

The Great Escape?
Revelation 21: 9 – 14; 22-27
Preached by Dr. Cahill
Babcock Presbyterian Church
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Five hundred years ago, the great reformer Martin Luther questioned the validity of the Book of Revelation. In fact, after the German Church severed ties with Rome, Luther seriously considered deleting it from the Bible. He thought Revelation's cryptic writings and bizarre symbolism confused people and led them to mistaken, if not dangerous, conclusions. However, Luther relented and reluctantly included the book of Revelation in the Protestant New Testament canon. (By the way, the word "canon" refers to the sacred writings sanctioned by the Church to be included in the Old and New Testaments.)

Luther was right to include Revelation but I sympathize with his hesitation since there have been and continue to be too many fantastic if not wrongheaded speculations surrounding this book.

The other night I went to YouTube and typed in the word "Revelation" and found scores of videos offering various interpretations of this mysterious book. The first one I chose had a pastor teaching a class on Revelation. Being a fundamentalist, someone who interprets every word in the Bible literally, this man presented precise timetables for the End times and even more precise predictions about everything that would happen, complete with power points with terrible scenes. He also revealed the identity of the Antichrist, the son of Satan who'd ruled with impunity for seven years. According to him, the Antichrist would be... the pope, not necessarily Francis but a future pope. His evidence? He claimed that by translating the letters on the pope's miter (his headdress) from Latin to Hebrew you'll find the formula 666, which is the number of the Antichrist.

For the past 2000 years Christians in every generation have been convinced that they were living in the end times. They'd match key verses from Revelation with current events and draw the conclusion that the Antichrist was on the move. The candidates included a few Roman emperors, a couple of popes and the usual list of modern-day suspects, Napoleon, Hitler and Stalin. As it turned out, none of these villains were in fact the Antichrist so these prognosticators had to go back to the drawing board and conger up new and improved interpretations and predictions.

I really can't say I fault believers in past generations who believed they were stuck in the end times, especially when you consider the horrific wars, plagues, famines and persecutions they endured. Each generation discovers for itself the presence of evil in the world and some of them think it was never as powerful as it is now. That explains why the Book of Revelation fit into their worldview. In fact, that's why Revelation was written in the first place.

In 96 AD, sixty years after Christ, the Emperor Domitian began the first systematic empire wide war against the Church. Christians were hunted down, arrested, tortured and martyred. In the midst of these persecutions a believer, known only to us as John of Patmos, had visions he wrote down in what he called the Book of Revelation. It was intended to be a word of hope to the suffering Christians, urging them to believe Christ already won the ultimate victory on Easter morning, therefore place your trust in God and hold on to the end.

Someone once summed up the entire Book of Revelations in five words, "In the end God wins". That saying is the one of the reasons why the Book of Revelation was kept in the Bible.

From the time of Christ, including our own, somewhere in the world God's children have suffered for their faith. In recent history, Jews were murdered and Christians hounded in Nazi Europe. Behind the Iron Curtain, Atheistic Communism outlawed any practice of religion and sent those who did went straight to the gulags. Today in parts of Asia and Africa, Christians are still being hunted down like animals. Two thousand years later, the Book of Revelation still speaks to these people because it was written for them in particular.

At the same time, there's something inappropriate about American Christians, who enjoy unprecedented religious liberties and never experienced any real persecution, spending so much time and energy predicting the future. Jesus himself said he didn't have any idea when the end would come.

What's even more inappropriate and self serving is the message these people are sending out. They tell their listeners, if you're Christian you don't have to worry about these things. You backed the right horse and his name is Jesus. When the rapture comes, you'll be taken up to heaven before the tribulations begin. Only those left behind will have to face the wrath of God.

The unintended consequence of this message is complacency. If you become so focused on escaping from the world you have permission to stop serving in the world. I've had conversations with people who are so convinced that Jesus is coming back at any moment they don't feel any need to be concerned about the world's problems because they'll be making their escape, just in the nick of time.

Back in the 1950s there was a science fiction movie called *When Worlds Collide*. An asteroid was on a head on collision with the earth. The richest man in the world (who was also the meanest man in the world), wanting to save his own skin financed the building of a spaceship that would take one hundred people to live on another planet. Hundreds of men and women with the proper skills were secretly selected to build the spaceship but only one hundred would be picked by lottery to escape before the earth exploded. Those who didn't win the lottery would be left behind. On the last day, when everyone learned whether or not they'd live or die, a riot broke out between the two groups. The only thing that mattered for the lottery winners was making sure they'd be on that rocket.

