a truth that we might not grasp otherwise.

So, yes, there are beasts with seven heads (Rev 13:1) and a lake of fire (Rev 20:15) that make their appearance in the book of Revelation, but the word "rapture" never shows up. And at its heart, that's not really what it's about. In fact, many scholars even believe that these beasts and images actually depict real-life people from history, like the Emperor Nero, rather than some end-of-times mythical creature that will come and destroy the earth.

John of Patmos, who recorded his revelation and sent it as a letter, wrote it with specific faith communities in mind, addressing the real-life struggles that they were dealing with. And sometimes, rather than saying outright, "that Emperor Nero is no good," he would use a symbol or a metaphor, or in this instance, a seven-headed beast, that everyone reading the letter would understand as depicting Nero.

Greg Carey writes that "Apocalyptic works reflect in the most dramatic way the response of the people of God to the pressures of their time."

That's not to say John doesn't also write on a larger, more cosmic level, there is some of that happening as well, but he also has real people, living in a real time in history in mind.

And his goals aren't to provide a key that unlocks and decodes the apocalypse or to predict the future and provide a date for the end. Nor is it to be turned into a high-action Hollywood film or a low budget Christian movie starring Kirk Cameron.

His goal is to convey comfort and hope; peace and grace and to envision a world where God's justice, love, and mercy reign.

This morning, Dr. Emerson read for us the very beginning of this book, and it begins:

"grace to you and peace..." Grace and peace. Not war-mongering, fear-mongering, and divisions, but grace and peace.

Alison Faison, our Director for Children's Ministries, spoke with our children about how this book is like a dream or a vision. And it was. John of Patmos had this vision, a vision of what the world could be;

a dream of how the world should be, and then he shared it with the churches with the hopes that they might help make this dream a reality.

The Book of Revelation is a vision of the realm of God. And it looks like this:

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more.

<sup>2</sup>And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband.

<sup>3</sup>And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying,

"See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them as their God; they will be her peoples, and God himself will be with them;

<sup>4</sup>God will wipe every tear from their eyes.

Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away.”

<sup>5</sup>And the one who was seated on the throne said,

“See, I am making all things new.”

Also he said, “Write this, for these words are trustworthy and true.”

<sup>6</sup>Then he said to me, “It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. To the thirsty I will give water as a gift from the spring of the water of life (Revelation 21:1-6)

Friends, this is the vision of John, this is his great revelation, included in our holy scriptures: a revelation and a revolution of love and peace, where all who thirst are quenched, where all who mourn are comforted, where God is present to wipe away our tears and promises to make us and all things new.

The image on the cover of your bulletin comes from the St John’s Illuminated Bible. It is the first completely handwritten and illuminated Bible to have been commissioned by a Benedictine Abbey since the invention of the printing press. And by illuminated, we mean that the text is supplemented with decorations and miniature illustrations and borders.

It is absolutely beautiful. Beauty simply for the sake of beauty. Look it up sometime and enjoy this amazing work of art.

Donald Jackson is the calligrapher and also officially works as a scribe to Her Majesty’s Crown Office in the United Kingdom. And this particular image is from the Book of Revelation.

Gold leaf is used throughout The Saint John’s Bible to indicate the presence of the divine. And we can see that as Jackson read through this book, he felt God’s presence throughout.

So when we say, “The End is Near,” for whom is that comforting?

It is comforting to the Syrian refugee, fleeing the only place she knows as home seeking a new life where her humanity and dignity might be valued. The end of your travels and trauma are near, my friend.

It is comforting to those living in constant fear of gun violence and stray bullets in the south side of Chicago, Bayview, and too many other places in this world. The end of your fears and constant anxiety are near, my friend.

It is comforting to those battling cancer and other diseases that alienate and isolate you from society and who you once were. The end of your pain, loneliness, and treatments are near, my friend.

To some, hearing that “the end is near” brings comfort and hope. For when the end comes, resurrection and newness of life await.

One commentator notes that, “Revelation is speech by and for the oppressed, those suffering under the sword of Rome, not for a successful, affluent or powerful church,” (Susan Eastman).

In this day, in this country, it’s no wonder that many Christians don’t quite resonate with its message. But to some, the words, “the end is near” is music to their ears.

M. Eugene Boring says that John of Patmos wrote to “churches suffering general and official persecution, to provide encouragement to the few Christians actually suffering overt persecution but also, to address complacent church members who saw no great contrast between their Christian commitment and the surrounding culture, to make them aware of the critical situation...” and to perhaps wake them up from lukewarm faith, to shake them from complacency, and to spur them towards faithful and sacrificial living.

“The End is Near,” but it is not near enough.

God is working to make a home among mortals, to dwell with us and to be with us. God is working to end injustice, oppression, fear, and hate. God is working to make all things new. And we are God’s co-workers.

We are the ones who can help usher in God’s home among us, who can help make this vision of John’s a reality.

Let us be participants in God’s work. Let us make an end to broken systems and fear-driven policies, so that all may live in safety and with full humanity. Let us take part in a revolution of love. For we have been given a revelation of love through the person of Jesus the Christ to whom the Book of Revelation simply bears witness to.

As we begin this season of gratitude and thanksgiving, as we survey all our blessings and pause to give thanks with full bellies this Thursday, let us remember that our gratitude should lead to action.

Our abundance should overflow into acts of mercy, kindness, and love.

Let us give thanks. And then, let us give of ourselves.

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