

Revelation 1.12-20
1st in a series of 3 sermons
15th Sunday in Ordinary Time

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(A disclaimer: This sermon was written to be spoken, which does not always translate into correct grammatical form for a document written to be read.)

Revelation: The Last Word on Christ

Before I get to the scripture reading for this morning, I want to say a little bit about why I'm choosing to preach today and the following two Sundays from the book of Revelation.

This sermon had its genesis two months ago, in the middle of May, when the lectionary took us to the 21st chapter of the book of Revelation. Now among the four appointed readings for each Sunday, I am much more likely to choose the gospel or Hebrew scripture readings. Those stories appeal to me and fit more easily with the way that comes most naturally to me to preach.

But I do like the penultimate chapter of the book of Revelation with its words of a new heaven and a new earth. So I thought I would see what would happen if I tried to write a sermon from that text. One of the books I picked up to guide me was Eugene Peterson's meditation on the book of Revelation called *Reversed Thunder*, subtitled *The Revelation of John and the Praying Imagination*. In the first ten pages, Peterson quoted two of my favorite poets, Wendell Berry and Denise Levertov, so I decided this was a book worth reading.

And then when a stretch of three preaching Sundays opened up for me this month I wanted to return to Eugene Peterson and the book of Revelation.

Like I imagine is true for many of you, the book of Revelation—the Revelation, as Peterson simply calls it—is mostly uncharted waters. Or if you've been out in that boat, it's been a stormy, terrifying ride that you promised yourself as soon as you hit land, you'd never go again.

Many of you have heard me tell the story of my junior high youth group and the night I was thoroughly frightened by conversation about all the fearful things that were ahead, according to the book of Revelation. And even if you haven't ever read the Revelation you've surely been subject to all the prognosticators who scan through the text with their magic decoding rings to tell us that this symbol means Israel and this one means the United States and this one means March 19, 2012 is the day the world will end. G.K. Chesterton once remarked that "though St. John the Evangelist saw many strange monsters in his vision, he saw no creature so wild as one of his own commentators."¹

What caught my eye about Eugene Peterson's book was the absence of all that predicting and doomsday forecasting. Peterson says the Revelation is a work of pastoral imagination—it is the work of a poet who uses language "in fresh ways so that old truth is freshly perceived."² "Poetry is...the language of imagination."³ The Revelation, says Peterson, "will jar us out of our lethargy, get us to live on the alert, open our eyes to the burning bush and fiery chariots, open our

¹ Quoted in Eugene Peterson, *Reversed Thunder – The Revelation of John and the Praying Imagination*, Harper San Francisco, 1988, p. *xiii*.

² Peterson, p. *xii*.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

ears to the hardsteel promises and commands of Christ, banish boredom from the gospel, lift up our heads, [and] enlarge our hearts.”⁴

That sounds a lot more compelling to me than what’s too often offered up about the Revelation (including the unbiblical, but best selling, *Left Behind* series). So I’d like to offer you three Sundays of sermons on the Revelation. I’m borrowing chapter titles from Eugene Peterson’s book for the titles of the sermons—“The Last Word on Christ” today, “The Last Word on Evil” next Sunday and “The Last Word on Salvation” on the Sunday after that. And of course, “the last word” is not the final, locked-up, you’ll-never-need-to-know-anything-more word, (far be it from me to claim anything like that!) but the last word, is the one coming from the last book of the Bible.

All right then! Let’s begin.

We know very few autobiographical details about John, the writer of the Revelation. He writes that he is on the island of Patmos but we don’t really know why he has ended up there.⁵ John writes he was “in the spirit”—some kind of visionary state inspired by God’s Spirit. This visionary state took place “on the Lord’s day”⁶—literally Sunday but “poetically it refers to the day of Jesus’ resurrection (past) and [the day of Jesus’] coming (future).”⁷ John heard a loud voice that sounded like a trumpet commanding him to write what he saw and to send it to seven churches.

One more comment before I read the text. Two words show up a lot in John’s revelation: “as” and “like.” If you remember English class from perhaps middle school or high school, you recognize those words signal a metaphor on its way. We use metaphors when we’re trying to find the words to adequately express an idea or an image. This is not “precise [or] uncomplicated” language we’re going to be reading. The “imagery [of the Revelation] beckons us to suspend our pragmatism” and our desire to find the facts “...to enter its imaginative world”⁸ and see what’s there.

And we’ve already heard our first metaphor: John hears a “loud voice like a trumpet.” It catches his attention and he turns to see the voice he heard.

Now, listen for the word of God as it comes to us in Revelation 1.12-20. [read]

John turns to see the voice he heard. That’s one of those poetic juxtapositions that jars us—How can John see a voice? What he sees first is seven gold lampstands—lampstands that he will be told are the seven churches.

Then did you hear all those “as” and “likes”? John saw, in the midst of the lampstands, “one like the Son of Man.”

Bill Placher, in his book *Jesus the Savior –The Meaning of Jesus Christ for Christian Faith*, says that we could equally use “Child of a Human Being” in place of “Son of Man.” Jesus

⁴ *Ibid.*, p6.

⁵ *The Access Bible* (NRSV) suggests John might have been banished to Patmos by a judicatory or could have chosen to go there “either to carry his testimony or to use the relative isolation of Patmos to collect and edit his visions.” Eds. Gail R. O’Day and David Petersen, Oxford: Oxford University, notes, p. 392.

⁶ Revelation 1.10

⁷ *Access Bible*, notes, p. 392.

