

Revelation 4 - 8th Sunday after Pentecost

Today we begin our six-week series on the Book of Revelation – not an easy book to read and understand. The wild imagery and language require background and interpretation, and lots of it. Revelation as translated from the original Greek, means an apocalypse: a disclosure of Jesus Christ, presented in deliberately startling images and time-bending episodes, to shake off the narrow vision of ordinary life and time.

Revelation advances in distinct stages. It begins with letters to “the seven churches that are in Asia,” some faithful, some faithless, and some so inert that they’re even worse than apostate. Jesus is revealed as true priest, who leads and receives worship in heaven; true king, who does battle against the enemies of God; and true bridegroom, who gathers his beloved into the New Jerusalem for an everlasting honeymoon in the final chapters.

John begins his letter to the seven churches with a Trinitarian blessing: Grace and peace come “from him who is and who was and who is to come,” or, from “I am who I am.” This captures the everlastingness of God as well as his presence to all of history. This blessing comes “from the seven spirits who are before his throne.” Not only is this out of the usual Trinitarian order; the number has jumped from one Holy Spirit to seven!

The numbers in Revelation are neither math nor a secret code. As church father Irenaeus figured out over 1800 years ago, you can manipulate numbers to mean anything you want, so they prove nothing. But in the symbolic usage of Revelation, seven is the number of completion and perfection, as in the days of creation according to Genesis. The “seven spirits” signify the perfection of God’s (one) Spirit. This accounts for the recurring sevens in the opening chapter: seven churches, seven golden lamp-stands, seven stars, and seven angels.

In the last part of the Trinitarian blessing, we hear “from Jesus Christ the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of kings on earth.” Jesus is the one who loves us, freed us from our sins by shedding his blood for us, made us a kingdom of priests for God his Father, and will come again with the clouds of heaven. This first chapter of the reading ends with the Lord God announcing; “I am the Alpha and the Omega, who is and who always was and who is still to come, the Almighty one.”

There are four popular ways of interpreting Revelation that can be summarized as: **Preterism**, which claims that the prophecies were fulfilled before 400 CE; **Historicism** which claims that the prophecies are being fulfilled; **Idealism** claims no historical fulfilment; and **Futurism** which claims that the fulfilment is still to come.

This begs some questions: Who wrote Revelation? When? How did it become part of the canon? Who was responsible for it’s inclusion in the

New Testament and when was it added? What is the genre? What role did politics play in its writing and inclusion in the New Testament? How did the disciples and apostles fit into the story? What part did the discovery of the buried “secret writings” in 1945 at Nag Hammadi play in helping to understand the Book of Revelation? What **was** in those secret writings? ... So, is your curiosity piqued, even a little?

The second part of our reading, is from the fourth chapter. It opens as John describes how he was “in the spirit,” in an ecstatic trance, when suddenly he heard a loud voice speaking to him. Turning around, John saw a divine being, who foretells what is going to happen soon, to bring on the end of time. John a Jewish follower of Jesus, believed that this divine being who spoke to him was Jesus, alive after his death, now appearing not in ordinary human form but as a glorious and terrifying presence whose “face was shining like the sun.”

According to John, Jesus announced that God is about to make war on the evil powers that have taken over the world and that, although the coming cosmic war will destroy the entire universe, ultimately God will prevail, throw evildoers into a lake of eternal fire, and welcome the righteous into his kingdom.

Then John heard a voice telling him to “come up here!” - apparently a summons to ascend into heaven through a door, standing open before him. John says that “at once I was in the spirit,” allowed to glimpse the

throne of God in heaven, looking just as the prophet Ezekiel, writing six hundred years earlier, said he had seen it: blazing with fire as flashes of lightning and peals of thunder burst around it; brilliantly gleaming like emeralds, rainbows, sapphires; glorious light flowing into a sea of glittering crystal.

Now, what kind of man was writing these prophecies? John, a Jewish prophet was writing about visions he claimed to have received on the island of Patmos, about seventy miles from the city of Ephesus, off the coast of Asia Minor in present-day Turkey.