This story is a metaphor for the attitudes of some Christians who believe they won the lottery and will escape the trials and tribulations of the End Times. When earthquakes, hurricanes and floods strike, they feel justified and say, "The Bible says these natural disasters would happen they're signs of God's wrath to come but I'm not worried. It's all part of God's plan." Likewise, when whole populations of people in faraway countries are being systematically persecuted because of their faith, they say, "Isn't that sad but why are you surprised? Jesus said this would happen."

Revelation isn't just a blueprint of the times to come, it's a wakeup call for the Church to be the Church in a world that needs to be cared for and loved. Remember, "God so loved the world," doesn't mean God only loves Bible believing Christians. It means what it says, God loves the world including everything and everyone in it.

Jesus didn't die on the cross so you and I can be safe. He died and rose again so we can be saved to be members of the Body of Christ. Instead of washing our hands and hiding from the the world we are meant to go out and serve the world. That means not abandoning our neighbors and their problems. Christians are supposed to be a proactive presence, not just talking about Jesus but living like Jesus and standing up against the prevailing evil that permeates our culture. Carefully read the Gospels. Jesus never gave his disciples permission to head for the hills or separate themselves at the first sign of trouble. If we do, we become latter day Pharisees, so heavenly bound we're no earthly good.

No one here wants to become one of those congregations that walls itself off from the pain and suffering around us because we know if we did we could never claim the beloved community in our neighborhood. That's why we are being encouraged by the Holy Spirit to listen to God's voice and bear witness to the justice and peace of Christ by what we say and do in his name.

In the twenty first chapter of Revelation we read:

Then one of the seven angels... came to me and said, "Come, I will show you the bride, the wife of the Lamb." And in the spirit he carried me away to a great, high mountain and showed me the holy city of Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God... I saw no temple in the city, for the temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb. And city has no need of Summer Moon... for the glory of God is light and his lamp is the lamb. Nothing unclean will enter it... but only those who are written in the Lamb's book of life. (Revelation 21:9-10; 22-27)

This vision took place after Christ Second Coming, reaffirming the victory of his first coming on Easter morning. Notice it doesn't say God's people were rescued and taken up to heaven, leaving the earth behind. Instead, the Kingdom of God came down to earth and the two became one.

Jesus inaugurated his earthly ministry by preaching, "The kingdom of God is at hand, the kingdom of God is within you." In the Lord's Prayer Jesus taught, "thy kingdom come thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven."

Jesus came the first time to assure us the Kingdom is already here! That's the hope found in the book of Revelation. Yes, the powers and principalities of this present age seem to have the upper hand. Earthly rulers and their henchmen may oppose God by abusing the power God gave them but their hold on power is an illusion that won't last. They can't see that from the beginning Christ alone was and remains the king of King and lord of Lords who shall reign forever and ever.

The wife of the Lamb in John's vision is the Church, including you and me. We are called to faithfulness to resist cooperating with the world system whenever it organizes itself outside of God's authority. Remember, Jesus what said, "Do not be afraid. I have already overcome the world."

Jesus has overcome the world and wants us to live our lives accordingly. Waiting to be rescued from the world, waiting to escape the world's problems is not in our job description. Instead, the Holy Spirit empowers us to be, in Chesterton's words, "fearless, joyful, troublemakers," spending our lives opposing anything keeping God's will from being done on earth as it is in heaven.

I've been praying that despite our financial problems and limited resources we will rise up and bravely respond to God's calling to make an impact on the world around us. Yesterday, the members of the New Beginning team met for prayer and instruction. We are learning to be listeners so we can listen to the concerns of our neighbors but especially listen for the voice of God imploring us to bring his kingdom to the neighborhood we find ourselves in.

I ask you to be in prayer too. Pray for the New Beginnings team but also ask God to open your heart to the Lamb of God who lived for us, died for us and reigns in power for us.

Something tells me that the new heaven and the new earth are nearer than we think. Don't be left behind. Be prepared to be in the world but not of it for the sake of Christ and his kingdom. Amen.