

July 11, 2010-06-24

Psalm 107:1-9; Revelation 3:20-22

STAR WARS: A NEW HOPE

A number of years ago, when Marge Carpenter was Moderator of the General Assembly of our denomination, she traveled around the world proclaiming her theme: “Mission, Mission, Mission!” Throughout the book of Revelation, John loudly proclaims: “Worship, Worship, Worship!”

Worship permeates the Revelation – even during the horrific battle scenes that come later on in the book. John believes that worship is what we Christians are about – both here on earth and in heaven. All of creation worships Almighty God and the Lamb.

As we will see in the book, when the Church is persecuted, it worships. The martyrs, even in their grief, worship. I have found in my own life that I am able to get through difficult times when I worship regularly – both with my congregation, and in my daily devotional times.

As we continue on through this series on “Revelation” you will see that the Call to Worship each Sunday will be from “Revelation,” and most of the hymns we sing will have their texts taken from John’s vision. There is music all through this wonderful book, and some of the most famous choral pieces come directly from John’s text.

The well known passage that we are considering today, “Behold, I stand at the door and knock” comes at the end of John’s vision of Jesus speaking directly to the seven churches in Asia Minor. We could spend several Sundays speaking just about those seven churches. We’ll have to be content with just a brief overview.

These messages follow a pattern: there is a reference to the Lord, a summary of the good news about each church, a summary of the bad news (except for 2 churches which have only good news), an admonition, and finally the promise in 3:20.

As we read these 7 letters, we need to understand what was happening at that time in each of those 7 churches, why John wrote what he did, remember that he wanted to give them hope, then see what comparisons can be made with our own church.

Some of those ancient churches were poor and struggling to survive the oppressive Roman economy. Others were faring better economically. Some were located in important cities in the empire; others were not. Some cities had strong cults of emperor worship. John had a specific message for each.

“To the church in Ephesus, John wrote that they were patient and hard working, but no longer filled with love. The church in Smyrna was praised for being rich in the spirit even though they were poor in material things. Pergamum was threatened by contemporary society, but for the most part that church was withstanding the evils of its culture.

“The church in Thyatira was filled with love, faithfulness, service, and patience; but it was too tolerant of those of their number who mislead some of the congregation. The Sardis church was once faith filled and alive, but now was mostly dead. Philadelphia Christians were powerless and threatened, but faithful. Laodicea was rich in wealth, but lukewarm in faith.” (Dr. Walther’s descriptions on p. 37 in the Leader’s Guide)

Are there lessons we can learn for the situations in which we find ourselves? Remember that John wanted to strengthen each church and give hope to the Christians there. There are a number of questions we might ask as we examine each of the seven churches.

Is Jesus Christ proclaimed as Lord in everything we say and do? Is He the center of our worship, our fellowship, our mission, our witness? How can we do better at lifting up Jesus as Lord? What are our idols? Are we tempted to worship something other than Jesus Christ?

Do we look more like the world around us than like followers of Jesus? Do we love one another and those outside our congregation? Or do we squabble about inconsequential things within the church, and ignore the terrible need outside these walls that cries out for our attention?

In his sermon to Shenango Presbytery last month, Dr. Hink used this sentence from Philippians 1:27: “Only let your manner of life be worthy of the gospel of Christ...” This means how we live our personal lives, AND how we live together as a congregation – as the body of Christ.

The Christians in Smyrna and Philadelphia were praised because they were rich and strong in spiritual things, and remained faithful even during the hardest of times. In 2:10 Jesus says, “Be faithful, even if you have to die, I will give you the crown of life.”

About this verse, Max Lucado writes: “Can you imagine a life with no death, only life? If you can, you can imagine heaven. For citizens of heaven wear the crown of life . . . We are not made of steel, we are made of dust. And this life is not crowned with life, it is crowned with death. The next life, however, is different.” [Max Lucado *Daily* – “Only Life” – for July 9, 2010.

Pergamum Christians were struggling, but were withstanding the evils of society. They all had choices to make. Those churches may not have had glitzy ads from Madison Avenue raining down upon them day and night, but the pressures of society to conform to what Rome wanted were just as great. The daily little battles that those followers of Jesus faced are the same ones we face. We have choices.

Temptations abound, and some seem so innocuous. “It’s not going to matter if I do this just once.” “Who’s it going to hurt?” “Who’s going to know?” “If it feels good, how can it be wrong?” Satan is a wily one, and John warns his churches to beware the evil one.

