

July 4, 2010

Psalm 30:1-5, 11-12; Revelation 1:1-8, 17-20

STAR WARS

Last month I had the privilege and pleasure of leading the Bible study for those who attended the Synod of the Trinity Gathering of Presbyterian Women at Waynesburg University. I had a marvelous time, and I was also blessed in many ways during my weeks of research for my sessions.

The Bible Study that will be done by the women in many Presbyterian Churches beginning in September will be on the Book of Revelation. It is a wonderful study, and I hope it will put to rest any fear or confusion that folks have about John's vision.

Too many people think "Revelation" is just plain weird, or kookie, and totally irrelevant for today's world. Others have decided it's impossible to understand the book. Nothing could be further from the truth.

"Revelation" is as up-to-date as George Lucas' "Star Wars" movies – about which you will be hearing in my series on this wonderful book of the Bible. There are indeed strange and confusing things in "Revelation" but I believe that we can unpack the symbolism in the visions so that we will be able to understand what John is saying and celebrate with him the hope that permeates this book.

This morning I want to give you background information that is essential to any study of "Revelation," then in the upcoming weeks, we'll look at the hope John gives us, the ultimate battle between good and evil, and John's vision of the new heaven and the new earth.

The infant Christian Church grew by leaps and bounds, thanks to the outpouring of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. So powerful, so joyful was the good news of Jesus' resurrection and ascension that even Gentiles became believers, were baptized and received the gifts of the Spirit. The Holy Spirit was out of control, and the power was palpable.

By the time crazy old Nero became Emperor of Rome, the persecution of Christians had begun. Some of it resulted in families being torn apart, with ostracism thrown in. Other people lost jobs and friendships. Some were imprisoned, as was the Apostle Paul; still others were murdered for their faith, either by crucifixion, beheading, or as victims in the vicious games so loved by the Romans.

Yet there were areas where the Christians lived lives of relative ease, drifting into complacency as their culture pulled them into the Roman style of life. What was happening to Christians in John's day can be found in various parts of our world, today.

The author of Revelation, a man named John, was a prisoner on the island of Patmos toward the end of the first century AD. It was a hellish place to which the Roman Emperor Domitian had exiled Christians in an attempt to snuff out this bothersome group that claimed a Jew named Jesus was Lord, and not the Emperor.

Domitian was so obsessed with wanting to be called Lord and God, that he even banished his own wife to Patmos when she confessed Jesus as Lord. What had begun as a time of great joy for the first disciples had become a confusing time of persecution, fear, and anxiety for some, and dangerous complacency for others as they were absorbed into the surrounding culture.

It was in the midst of this scenario that John received his vision and then wrote about it to the 7 churches. The first and perhaps most important thing to remember about John's vision is that it is one of great hope and joy, meant to strengthen and energize the persecuted Church of Jesus Christ.

It also served as a wake-up call to those churches who had succumbed to the pressures and temptations of the Empire, becoming lukewarm in their discipleship and witness to the risen, reigning Lord. For them it was a strong call to repentance.

Revelation was written during a specific time in history and was directed to a specific group of people. We need to keep this in mind as we study this wonderful book. "John wanted to change the way Christians look at the world here and now.

"He particularly wanted them to understand that the Roman Empire's demands to conform to its religious and moral standards were not benign, but diabolical – inspired by a dragon (that is, Satan), whose ultimate goal was to promote idolatry." Susan R. Garrett from "The Thoughtful Christian" study. For John it was as simple as God versus the wiles of Satan. The danger for Christians was real and it was to be found everywhere – either in outright persecution or in the temptations of the Roman Empire's culture.

The Revelation is also full of Old Testament references and images. John was a Jew who knew his scriptures well, and the churches to which he wrote were filled with people who also knew the scriptures of the Old Testament. In chapters 8 & 9 alone there are 50 Old Testament references!

