

5-Nov-2017 Sermon

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As you probably know, there are three Lectionary years with readings for each Sunday. So that means there are about 150 Sundays covered by the Lectionary. Ten of these readings are from the book of Revelation. That means, for any given Sunday, you have a one in 15 chance of a reading from the book of Revelation. And, since we have six people who regularly preach here, that means, the odds of my preaching on a Sunday where there is a reading from the book of Revelation is one in 90. One in 90. *Today is your lucky day.*

Revelation is an apocalypse, which means it's full of crazy symbolism and it describes a heavenly battle and an earthly battle and it's full of angels and Satan and dragons and prostitutes. Perhaps you grew up in a church which had an 8-foot map of the dispensations of God at the front of your sanctuary, a map that showed the church in the 6th dispensation, and where Revelation figures prominently in the 7th dispensation and beyond. But for other traditions, like ours, Revelation is the odd one out in the New Testament. The sore thumb. The one that looks it was created at the height of the psychedelic era in the 1960s, by the same guy who wrote *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test*.

By the way, they say if you can remember 1960s, you weren't really there.

But Revelation is tired of being the odd child. Tired of being the last one chosen for baseball. Tired of always being a bridesmaid and never the bride. Or never even being a bridesmaid.

Revelation says, *it's my time*. Revelation would like a boyfriend. Or a girlfriend. In fact, Revelation is looking for long-term commitments. Revelation is on BibleBook Match.com. Looking *for you*.

Revelation has a list of things it wants you to care about. More on that later.

You know, sermons typically come in two types: the “Do This” sermon and the “Don’t Do That” sermon. And I guess a third type that contains both “Do This” and “Don’t Do That.”

In the “Do This” sermon, the preacher latches onto a verse like “Love one another as I have loved you,” and basically says, “Loving one another is good. So love one another. And if you find someone who is difficult to love, just try harder. Love one another. And if you’re already loving someone, keep on loving them. Don’t stop. Amen. The closing hymn is number 438.”

The “Don’t Do That” sermon is basically the opposite. “Don’t worship idols. God doesn’t like it and your priest doesn’t like it and the altar guild doesn’t like it. If you feel like you’re about to worship an idol, don’t do it. Just say no. Walk away. Don’t do it. Amen. The closing hymn is number 438.”

And it can be the same way in Bible study or devotional reading or the Daily Office. “How was your Bible study today, honey?” “Oh, really good, I picked up two ‘do’s’ and three ‘do not’s.’ Here, look at my list.” “Oh that’s good. I really like the first ‘do not’: ‘Do not cook a young goat in its mother’s milk;’ Exodus 23:19. Not really a problem for us, is it?”

We were with our grandson last weekend, and the kid's being raised in a veritable forest of do's and do not's. "James, do not run around the pool. Walk around the pool." "James, do eat some of your dinner." "James, do not tell your friend he's not coloring in the coloring book the right way. James, be nice. James, do not take the coloring book from your friend." Everywhere he turns, there's a Do or a Do Not staring him in the face.

And it's great! I'm glad he's surrounded by Do's and Do Not's—the last thing I want is for him to be in a corporate board meeting and then taking a coloring book away from the CEO. Or, worse, as a kindergarten teacher taking away a coloring book from a five year-old. Where would we be if we didn't have parents who were consistently and constantly reinforcing good behavior and turning us away from bad behavior? Thank God for Do's and Do Not's!

But it does tend to reduce us to being human machines, don't you think? Calibrated to do some things and calibrated not to do others. We roll ourselves into church every Sunday for a tune-up and check-up—"Hey, can you check my anger—seems to be a little high this week, and you know, 'Refrain from anger and turn from wrath (Psalm 37:8.)'" Reminds me of the boy whose family was studying the Ten Commandments. In church he turned to his mother and said in a strong voice, "Remember, Mom, don't commit adultery!"

So in life, so in sermons: Do This. Don't do that. The trouble is, the book of Revelation will have none of this. Once you get past the symbolism and the weird imagery—which *is* weird but which you can get past without much trouble—once you get past that, there aren't many Do's and Do Not's. Revelation 12:3: "Then another sign appeared in heaven: an enormous red dragon with

seven heads and ten horns and seven crowns on its heads.” And the moral of that verse is, I don’t know. Revelation 12:7: “Then war broke out in heaven. Michael and his angels fought against the dragon, and the dragon and his angels fought back.” And the moral of that verse is, I pass.

So, not much Do and Do Not in Revelation. But the summary of the book, this last love letter from the Holy Spirit to the Church, the final glimpse back at the inspiration of God in hearts of the New Testament writers is this: God will win. God will win. Whether it’s the battle in the heavens or the battle against death or the battle of anxiety in our own hearts, *God will win*. And the secret of the book, which not too many people realize, is that in Revelation, the Church does nothing. There is a great battle between the angels of God and the angels of the dragon, but the Church does not participate. There is no “onward, Christian soldiers” and “no backward, Christian soldiers” for that matter. At the conclusion it is Jesus on the throne saying, “I am making everything new.” At the conclusion it is Jesus saying, “I am the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the Last, the Beginning and the End.” At the conclusion it is Jesus who says, “Yes, I am coming soon.” And the victory of Christ is the context for all the rest of the Do’s and the Do Not’s in the Bible. That, as Billy Graham said, “I am an optimist because I have read the last page of the Bible and *I know who wins*.” That the Heavenly parent has come into our room and looked under the bed and does *not* say, “There’s nothing to be afraid of,” because there is *plenty* to be afraid of. But God the heavenly *parent deals with those things* that wise people are terrified of. That brave terrified are of. That God offers—indeed, that God *demand*s—that He wipe away our every tear. That the book of Revelation is nothing more than—but nothing less than—a giant exposition, in Technicolor, in psychedelia if you please, of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Think of the gospels as a photograph of a phase. They describe the death and resurrection of Jesus. And Revelation describes the second coming and the completion of the victory of Jesus Christ, and it’s like an xray of the same face. Different insights, same reality.

