Staying Power

Vienna Presbyterian Church
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Revelation 13:1-10

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Revelation is, admittedly, a strange book. The passage I read from, Revelation 13, is a case in point. What are we to make of this sea creature with seven heads and ten horns?

I distinctly remember reading Revelation for the first time in college. It rocked my world. I couldn’t fathom how this book made it into sacred Scripture. I remember thinking why didn’t anybody tell me this book was in the Bible? It’s unlike any other book I’ve ever read.

Revelation scares people. It’s a story about all manner of diabolical beasts, fire-breathing dragons and stars falling from the nighttime sky. I wouldn’t advise reading it to children as a bedtime story. It could give them nightmares.

But here’s the deal! Revelation is written to bless and encourage its readers. No, really! It’s not written to scare the literal hell out of us. Consider how John opens this book, “Blessed is the one who reads the words of this prophecy…and who takes to heart what is written in it” (1:3).

We come at long last to the last chapter, 31, in this abridged, chronological version of the Bible called The Story. We’re told at the outset that the Apostle John is the author of Revelation (1:4). We read in verse 9 that this vision is received while he is banished on the Island of Patmos as one of Jesus’ missionaries.

While we commonly refer to Revelation as a book, it’s actually a letter written “to seven churches in the province of Asia” (1:4). We can locate this cluster of churches on a map. Don’t confuse Asia Minor with the continent called Asia. Asia Minor is where modern day Turkey is located today.

John identifies these seven churches by name in verse 11—Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia and Laodicea. Each church will be addressed specifically in chapters 2-3. While this letter is most often attributed to end-time events, these first few chapters address more immediate, pressing concerns relevant to first century believers.

Seven is a highly symbolic number in Revelation. There are seven seals, seven trumpets, seven bowls and seven angels to go along with seven churches. Seven is the Biblical number expressing fullness and completeness. Since
Revelation deals with last things, even its numerology witnesses to God’s fulfillment of human history.

No aspect of Revelation has engendered more speculation than this beast in Revelation 13. At the close of chapter 13, we’re told that the mark of the beast is the number 666. It’s one number less than seven; a symbol of imperfection.

Most of the pictures for this beast that I researched to include in sermon slides look like they came right out of a Marvel Comic Book or video game. How on earth do you depict this sea creature with seven heads and ten horns? The best I could do was this French tapestry dating back to 1377.

There is no lack of speculation about the meaning of these multiple heads and horns. Most people who drill down on such things correlate them with world dynasties and political leaders, but don’t press me for details. It’s above my pay grade!

The true character of this beast is evidenced by the crowns it wears on its ten horns (13:1). These crowns suggest this beast has every intention to rule.

Here’s what I find interesting. Revelation was written near the end of the first century when Domitian was emperor of the Roman Empire (81-96 AD). He’s the first emperor who tried to compel people to join in emperor worship. Domitian insisted that all Roman subjects address him as “Our Lord and God.” Christians who opposed this practice faced persecution and martyrdom as a consequence.

John tells us in verse 4 that this beast is a formidable opponent. Those who bow down give him homage, “Who is like this beast? Who can make war against him?” This beast seems invincible. Certainly to Christians living in the first century, Rome and Domitian seemed invincible.

This beast opposes God at every turn. In verse 6, “he opens his mouth to blaspheme God and slander his name.” In verse 7, “he makes war against
the saints of God.” This beast resists everything Jesus stands for. Quite literally, he’s the Antichrist.

There have been various attempts in history to identify this beast. He’s been identified with tyrants like Mussolini and Hitler. The Reformer Martin Luther called Pope Leo X the Antichrist. This didn’t sit very well with the religious establishment and they excommunicated Luther a short while later.

In the middle of this vision, John breaks off to announce, “He who has ears to hear, let him hear” (13:9). These are the same words spoken to each of the seven churches by John in chapters 2-3. Jesus often speaks using the same idiomatic phrase. It means to pay really close attention and listen up. I’m about to tell you something important.

Notice what comes next: “This calls for patient endurance and faithfulness on the part of the saints” (13:10). These same words appear in the next chapter also (14:12).

The Greek word translated “patient endurance” is hupomone. It’s a compound Greek word consisting of hupo, meaning under, and mone, meaning remain. So, literally, the word means to remain or abide under. This same word appears, you guessed it, seven times in the book of Revelation.

John doesn’t instruct fellow believers to sit around and wait to see what will happen next. Hupomone suggests active waiting. Believers are called upon to wait confidently and expectantly until Jesus returns.

Remember, this letter is meant to encourage Christians who are experiencing Roman persecution and suffering. John tells his readers not to give up. Don’t ever give up. Jesus will triumph.

We can become so wrapped around the axle of dragons and beasts in Revelation that we miss the point. John opens with the words, “The revelation of Jesus Christ which God gave him to show his servants what must soon take place” (1:1). This letter is not ultimately about the Antichrist or the mark of the beast. It’s about Jesus Christ, who will achieve a final cosmic victory over the diabolical forces of evil.
There are times, in this letter, when the evil forces of Satan look like they have the upper hand. But things aren’t always what they seem. Evil is doomed to fail. Evil rages in this last book, not because it is invincible, but because it is desperate. The devil rages like a wild animal who knows its time is running out.

Revelation attests from beginning to end that God is in sovereign control of the cosmos. Evil will not have the last word. Jesus will triumph.

The last few chapters soar with hopefulness. The devil and his demons are thrown into a lake of fire. People will gather the world over to worship this lamb who is seated on the throne. A lamb on the throne seems like a mixed metaphor (4:6-11). Ordinarily, kings occupy thrones, not lambs. But Jesus is the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world. His sacrifice is worshipped by the 24 elders and all the company of heavenly hosts. He alone, as the Lamb of God, is worthy to receive glory and honor, wisdom and strength (4:11). He alone is able to open the scroll and break its seven seals to bring everything to fulfillment. He will usher in the new heaven and the new earth. He alone is given the honor of King of Kings and Lord of Lords.

Dr. Vernon Grounds was professor of theology at Denver Seminary and its president for many years. He tells the story about a time when he was a seminary student. The seminary he attended had no gymnasium, so Vernon and his friends played basketball at a nearby public school gym. An elderly janitor would wait patiently in the evening until the seminarians finished playing. Invariably, this janitor would sit there reading his Bible. One day, Vernon’s friends asked this janitor what he was reading. He answered, “The book of Revelation.” These seminarians had just been studying this obscure book, so they asked this janitor if he understood it. “Oh, yes,” he assured them, “I understand it just fine.” Well, what does it mean?” they asked. The janitor answered, “It means Jesus is gonna win.”

Dr. Grounds writes, “In all my years of teaching seminary, that’s the best one-sentence commentary on Revelation I’ve ever heard. Jesus is gonna win.”

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Let me bring this sermon all the way down to where we live. Here’s the “so-what” portion of this sermon. Some of you could use some patient endurance right about now. You are losing your resolve to wait on God. You’re waiting for your prayers to be answered. You’re waiting for a career move, a friendship to repair, a prodigal child to come home, a friendship to rekindle, a child to hold in your arms or some such waiting. Can’t you help us, Lord? Can’t you make it a little bit better?

The Bible is full of stories of people waiting. Revelation tells one such story. People are waiting for God’s deliverance. Give us staying power, Lord. Give us endurance—endurance in suffering and hard times.

Resist the temptation to put arbitrary deadlines on God. Let go of your timetable. Give us patient endurance, Lord.

The last book of the Bible ends well. The devil gets his due. Jesus wins! The end! This calls for patient endurance on our part.