

Sermon Title: When Every Eye Shall See
Text: Revelation 1:4-8; John 18:33-37
Reign of Christ Sunday

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Memorial Presbyterian Church, Appleton, WI
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I need to get a sense of the lay of the land this morning. How many of you are familiar with, or have read one of the multitude of books in the *Left Behind* series? I know Sunday morning is not usually a time for public confession of faith, but I need to probe just a little deeper. How many of you agree with the basic presupposition of that series, that the book of Revelation is essentially a narration of events that will occur at the end of time, when this earth will be destroyed, and the elect of God will be gathered up into heaven?

Our lectionary reading from Revelation for this morning reminds me of the incredible impact this particular part of the New Testament seems to be having on the world around us, and not just this book of the New Testament but this particular mode of understanding its meaning and content. But I'm reminded, as well, that while this part of Scripture has been a most fruitful seedbed for speculation on end times and God's judgment, the particular reading which has become so popular through this imaginative series of books is in reality a fairly recent development in Christian thought, and hardly the mainstream.

So, first a little history lesson. Dispensationalism, from which this reading of Revelation draws its foundations, is really the product of the mid 1800's, and a disaffected Anglican clergyman by the name of John Nelson Darby. Darby grew increasingly disenchanted by the corruption he saw to be filtering into religious institutions, and he "began to entertain 'doubts as to the Scriptural authority for church establishments.'" This led him to leave behind not only the Anglican church, but to formulate a harsh judgment of established churches in general. He became a part of a loosely organized federation of believers identified as "The Plymouth Brethren" and began to formulate a new interpretation of biblical history. Darby based this new system on seven "dispensations" and eight "covenants" which he saw clearly delimited in the biblical text, beginning at the Garden of Eden, and culminating in the final battles of Armageddon.

What marked each dispensation was the fact that God had laid a "law" on the hearts of humankind, which humans promptly broken. The covenants were promises God then made which both provide for the judgment of those who have failed to keep God's law, and for the eventual salvation of those who persevered. The core of Darby's thinking in relation of Revelation is that we were living in the last "dispensation" awaiting a "new covenant" which would be sealed by destruction and recreation, not only of the world as we know it, but specifically of the church. Because the church, in Darby's scheme, was specifically *not* the means of God's gracious act, but would itself be found wanting and destroyed, as a righteous and holy remnant within it would be identified and "raptured" before the final battle began.

The interesting historical accident that gave what would have been an otherwise obscure reading of Scripture such prominence was the publication of a new annotated bible in 1909, edited by one Cyrus Ingerson Scofield. That Scofield Reference Bible, as it came to be known, sought at the turn of the century to bring into a single volume the core of evangelical scholarship and interpretations of Scripture. Among other things, it is this Scofield Reference Bible that set James Ussher's chronology of the Old Testament firmly in the American mind. So, during the

Scopes trial, Clarence Darrow could question William Jennings Bryant as to whether he accepted the notion that the date of creation as “the nightfall preceding 23 October, 4004 BC.”

Scotfield, influenced and shaped by the Plymouth Brethren, embraced dispensationalism, and wrote it deep into his commentary. So it became an essential part of the fundamentalist controversies which then swept through Presbyterianism among others in the 1920's, and to abbreviate this history lesson, gives us *Left Behind*, as a more or less authoritative popular reading of the last book of the New Testament. All based on the musings of a disaffected Anglican preacher from the 1800's who had basically given up on the church.

What does all this have to do with the Sunday after Thanksgiving, the last week of the old church year, and “the Reign of Christ”? We obviously don't have the time, nor is this necessarily the appropriate forum, for fleshing out the varied and disturbing images of the Revelation of St. John, but we do, I think, need to pry this morning's reading out of that popular context if we're to understand what it has to say to us as we are about to step into Advent, and prepare once more for the celebration of our Lord's birth.

