

**Apocalypse Now**  
Introduction to the book of Revelation  
October 15, 2006

In May I had the opportunity to travel to Turkey,  
not really knowing what to expect.  
In addition to having an experience of a modern secular democracy  
whose citizens are 99% Muslim,  
we walked in museums where artefacts dated back to 8000 years B.C.  
We climbed through living quarters built into volcanic rock  
and explored underground cave systems that sheltered Christians  
during various times of persecution.  
For several days we visited archaeological sites from the Greco-Roman era.  
It was Rome that ruled the “known world” in new testament times.  
Caesar Augustus ruled when Jesus was born –  
he ordered “that all the world should be registered” in a census  
that saw Mary and Joseph travel to Bethlehem.  
Paul used his Roman citizenship to defend himself when in trouble with authorities  
as he travelled through the Roman Empire, speaking of Christ.

Revelation was written by someone named John,  
(probably not the same John who wrote the fourth gospel)  
in what scholars think was the year 92.  
The severe persecution under the Emperor Nero  
Had seen Christians burned on torches – (“You are the light of the world”)  
thrown to wild animals as a form of mass entertainment  
and otherwise harassed and harmed.  
By 92 Domitian ruled the Empire.  
He was a suspicious, even paranoid man without offspring to take over from him.  
He sought to protect himself from those who would overthrow him.  
It was Domitian who proclaimed that all in the Roman Empire  
Would take part in state religious functions.  
Emperor-worship became mandatory.

What would you do, as a Christian, if you were ordered to take part  
in worship of the state leader?  
Of course, many people around you are already doing that.  
For years, since Julius Caesar, the emperors had declared themselves  
Sons of God.  
State religion had exempted Jews from the expectation to worship the Emperor  
But Christians were a new phenomenon.  
Jews, with whom there were tensions,  
Because missionaries like Paul, Barnabas, John Mark  
went first to the synagogues in the cities they visited  
and talked to the Gentiles, the God-fearers, who worshipped there.  
They were among the first converts to Christianity

and the synagogues were not happy to have their Gentile patrons stolen away.  
They were unlikely to stand up for Christians being persecuted by Rome.

So, by the year 92, the Christians of Asia Minor (now western Turkey) were facing a difficult future.  
Worshipping God revealed in Jesus Christ made it impossible for them to engage in worship of a human ruler, powerful and threatening as he was.  
Some Christians had already been martyred.  
Like soldiers on a difficult combat mission, they each needed to be prepared to die.  
The question couldn't be avoided: if God is in charge of the world, how could God allow Christians to be persecuted and killed?  
It is in this situation that John, exiled on the island of Patmos, has the visions that he records in the book of Revelation.  
The visions are wild, richly symbolic, sweeping history.  
He prefaces them by speaking directly to the Christian communities he knows very well.  
Seven churches are addressed by name, encouraged and challenged.  
The visions are for them, to help them live with faith in an apocalyptic time when their lives are on the line.  
John writes as a pastor  
and he couches his message so that the powerful of the Roman Empire would not realize that the beast that threatens life is them.

As a pastor today, I often hear questions like this:  
"You wonder where the world is going, don't you?"  
"What is the world coming to?"  
There is a sense of deep concern as we try to discern, in the troubling events of our time, where God is.  
Much of the world around us has stopped asking that question because, for many, God is no longer an entity or has become a purely personal being uninterested in world events.  
The idea that God is involved in world events, is concerned about global issues is hard to defend.  
People like the current American president, George Bush, who insists on speaking in terms of good and evil, with God on our side as he sends his nation to war, make progressive Christians quake.  
Surely, we think, God isn't at the beck and call of Mr. Bush.  
Surely we do not live in an age when the world can be divided in black and white.

We also live with Christians of the right who speak in terms of the end of the world,

imminent destruction, Armageddon and the final battle.  
The book series known as the “Left Behind” books  
talk of the end of time with the possibility that those who are saved  
will experience the rapture, an immediate transporting to heaven,  
while the rest of us perish in horrible ways.

In fact, there are many Christian groups that draw on the apocalyptic writings  
of Revelation.

The figure of the beast, and the number 666 are drawn from here.  
The number of 144,000 whose place in heaven is sealed –  
you will hear of this if you talk with Jehovah’s Witnesses – comes from Revelation.  
When it seems like the world is falling apart,  
when our sense of order and security is threatened  
by forces we don’t understand and can’t control,  
we are drawn to the big questions of meaning and destiny.  
When our faith is challenged, undermined, denied or even forbidden,  
we seek to know where God is and whether God is involved in the events of the world.

In times like these, it is good to be reminded that God  
is Lord of history,  
not a power of nature that can be appeased or manipulated to suit our whims.  
We look back to the situation of Hebrew slaves in Egypt,  
to the exodus event that even now shapes Jewish identity,  
and we see God acting in history.  
We read in the prophets of the times when other nations conquered Israel  
and took many into exile in a strange land.  
The prophets see God’s hand in the affairs of empires,  
a tool for punishing but also for re-establishing the people of Israel.  
We see the hand of God, the presence of God,  
in the birth of a baby in Bethlehem who will later  
be executed as a criminal by the Roman state.  
We do not speak lightly of God’s involvement in history  
because we are conscious that our perspective is very limited  
and our own interests can distort our perception.  
Yet, our faith is not in a small god who only cares about individuals.  
Our faith speaks of God as Lord of history,  
whose intentions are active, whose love is all-encompassing,  
whose compassion extends to all people, all creation.  
Our faith speaks of God who, in the beginning,  
created the heavens and the earth  
and whose goal is to redeem the heavens and the earth.  
In the beginning and in the end, God.  
And in the meanwhile, in the midst of complexity and suffering,  
of uncertainty and conflict, of life and death,  
the central message of the book of Revelation,  
the message that John, the pastor, wants the churches to hear

is this: Jesus Christ has not abandoned you.  
Jesus Christ stands in the middle of the seven lampstands  
that represent the seven churches – that is, the whole church –  
holding the seven stars.

Jesus Christ, the Lamb who was slain  
and who lives forevermore, in here among us.  
In the midst of complexity and suffering,  
of uncertainty and conflict, of life and death,  
we are not alone.

God is on the throne of heaven,  
God is actively involved in the events of history  
and is working to overcome death and destruction.  
At the centre of God's power is the unlikely instrument of the cross,  
a reminder to us that love holds the greatest power.

So welcome!

Welcome to the book of Revelation in this sermon series.  
Welcome to the seven churches with their unique weaknesses and strengths.  
Welcome to the world of horsemen and trumpeters,  
of beasts and dragons and whores and women giving birth.  
Welcome to the world of struggle and of martyrs  
and to the vision of a new heaven and a new earth.  
Welcome to the challenge to live faithfully and courageously  
in difficult time when we wonder what the future holds for our planet.  
Welcome to a time of reflection on the nature of our church community  
for in difficult times, we need one another to be faithful.  
We can't stand alone. We do not need to stand alone.  
Jesus walks in the midst of the church  
and holds the stars which can guide us through darkness and uncertainty.

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