So Revelation can serve as the context for the Church and for our lives. Revelation can serve as a giant banner over the Church and over our lives—a giant banner that reads, “There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.”

Revelation can say that men and women don’t serve the Do’s and the Do Not’s, but instead the Do’s and Don Not’s serve the Lamb who is the shepherd. That we have no business obeying God or disobeying God or worshipping God or loving the Church or hating the Church until we hear that He has led us to springs of living water. *God will win. Life will win.*

And that is how we come out of the tribulation. In the middle of today’s passage, we read that one of the elders asks, “Who are these, robed in white, and where have they come from?” And our narrator shrugs his shoulders and replies, “Um, how would *you* answer that?” And the elder says, “These are the ones who have come out of the great ordeal...” (Rev 7:14).

So we get to learn a fun-sounding Greek word, *thlipsis*. T H L I P S I S. Thlipsis. Literally, it means crushing, like feet crushing grapes as part of making wine, like crushing olives for the oil, like the medieval practice, when if they thought you were guilty of some crime and they wanted you to confess, they would strap you down and put a weight on your chest. And if you didn’t confess, they put a greater weight on your chest. And eventually the weights would crush the life out of you. And that’s how we get to the broader meaning of *thlipsis*, not only crushing, but ordeal. Tribulation. In Revelation chapter seven, the Church is said to have come out of the great ordeal. Because even though the Church does not fight in the heavenly war to end all wars, it does suffer severely. In chapter six, just after the four horsemen of the Apocalypse make their entrance, the souls of the believers who have suffered cry out, saying, “How long? How long, Sovereign Lord?”

And that’s the cry of our hearts, isn’t it? How long? Whether it’s anxiety weighing on our chest.

Or worry for our families or our friends or our neighbors. Or fear for the country or the world when we watch the news. Or contending with ourselves. *Contending with ourselves*. Dealing with the Do's and the Do Not's. All of like a crushing, and we cry out, "How long?"

There is a line from a T.S. Eliot poem called *Ash Wednesday*, where Eliot writes as a prayer, "Teach us to care and not to care. Teach us to sit still." When I first read that I thought it was the dumbest line ever. "Teach us to care and not to care." Which is it, Mr. Eliot? But now I think there's deep wisdom there. It was Eliot's first long poem after he converted to Anglicanism in 1927. It deals with the ordeal, the *thlipsis*, of learning to care for things that we have not cared enough for. To care for one another. To care for those who have fallen on hard times. To care for, and be more tenders toward, ourselves. And it deals with the ordeal of learning *not* to care, to lessen our fixation on the things of this world. That's as difficult as learning *to* care. To let God remove a bit of this weight on our chest. To take ourselves a whole lot less seriously. The poem deals with moving toward God, who is the winning God, the God who triumphs.

And this is what Revelation teaches us. Revelation teaches us the context of the world after the resurrection, after the apostles, after the destruction of Jerusalem, in the midst of the Roman emperors and the greatest empire the world had ever known and its on-again, off-again persecution of the Church, which lasted 250 years. Revelation teaches us to care and not to care. Not to care, because from beginning to end, it's about the victory of God. Not to care, because the message of Revelation is, everything will be alright. Not to care, because Jesus is the One who is making all things new.

And to care? What is it that the book of Revelation wants us to care about? Well, when I said that the Church in the book of Revelation does nothing, that wasn't entirely true. It's true that the

Church doesn't fight in the final battle. But look again at our passage. The Church worships. The Church cares about worship. "Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our God forever and ever!" Count them—seven nouns praising God. Seven because for the Jews, seven was the perfect number, the number of completeness, the number of wholeness, the number of rest. God rested on the seventh day. The Church comes out of the great ordeal because the Church *worships*. The Church comes out of the great ordeal because the Church takes a moment to look at the majesty of God, like your first view of Mount Rainier after moving to Seattle, when you say, "Oh, my God." The weight is moved off our chest when we know that God will win. That in the cross and the resurrection, God won. That we have no business obeying God or disobeying God until we hear that He has led us to springs of living water.

So the Church does not fight in the last battle, but we do work. We work when we worship. We work when we pray. Your last words on earth may be, "Lord bless my family around me." They may be, "Into your hands I commend my spirit." They may be, "I am afraid, my God." But these prayers are holy work for God. Crying out in anxiety is holy work for God. Listening to another, when you'd rather interrupt, is holy work for God. Men, beginning in these days, it is our listening to the pain of women at the hands of men, and not interrupting. And to care in a new way.

Praying, "Teach us to care and not to care. Teach us to sit still," is holy work, and is the holy work of the book of Revelation. *"O God of peace, who has taught us that in returning and rest we shall be saved, in quietness and confidence will be our strength: By the might of your Spirit lift us, we pray, to your presence, where we may be still and know that you are God; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen."*