You see throughout the broader span of the church's history, Revelation has had a place in the work and life of the church, and it is found most clearly right here, at the cusp of the old year and new year of the Christian calendar—in the movement from Common Time to Advent which we claim as Reign of Christ Sunday. It is on this day that the lectionary has, since well before Martin Luther, set the images of Revelation into the worship life of the church: images of judgment, coupled with stories of the final scenes of Jesus' earthly ministry with its betrayal and arrest, of desertion and crucifixion. In the broad arch of Christian history it was in *this* way that we would be prepared for the turn back to Mary, and Elizabeth, to Joseph, and stables, and angel voices. It's here that Revelation has historically spoken into the witness of our faith.

So what are we to make of *that*? How do we shuffle this card into the deck of our faith knowing that the strange images of John—its horsemen and trumpets, broken seals and terrifying battles—have found their voice not as the final act of a God who has tried and tried with this world but now is just fed up, but as the *preparation* for God's true saving act: the incarnation? I can think of several, but this morning let me just give you three to chew on.

The first is the one that I think is most quickly lost among the heirs of Darby and Scotfield, for whom the drama of divine salvation consists mainly in waiting for that last trumpet and the rage of God's retribution. The faith of God that is shown us in Jesus Christ is an *incarnational* faith: it is one that sees and seeks the essential value of this creation, not so that it can be gathered up and destroyed, but so that it can be transformed—in the twinkling of an eye, Paul would say—according to God's original intention, first uttered amid the formless void when the Word said, “Let there be...” Whatever this book of Revelation might be about, if God so loved this world that God sought to enter it in fullness and in grace, it cannot contradict that love. It is not so much that this world must be destroyed, but that it must be put back into *context*, renewed, and reclaimed for God's true purpose.

But one of the things that means is that not only our living must be set right, but our dying, as well. Why is it, do you suppose, that on *Christ the King* Sunday as we used to call it, the Gospel

brings us into Pilate's chamber, and this confrontation between Caesar's puppet and the Lord of all creation? Why is it that before we can see the New Jerusalem, descending from God we must first endure the garments rolled in blood?

Here's my best guess: because the sort of living God intends for this world does not *deny* death. Rather, it's a way of living that claims dying as a part of its fulfillment. True Christian faith doesn't say, "Jesus died so I don't have to," but it says, "Jesus died to show us the way to life: to prove to us that God's "Yes" to life is finally stronger than death's "no!" Again, it's Paul who provides the words: not that we will not die, but that death will be swallowed up in victory.

That is the essential claim of Revelation, and what we celebrate as our King leaves Pilate's court for a cross: not that we will be lifted up into the skies as a disaffected preacher thought in the 18th century, but as centuries of monastics attested—and the fact that it sounds so strange to us is as much a diagnosis of our disease as anything else—that it is in contemplation of our dying that we will discover God's claim on our life. Revelation does not provide the encoded path by which we can avoid the hard facts of our living, but shows us the God who so loved this world that he couldn't just let it be, but claimed it—lived into it, and even tasted its death—in order to bring its salvation.

And its right there that I hear the hint of one last thing this strange Apocalypse of John might offer us as we step into anew into the stream of God's saving story. Contrary to Scofield and Darby and the Dispensationalists, the mighty acts of God in this world are not about you, or me—seeking out the remnant that at the end of the day is somehow *worth* it to God. It's not that God so loves *me* that he was willing to unleash fire and brimstone on everyone else in some sort of Blackhawk Down finale to the history of the world. What God *loves* and what God seeks to *save* is not me, or you, or *us*, but the *World*. The Cosmos. The promise is not that if you keep your eyes closed and pray hard enough you will see it, but that *every* eye will see him, even those who pierced him, and all the tribes of the earth will shout out. "So it is to be, amen!" says Revelation.

God's saving work is not for "the few, the proud." God's saving work is for those whom Jeremiah saw limping back to Jerusalem: the widow and the orphan, the blind and the lame, the broken and the misfit. Not the righteous remnant, but "all flesh will see it together." That's what we're bracing for as we finish up our Thanksgiving leftovers, and begin to pull out the ornaments and tinsel and wrapping paper. It's what is truly to be revealed in the season that waits just around the corner: a dispensation, to be sure, but not of God's final wrath. It is the pouring out of a love so deep that even a cross could not stop its movement, not to take death away, but to swallow up death in victory: a dispensation not for your eyes only, but for *every* eye to see.

Let us pray.