John of Patmos was not the son of Zebedee nor the brother of James, nor the Evangelist who wrote the Gospel according to John. We begin to understand what he wrote only when we see that this book is *wartime literature*. John probably began to write around 90 C.E., having likely fled from a war that had ravaged Judea, his homeland. John may actually have witnessed the outbreak of war in Jerusalem in 66 CE, when militant Jews, fired with religious fervour, sporadically attacked groups of Roman soldiers and stockpiled weapons to fight an all-out war against Rome's occupation of Judea in the name of "God and our common liberty."

After four years of desperate fighting, Rome sent sixty thousand troops to besiege Jerusalem, starve its inhabitants, and break the revolutionaries' ferocious resistance. When Roman soldiers, led first by the future emperor Vespasian finally defeated the Jews, they desecrated

the sacred precincts of the Great Temple, burned it to the ground, leaving the inner city of Jerusalem in ruins.

Twenty years following the war, the prophet John was living on Patmos, where tradition says he was forcibly sent “because of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus Christ.” We might imagine him pacing restlessly along the sea by day and, lying awake at night, watching the constellations as they moved across the sky. Horrified by the slaughter of so many of his people by Rome, John put his own cry of anguish into the mouths of the souls he says he saw in heaven, pleading for God’s justice.

John was not a traditional Jew, since he had joined the radical sect devoted to Jesus of Nazareth. John of Patmos belonged to the second generation of Jesus’ followers, who had heard what the early disciples reported Jesus secretly telling them: that he himself was God’s messiah, the chosen future king of Israel. Many first-generation followers of Jesus had expected him to lead Israel to victory over the hated Romans and re-establish God’s kingdom in Jerusalem and eventually over the whole world.

But after Jesus’ crucifixion and death, many of his followers quit the movement, and Roman magistrates killed its outspoken leaders. Although John was born some years after these events, he probably knew that the Romans had also crucified Peter, Jesus’ right-hand man,

and had whipped and beheaded Paul of Tarsus. He may have heard various accounts of the violent death of Jesus' own brother James, whom many regarded as his successor, beaten or stoned to death near the Jerusalem Temple.

But some of Jesus' followers - and those that followed them - refused to give up. John, persuaded by their preaching, was one of those in the next generation who insisted that - Jesus was still God's appointed future king of Israel and the whole world. They claimed that God had brought him back to life and that soon Jesus would return from heaven to earth and vanquish his enemies as God's chosen ruler of the universe - "King of kings, and Lord of lords."

Jews among John's contemporaries thought Jesus' followers were fools, since more than sixty years had passed since Jesus had been killed. But had his loyal followers been asked how they could possibly believe that Jesus would return as king, John could answer that he had seen proof that most of Jesus' prophecies had already come true. So, he dared to hope that the rest would do the same. When Jesus announced that "the kingdom of God is coming soon," he also warned his followers that before God's kingdom would come, terrible suffering must first take place; earthquakes, famine, and war, followed by the unthinkable: enemy armies would surround and besiege Jerusalem and destroy the Great temple, the sacred centre of Jerusalem.

Imagine how John felt, then, when about forty years after Jesus' death, this shocking prophecy turned out to be true: in 70 CE, Roman armies stormed Jerusalem, burned down the temple, and reduced the city centre to charred rubble. When this happened, John and others loyal to Jesus were both horrified and excited, for this meant that everything else he had prophesied would now happen.

Jesus had warned that “wars and rumour of wars” would be “only the beginning of the birth pangs of the Messiah” and told them to expect persecution, saying that “in those days there will be such suffering as has not been from the beginning of the creation until now, and never will be.” But Jesus had added that *after* these catastrophic events, his followers would see “the son of man coming in the clouds, with great power and glory,” to establish God’s kingdom.

About ten years after the end of the Jewish war, racing against time, some of his followers wrote the gospels of Mark, Matthew, and Luke.

They wanted to spread Jesus’ message and warn the rest of the world before the end would come. John, like many among the second generation of believers, waited for Jesus to return and for his kingdom to “come with power.” But by the time John began to write his Revelation, another thirty years had passed.