⁸ Christopher C. Rowland, “Revelation” in *The New Interpreter’s Bible*, vol. XII, Nashville: Abingdon, 1998, p. 506.

of Nazareth was a human male but the divine Christ of the Revelation is not limited to a human gender.

While we probably hear “Son of Man” or “Child of a Human Being” as meaning “regular, old person like you or me.” Actually, “Son of Man” (or however we chose to speak of it) is a “cosmic, victorious [apocalyptic] figure from God who will bring liberty and justice to” God’s people. Jesus uses “Son of Man,” “with its apocalyptic resonances, more than any other term to refer to himself”⁹ in the gospels.

So this one, like the Son of Man—like the Child of a Human Being—that John sees is dressed in the clothing of a priest—a robe and sash. Christ is a priest—connecting us with God and connecting God with us.¹⁰

The one John sees has hair as white as snow and as white wool and we remember the words of God in Isaiah: “Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be like snow; though they are red like crimson, they shall become like wool.”¹¹ Christ is holy.

The one John sees has flaming eyes. Think of all the biblical images associated with fire: the burning bush, fires burning on altars, the fiery furnace, fiery chariots, metal made pure by fire. Fire transforms and purifies. That too is the character and work of Christ.

The one John sees has feet like burnished bronze. Back in the book of Daniel, king Nebuchadnezzar had a vision of a statue whose feet were made of iron and clay. Iron and clay do not bond well and the statue fell apart. But a bronze base is firm and enduring.

The one John sees has a voice like many waters. That might be a river or an ocean or a great waterfall. We don’t know yet what the voice says but we know it is majestic, beautiful and powerful.

The one John sees holds seven stars in the right hand—the right hand, with all due respect to you lefties, is the hand of readiness—ready for action. Christ holds the stars, ruling the cosmos.

And from Christ’s mouth comes a sword. Not a sword for battle but the word of God which Paul says is the sword of the Spirit.¹² The writer of Hebrews tells us that “the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing until it divides soul from spirit, joints from marrow; it is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart.”¹³

Finally, the one John sees has a face as bright as the sun. When Moses sees God, his face shines so brightly, the people cannot look at him. When Jesus, Peter, James and John meet God on the mountain of transfiguration, Jesus’ “face shone like the sun.”¹⁴ And the blessing in the book of Numbers that we know as Aaron’s blessing says, “The Lord make the divine face to shine upon you and be gracious to you.”¹⁵ We can think too of the opening lines of the gospel of John, that tell us Christ is the light of the world.

⁹ William C. Placher, *Jesus the Savior – The Meaning of Jesus Christ for Christian Faith*, Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001, p29.

¹⁰ Much of the following understanding of the appearance of the One John saw comes from Peterson, pp. 33-38.

¹¹ Isaiah 1.18

¹² Ephesians 6.17

¹³ Hebrews 4.12

¹⁴ Matthew 17.2

¹⁵ Numbers 6.25

These are majestic and awe-inspiring images. Christ is priest, holy, pure and purifying. The rule of Christ is enduring and encompasses the entire cosmos. Christ speaks truth and is the light and blessing of the world.

And the response of the one who sees is to fall down. To know one is in the presence of the Holy. And that evokes reverence and awe and even fear for what is untamed and surprising and beyond our comprehension.

But the next words are not words of terror or destruction but they are words of peace: Fear not. It's what angels always say when they appear. It's what Gabriel said to Mary. It's what the angels said to the shepherds. It's what Jesus said to the disciples on the sea. It's what the angel said to the women at the tomb. Fear not.

And then the sign of blessing – the right hand put on John. “Do not be afraid.” It is the same word of peace and sign of blessing that Jesus gave to the disciples who were with him on the mountain of transfiguration when they fell to the ground in fear.¹⁶ And then Christ says, “I am the first and the last, and the living one. I was dead, and see, I am alive forever and ever.”

These are the words not of the human Jesus of Nazareth but of the cosmic and eternal Christ. The divine redeeming presence.

So why do we need this revelation? We've heard these stories before. We've seen these images elsewhere in scripture.

But by the time we've read all the way from Genesis to the book of Jude our minds might be a little muddled. “Our attention wanders. We [take up] arguments about predestination;...we digress into conjectures on the atonement; we divert ourselves by counting miracles or collecting grammatical oddities.” And then, says Eugene Peterson, “John's vision interrupts us. We are startled out of our digressions, [out of] our tangential arguments, [out of] our inattentive diversions. Our imaginations are kindled with a vision—of Christ...Everything is suddenly in proportion. *Christ* is the last word...The ten thousand details now find their place in the whole. Oddities and puzzles and curiosities...all arrange themselves...now around the Christ.”

The Revelation begins with Christ and “gives us the last word on Christ, and the word is that Christ is center and at the center.”¹⁷

Christ who is the center and at the center is the beginning and the end, the first and the last and the living one. This is the One who we belong to in our living and our dying. This is the One who, despite all the destruction the world can dish out, holds the keys to death and is alive. This is the One in whom we live and move and have our being.¹⁸

The Revelation opens with Christ and shakes us awake. If we've gotten weary, adjusted our sights to the expectations of the world, resigned ourselves to the reign of evil and destruction, or simply acclimated to the glamour and luxury of our culture, the Revelation jars us with the proclamation that there is One greater than all of that—One who holds our present, our past and our future. It is Christ—it is Christ who is holy, who connects us to God and God with us, who speaks truth, and in whom the whole creation finds its life, its center and its blessing.

¹⁶ Matthew 17.6,7

¹⁷ Peterson, p. 28.

¹⁸ Acts 17.28