

PALM SUNDAY REDUX

Revelation 7:9-17

April 17, 2016

First Presbyterian Church

High Point, NC

Service for the Lord's Day

It's always tricky to preach on Revelation. Whenever we read it and study it, there are so many things I want to remind you (and myself!) about, so many interpretive keys I want to give out to help us all get a handle on things. This week a new thought occurred to me—that reading Revelation is a little like the *Star Wars* franchise. Now, if you've seen *Star Wars*, you know how that begins, don't you? "A long time ago in a galaxy far, far away..." A long time ago. But if you think about *Star Wars*, it seems so future-oriented. Space travel and light sabers. But they tell us right there in the beginning, right there in those opening words, that *Star Wars* is about things that happened a long time ago. A vision of the future in a long ago setting. That's sort of what reading Revelation is about. This letter has a very particular setting—it was written for and about people going through very particular things in the past. But that doesn't keep it from being future-oriented at the same time.

So, we do well to remind ourselves what the church was facing when John had his vision on the Isle of Patmos. This was a letter to a church in crisis, written somewhere around the year 90, during the reign of the emperor Domitian. The seven particular churches to whom John writes lived in a world that may well have felt chaotic and uncertain. There were wars raging along the borders of the Roman Empire—wars that may not have affected their day-to-day lives, but that they would have heard word of, and would have been a constant threat. In the year 79, just ten years before John wrote this letter, the volcano Mt. Vesuvius had erupted, destroying the entire Roman city of Pompeii and beyond—estimates are that as many as 16,000 people perished. So the question of whether the foundations of the earth itself could be trusted was up for debate. But perhaps most importantly, the church was facing conflict with the earthly powers, specifically with the Roman Empire itself. While widespread persecution of Christians was not yet the norm across the Empire, it was on the horizon.¹ John could see it coming. Religion and politics were mixed in the Roman world, and quite on purpose. Worship of the Roman deities also signaled loyalty to the Roman state. And while Christians may not have yet been thrown to the lions on a regular basis, they were certainly economically, socially, and politically ostracized by non-participation in worship of the emperor or other deities. Accommodating to the ways of the empire was the practical way to go.² Many in Rome held onto the belief that an emperor was the son of a God and could save them, but of course John knew that was an impossible position for Christians to hold. John also knew that if Christians really resisted the Empire, then persecution was bound to be unleashed. And so John does several things in this letter: he encourages Christians to be Christians—that is, to stand up against the Empire; and then he warns them what will happen if they do that; and then he offers them some comfort by way of eternal promises.

Because this book, this Revelation that John has sent to the churches, is eschatological—which is just a fancy, theological way to say that it is future-oriented. It is focused on the future that those

¹ Brian K. Blount, *Revelation: A Commentary*, p. 12.

² Blount, p. 9.

Christians in Asia Minor, and that we all can expect because of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. It is a triumphant vision of our ultimate destiny. A peek through the veil, so to speak. A vision of what heaven might be like.

This glimpse behind the veil, this eschatological vision serves a purpose, though. John didn't intend it for entertainment value or for wild and fanciful speculation. It's a vision of hope given to a people who need encouragement. And we see that particularly in the selection that we read today. This is a really hopeful passage. It paints a picture of people from every nation, from all times and places, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before Jesus, who is referred to here as the Lamb. And we see this great mass of believers gathered around the throne, all robed in white, and crying out in a loud voice, "Salvation belongs to our God!" and waving palm branches.

Now where have we seen something like that before?

Do you remember Palm Sunday? It's been about a month now since we celebrated the triumphal entry of Jesus into Jerusalem, and we saw folks waving palm branches. They weren't wearing white robes, but they spread their cloaks on the donkey and on the ground. And they shouted "Hosanna!" which is a cry of praise, that has to do with salvation. It is difficult to translate, to get at exactly what it means, but it means something that is probably not that far off from what those in the white robes are saying as they gather around the throne of the Lamb. "Salvation belongs to our God!"