Now *two* generations had come and gone - and John along with Jesus' other followers, must have wondered how the prophecy had failed. For when John travelled through Asia Minor, he could see evidence everywhere that the kingdom that actually had "come with power" was not God's - it was *Rome's*.

When John arrived in Ephesus around 90 CE, having spent some time travelling and preaching in Asia Minor, he might have seen a small army of expert stoneworkers constructing the colossal statues – each about a hundred feet high – of emperor Vespasian and his sons, and the building of the most spectacular temple in the entire city, to honour as divine, the very rulers who had devastated Jerusalem and destroyed the Great Temple of God. Longing for vengeance, John recalled Israel's sacred scriptures: hadn't King David himself declared that "the gods of the nations are demons?" And hadn't the prophets - most recently Jesus, - announced that God would soon come to judge the world?

Why would God allow these demonic forces and their arrogant human agents to overrun the world with apparent impunity?

What John did in the Book of Revelation, among other things, was to create *anti-Roman propaganda* that drew its imagery from Israel's prophetic traditions: the writings of Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Daniel. John claims that while he was on the island of Patmos, visions came to him - perhaps induced by prayer and fasting. "When I heard behind me

a loud voice, like a trumpet,” saying, “what you see, write in a book.” When John turned to see who was speaking to him, he saw Jesus in the form that the prophet Daniel claimed to have seen “the Son of Man,” more than two hundred years earlier; “his hair, white as snow, like white wool, his eyes blazing like flames, face shining like the sun in full strength.” When I saw him, John wrote, “I fell at his feet as though dead.” Next, John hears Jesus declare that God’s kingdom is, indeed, coming soon - and promises those who endure that “I will keep you from the hour of trial that is coming upon the whole world.”

John tells how moments later, having ascended “in the spirit” into the heavens, he was allowed to glimpse the glorious throne of God, the One on the throne radiating light, set among seven flaming torches, much as John had read in Ezekiel’s prophecy.

Although many people assume that Revelation is all about the end of the world; the first vision in the book, is one of Christ, who is present among the churches. Then Revelation takes a look at what is going on in the churches through Christ’s eyes. The idea is that Revelation wants us first to take a look at who Christ is, and then take a look at who we are in relation to Christ. One of the main points of the Book of Revelation is to encourage followers of Christ to persevere through the troubles of this world and to worship the one true God, while condemning the ways opposed to God that are characterized by violence, idolatry, and greed.

John shares a visually stunning description of the throne room of God, in which God is at the centre and is worshipped and praised. This is a stylized image of God's kingdom, in which God's will of order, peace, and joy, is supreme. This is set up against the kingdom of this world, in which idolatry, violence, oppression, and injustice rule. Revelation calls Christians to remain faithful to God and Christ, and to resist the powers of evil in the conviction that God will prevail and bring salvation in the new Jerusalem.

Revelation's vision of the heavenly throne room introduces people to God, who is the Creator. The scene pictures a rightly ordered universe in which God is at the centre. Around the throne are four living creatures, who represent the created order. The creatures' faces are those of a wild animal, a domestic animal, a bird, and a human being. The one with the human face does not take the central place of God, but with all creation joins in praise of God. The elders are the heavenly representatives of the community of faith. As they cast down their crowns before the throne, they recognize that God and not the elders is Lord of all. God is praised for being the creator of all things.

Although Revelation is usually seen as a book of destruction, God's fundamental identity is that of Creator. This scene anticipates the outcome of the book, where God's purposes culminate in new creation.

The words "holy, holy, holy" and the images of casting down crowns by

heaven's glassy sea have inspired many of the hymns that we use in worship. Revelation functions rightly when it invites us into worship too, which we do as we add our voices to the song.

Amen.

Prayers of the People – August 3, 2025 – Pentecost 8

Holy God, who brings heaven to earth, merciful and mighty Son who guards our hearts, compassionate and counselling Spirit who walks with us, we stand in prayer with our Christian brothers and sisters around the world, in places where food is scarce and hunger powerful. And with them we pray for your light to burn brightly on their work.