In addition, John's letter was meant to be **heard** during worship. Keep this in mind. Worship would have surrounded the reading of the Revelation. It would have been an auditory experience – full of drama and excitement, much like the Greek plays with which everyone would have been familiar.

Another important thing you need to know about Revelation is that it is packed with singing. John's vision has human beings and heavenly creatures – indeed, all of creation, just bellowing their lungs out in praise.

There is a tremendous amount of symbolism in Revelation, which has unfortunately been misinterpreted over the centuries. One of the most valuable tools to have in understanding “Revelation” is the study written by Dr. James A. Walther, Sr. who was one of my professors at Pittsburgh Seminary. Later we were colleagues at Hillside Presbyterian Church in Greenville. I was privileged to study it with him.

In his study, Dr. Walther unpacks the symbolism for us so that we don't get bogged down by numbers like 7, 12, 3½, 666, 144,000; or by colors; or by fantastic creatures. This kind of symbolism was prevalent in John's day, but can be very confusing for us.

For instance, 7 was considered a perfect number; 3½ would therefore be an imperfect number – just half of 7. 144,000 is 12 X 12,000. 12 is the number of tribes in ancient Israel. 144,000 is simply a multitude from each of the 12 tribes – a number too great to count in Greek. I'll deal with 666 in an upcoming sermon in a few weeks.

Eyes symbolized knowledge; hands symbolized power. The lion stood for royalty; the eagle for swiftness; a dragon or sea monster symbolized evil. White is the color of joy or victory; blood red is the color for martyrdom. And so it goes on and on.

Symbolism is one of the most characteristic traits of apocalyptic literature. Almost every thing of this earth was used symbolically. Once we understand this, much of the mystery of The Revelation becomes clearer.

With all of this as background, we come to the first part of The Revelation that was given to John. The word of the Lord comes to John and he writes a letter that he wants read in all seven churches. The letter begins with a doxology of praise to Jesus Christ: “to him be glory and dominion forever and ever. **Amen.**” That’s a shouted “**Amen**”.

This is a huge clue for us. John is saying that Jesus Christ, and only Jesus Christ, is worthy of our praise, is worthy of glory, is worthy of power. Jesus Christ is Lord. Caesar is NOT. This is a daring and dangerous claim to make with Domitian on the Roman throne. But it is **the central thesis** of John’s Revelation.

John shares these words: “I am the Alpha and Omega (the beginning and the end, the first and the last)” says the Lord God, “who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty.” Everything begins and ends with God. v. 8

John tells the 7 churches that the Son of Man (Jesus Christ) has them in His hand. (Ch. 1:20) He is protecting them as they do spiritual and physical battle with Rome. This is reason for great hope!

In the phenomenally successful “Star Wars” series of movies, George Lucas takes us on a journey through six movies that tell the story of Anakin Skywalker: his rise, his fall through being seduced into the dark side of the Force, and his eventual redemption.

They are powerful movies, full of strange creatures, fantastic scenarios, and incredible battles (made even more powerful by new and ever better movie technology). It is a classic story of good versus evil. And much of what we see in “Star Wars” is also seen in “Revelation.”

I’m going to use bits and pieces of the “Star Wars” movies to help us understand what’s going on in “Revelation.” John has so much to tell us about how to live our lives as Christians in a world that is decidedly not Christian. And underscoring it all is his message of hope and encouragement to the churches, proclaimed through the venue of worship.

So, hang onto your seats! We're about to go on a journey through John's "Revelation" that could begin with these words from "Star Wars:" "Long, long ago in a galaxy far, far, away...."

Let us pray. Lord, You are the great "I Am," the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. We thank You that You hold us in the palm of Your hand. We thank You for Your love for us, which is beyond our ability to completely understand it. We pray that John's vision will help us understand Your love for us, and that his vision will help us and other Christian churches stand firm in our faith no matter what pressures from society or what attacks we may face. Continue to walk with us, Lord Jesus. May our lives give You the glory, honor, and praise. Amen.

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