The Ephesians were hard working but had missed the main objective: to love one another. Paul wrote: “If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. . . . If I give away all I have. . . but have not love, I gain nothing.” 1 Corinthians 13:1, 3

The church in Thyatira seemed to be doing everything well, but John had one warning for them: they were too lax in dealing with people who misled the congregation. This is a good warning for all church leaders in our time.

Sardis and Laodicea received the harshest message. Sardis Christians were now mostly dead in their faith, and Laodicea had Christians who were nothing but lukewarm in their faith, and the Lord said He would spit them out of His mouth. How horrible they must have felt!

But John's vision does not leave them or us in despair. The churches are called to repent and return to the Lord. And it is in the message to the lukewarm Laodiceans that Jesus says, "Behold, I stand at the door and knock." He ends His evaluation with the gift of hope and a promise.

I hope most of you have seen this famous painting by Warner Sallman that is based on Revelation 3:20.



The beautiful thing about this painting is that Mr. Sallman put no handle on the door. It cannot be opened from the outside. The door must be opened from the inside in order to welcome Jesus into the home. So it is with us. We must open the door to our hearts and welcome Jesus inside. The choice is up to us. **“O come to my heart, Lord Jesus; there is room in my heart for Thee,”** proclaims the chorus of a lovely old hymn.

In his 2005 book *“The Paradox of Choice: Why More is Less”* author Barry Schwartz maintains that “our consumerist society has produced so much choice that people are increasingly paralyzed by complexity. Faced with dizzying choices, people are becoming intellectually frozen and spiritually frazzled.” [Karl Travis in *The Thoughtful Christian*]

Some years ago, a member of our congregation in Glenshaw became a Volunteer in Mission with the PC(USA). She spent 12 months in a remote section of Malawi in Africa as a nurse practitioner.

When Ruth returned home, one of the first things she did was to go to the local Giant Eagle, which is a huge store in Glenshaw, to buy a box of tea. When she got to that aisle, she stood frozen in front of all those boxes of tea. An employee stopped to ask her if she needed help.

She thanked him, then left the store. She could not cope with all those choices because where she lived in Malawi, there was only one choice for tea. Writing in *“The Thoughtful Christian,”* Karl Travis says, “Choices are a theological issue. In Genesis 2, creation was ordered by God in such a way that human beings could live safely and joyfully with one another and with God, provided the humans lived within the options provided by God.

But Adam and Eve chose to live outside those divinely sanctioned choices and creation has been in chaos ever since – until Jesus came and began the process of restoration. In “Revelation” John is encouraging the 7 churches to make good choices – to choose to live within the parameters set by God.

In Episode 3 of the “Star Wars” movies, an evil emperor claims the power and dominion, and in Episode 4, “A New Hope,” the army, led by Darth Vader, is quick to destroy anyone who opposes the empire. Princess Leia leads a small group rebelling against the evil empire. Obi Wan Kenobi trains Luke Skywalker in the power of “The Force” in order that he might withstand the temptations and attacks of Darth Vader.

Luke has many choices to make. In “A New Hope” he makes good choices and he and his friends, Princess Leia and Han Solo are able to destroy the Death Star before it can obliterate them. But Darth Vader is still alive. As we will see in two weeks, in “The Empire Strikes Back” there is more evil for Luke, Leia and Han to face.

We will also see that in Revelation John has dire visions, and a dreadful battle between good and evil will take place. What choices will the heroes of “Star Wars” make? What choices will the characters in Revelation make?

Jesus stands at the door and knocks. The choice is ours. Do we welcome Him in? Do we declare Him “Lord?” Or do we succumb to the temptations of our culture? John’s visions were meant to give the churches hope.

The first step we can take as we face our choices is to surround ourselves with worship and praise – just as John does in Revelation. It is a reminder of the hope we have in Jesus.

And, we can open our hearts to His indwelling presence. His promise is unbreakable: if we open the door, He will come into our hearts and dwell with us. Is there any greater hope or assurance?

Let us pray. Dear Lord, as we sing “Blessed Assurance! Jesus Is Mine!” fill us with strong hope in Your promise that when You knock on the door of our hearts, You will come in if we but open the door. Help us to make good choices as individual Christians and as a congregation so that when we behold You face to face, we will hear You say to us, “Well done, good and faithful servants. Enter into the joy of your Master.” We pray this in Your name. Amen.

The Rev. Pamela Maloney
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