As we pray for a new heaven and a new earth, we are aware of those among us and those beyond these doors who are in deep need of your peace, of your healing touch, of your just and bounteous kingdom. We pray those who dwell in places of strife, need, and want. God calls us to: “Choose this day whom you will serve.” One cannot serve God and embrace hate and inequality. One cannot be your child and be silent in the face of hate and racism, when others would tear our values asunder.

We pray for those affected by natural disasters: bring comfort to all touched by the devastating 8.8 magnitude earthquake off Kamchatka, in Siberia, triggering tsunami waves that reached as far as Hawaii, coastal California, Japan, French Polynesia and Chile. Significant damage and evacuations occurred in Severo Kurilsk and Petropavlovsk, Kamchatka. Shield the communities threatened by wildfires in the regions around Arouca, Portugal and El Arenal, Spain, as well as in our own province, Alberta, Saskatchewan, and Manitoba. Provide calm tending, and relief to firefighters who have gathered from around the world risking all to save lives, homes and your creatures. Keep them safe and may the earth’s fractures heal, as we work together in solidarity.

Protector of peace and justice—guide economic and political leaders throughout the world, as trade negotiations take place causing financial strain and stress to so many across the world amid rising global uncertainty. Trade agreements are being brokered and broken in all regions of the world as trade talks shape the future of tariffs and diplomacy. Grant wisdom and restraint in policymaking in all leaders, countries and regions. May the recognition of Palestinian statehood by France, Canada and probably the UK in September, foster dialogue, justice, and a cease to suffering in Gaza. May decisions be tempered by compassion, not conflict.

Source of life and harmony—shed light on recent regulatory shifts by the US Environment Protection Agency (EPA) and other national agencies including those in many European countries, the UK, Asia, Africa, South America and the Arctic, that may weaken vital climate protections. Inspire renewed commitment to stewardship of Earth’s air, water, and living systems. May our shared home flourish in responsible care.

In a world of rich resources, help us remember the poor, not only in memory, but also in love, for they are our brothers and sisters. Use our caring, giving, helping, and living with the poor as ways to be your incarnation. And may we see you incarnate in them.

God, we yearn for the day when nations shall beat their swords into plowshares. We yearn for the day of peace, when we can all walk in the gentle light of Christ. We look to your Son, who lived another way, taught a different lesson, emanated the Holy Spirit, and died a sacrificial death. He is the Messiah, and through Him we boldly pray. Loving God.... Let us give thanks to the one to whom we pray, the one who brings both the snow and the sun; the one who heals this troubled world; We pray for the sick: Dawn Hill, Pr. Kristen Steele, and Mark Wickson, and those who turn to Christ in faith; We pray for the abandoned, the lonely, the unhoused, those struggling with addictions. You are the one who grants new life not only to us, but to creation itself.

We pray for all denominations, large or small that we may love one another in practice as well as in prayer. We pray for Pope Leo XIV; Newly elected ELCIC Bishop Larry Kochendorfer, Newly elected ELCA Presiding Bishop Yehiel Curry, Bishop Kathy, Bishop Anna, Newly elected Anglican Primate the Rt Rev. Shane Parker, congregations and Bishops of the Moravian Worldwide church, Bishop Azar and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Jordan and the Holy Land, St. Paul's Lutheran in Maple Ridge - Rev. Nicolas Alexandre (Interim), Matsqui Lutheran in Matsqui, our sister congregation San Juan Camino d'Esperanze and Pastor Ana Maria Jara, and Holy Trinity Lutheran in Port Angeles. We pray for all deacons, pastors, lay leaders, musicians and volunteers.

Compassionate and counselling Spirit, we commit ourselves, as part of your global church movement, to play our part in bringing a kingdom of justice; in bringing spiritual and material transformation into the darkest places, in being part of the church and releasing its potential to be your agent of change in the poorest of places.

Gracious God, we pray to you in the name of the one who came to show us the way, he who is our Lord and our Redeemer, our brother and our friend. We pray to you as one family, even as he taught to pray ...

Our Father ...