Of course, if you remember Palm Sunday, you'll also remember how quickly that scene turned from a scene of festive joy to something else. The week wasn't up before the shouts of "Hosanna!" turned to shouts of "Crucify him!" Ken preached on Palm Sunday, and he titled his sermon and called these events a "Cosmic Drama." And he talked about the uprising that Jewish leaders and the Roman Empire thought they were squashing. A little ragtag rebellion, the kind of thing they put down all the time. Ken said this: *But this isn't just any uprising; this isn't any small-town carpenter with delusions of grandeur. This isn't just a little crowd shouting hosanna. This is the Son of God, and in five days he will be hanging on a cross, but in seven days he will be risen from the grave, and the best the darkness can do is not enough to stop him. The worst the devil can do is not enough to stop him. The worst the empire can do is not enough to stop him.*

*He comes on a donkey, not on a mighty steed. He comes with palm branches, not swords and spears. He comes wearing simple robes, not shields and armor. Because this is a different kind of king, and he represents a different kind of kingdom, where love is the greatest power, greater than swords and spears and bombs and machine guns...*³

So, maybe hearing something about folks waving palms and crying out about salvation would have caught the attention of the churches who received this letter. And maybe, just maybe, they would have thought again about their situation with Rome, and the ways it was similar to that Palm Sunday when Jesus entered Jerusalem. Maybe they would have remembered the way he clashed with the earthly authorities in more than just some kind of effort to claim earthly power, but in a cosmic drama to overturn earthly powers, to right wrongs, to demonstrate servanthood, compassion instead of greed,

³ Ken Broman-Fulks, "Cosmic Drama" preached at First Presbyterian Church, High Point, NC on March 20, 2016.

peace instead of violence, to usher in a kingdom where none go without because others are hoarding more than enough for themselves, where the least are the greatest.

And what John is doing throughout this letter is encouraging the church to engage in this same cosmic drama. While the victory has been won in an ultimate sense, there are still earthly powers at work here and now. There is still conflict with an Empire that would combine patriotism and worship, that would see itself or any particular leader as the bringer of salvation. And when John speaks of the great ordeal, he is speaking of the conflict that those churches are engaging in at present, and even further, what he anticipates will be the real persecution that they will face if they truly live into their identity as Christians—if they stop colluding with the cultural religion of the Empire, and start living like those who are following the one who went to the cross. If they start following the Lamb.

John is promising them that it is not going to be easy. That was especially true for the churches of Asia Minor, but it is true for us, too. Suffering is a part of our human existence—a mistake that we sometimes make is to think that God’s job is to keep us from suffering—or that somehow we are doing something wrong if we are suffering. But what John sees is that when you are faced with the powers of this world, and you choose to follow Christ, suffering will come.

And knowing that, John’s vision promises them a hopeful future, one where suffering is no more, where God protects them, wipes away tears, where there is no hunger or thirst. They don’t cut and run like they did after Palm Sunday. This time, those gathered around the Lamb, they stay.

Because on Palm Sunday, they didn’t know something that those gathered around the throne know in full. Those gathered around the throne know, even more than you and I know, the power of the resurrection. That the Lamb who was slain has also become our shepherd. That the cosmic drama that Ken spoke of on Palm Sunday, it is completed. And so no one has to run. The great, ultimate, eschatological hope that we have—this victorious promise that we expect to experience someday—it is a vision of this that John gives the churches of Asia Minor, and that he gives to us. A glimpse through the veil. And the glimpse that we get brings to mind something familiar. It’s Palm Sunday all over again. Only not exactly.

Because on Palm Sunday, the crowds capitulate to Rome, turning their back on the Messiah. But here, John encourages the churches to resist Rome, giving them a picture of those who stay faithful to the Lamb forever and ever. On Palm Sunday, the celebration gave way to tears around the cross. At the throne of the Lamb, God will wipe away every tear. On Palm Sunday, “Hosanna!” turned to shouts of “Crucify him!” But in John’s vision it turns to songs of never-ending praise: *“Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our God forever and ever! Amen.”*