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**Sermon – 10<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost**

**July 29, 2018**

**Revelation 3:1-6 and Mark 13:32-37**

**“The Book that is a Library – Apocalypse Section”**

Aside from watching Star Trek in the 1960’s and “the original” Star Wars movies I’ve never been much of a science-fiction guy. “Transformers” “Avengers” and Marvel Comic Superhero trilogies just don’t do it for me. But these are some of the most popular movies around the world today – Thor and Ironman and just about any Duane Johnson natural disaster movie can’t miss at the box office. So you’d think that a book like Revelation, with its bizarre, even violent imagery would appeal to folks. Yet it remains, except for “*Left Behind*” junkies’ one of the least read books of the Bible. We love Super Hero movies with their grotesque monster villains. So you’d assume we’d take to Revelation naturally, like a duck to water.

Yet likely because of its imagery - dragons with seven heads and ten horns, horses with frightening riders bringing destruction and angels that pour out bowls of wrath from heaven, this section of ‘*the book that is a library*’ is seldom visited, if checked out likely not finished, and if finished probably not understood. Revelation is a vision of John, the disciple of Jesus who was taken up into heaven. Its literary form is “apocalyptic” from a Greek word meaning “to reveal.”

Stories of people being taken up to heaven to receive a message from an angel were not uncommon in the first century, so this book would not have seemed so strange to its first century readers. But it’s not a comic book either – apocalyptic writing had a purpose other than to entertain. The purpose was to convey a message from God, just as the poetry and prophetic writings of the Old Testament and the parables of the New Testament were. We don’t find it difficult to think of God as a shepherd or a rock, as the Psalms portray him, or as a landowner or farmer, as Jesus parables do, yet to see God as a lamb with seven horns as Revelation 5 suggests is startling.

Same God however – just different form of literature. People who read this book as a history of the end of the world told in advance will read Revelation quite differently than people who read it as simply another form of literature used to convey a message from God. Luther suggested it be read as what its name suggests it is – revelation not history. He saw in its tales of plagues and beasts and warlike angels a consistent message – Christ wins and his followers overcome. Those who “overcome” do not adopt the world’s patterns of thinking or behaving, and refuse to despair when the world and its myriad hosts of suffering and evil seem to be winning.

I’ve chosen Revelation 3:1-6 as an illustration of how Revelation should be read. Sardis was a real place in the ancient world. It was a prosperous city, in a fertile region, that sat high atop a hill which over the centuries made it difficult, though not impossible for enemies to attack and conquer. The church in Sardis evidently began to think the good times would always roll. The other churches in different cities that Revelation was addressed to were warned about external dangers, like false preachers, Jewish or Roman persecutors or Gentiles who tried to entice them to retain a few harmless pagan practices in their worship.

But the church in Sardis was warned...of itself. They’d become complacent – allowing their distinctiveness to wear off and become, as one writer suggested, “*the perfect model of inoffensive Christianity.*” “*You have a reputation of being alive, but you are dead. Wake up! Strengthen what remains and is about to die.*” Their “revelation” serves a particular function but also the same function as the prophetic books of the Old Testament and the more forceful

parables of Jesus in the gospels. Comfort leads to complacency. No one likes conflict, and yet the church was created precisely to be in conflict with the world around it – not by choice always but by necessity. A comfortable church is usually comfortable not because of the size of its bank accounts or the numbers in its programs, but because it is at ease with and conforms to society’s expectations for it. That kind of church is not threatened in any significant way from the outside - by society’s judgements. But, as Revelation 3 warns, they are by Christ’s judgement.

The message of Revelation to the church in Sardis echoes the one Jesus gave his disciples in Mark 13. There, any notion that followers of Jesus can “*mark time*” or simply “*bide their time*” with foreknowledge of when the Lord would appear is clearly punctured. In a statement that remains mysterious, Jesus says that even He, the Son, does not know when the end of history will occur. It would be both unwise and unhelpful then for followers of the Son to try to establish when that day will occur. Unwise because it is hidden even from the second person of the Trinity - unhelpful because preoccupation with history and its events detracts from the church from the present and being a servant of Christ at all times and no matter the times.

What Jesus says to his followers in Mark and through the congregation in Sardis is that the church must always keep distinguished the “second coming” of Jesus confessed in our creeds, and the “return of Jesus.” Because Jesus made it quite clear he would be among the church in the form of the poor, the hungry, the persecuted, and the lonely. Jesus is always “returning.”

And like a thief, these “returns” are not scripted and put on church calendars. They just happen, and a church that is alive is ready for such returns, even if it means it shares in the sufferings of Jesus.

A final thought. The image of those “*dressed in white*” is often associated with someone of impeccable moral character and that could be the case. But in ancient times those “*dressed in white*” were usually generals who’d gone to battle and survived. Not without wounds however. Dressed in white Christians are those clothed in Christ through baptism. We’re a people washed of sin, not devoid of it. And to those Jesus makes a promise – I will remember you. To be remembered by Jesus will be amazing – to have him acknowledge you before his Father will be a moment of moments. So who cares what the world says of us?  
AMEN