

All Things New: The Living One Speaks
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September 29, 2019
Daniel 7:13-15, Mark 1:14-15; Revelation 1:9-20

Our final Scripture reading today comes from Revelation 1:9-20. May God add His blessing to the reading of His perfect, holy, and saving Word. “I, John, your brother and companion in the suffering and kingdom and patient endurance that are ours in Jesus, was on the island of Patmos because of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus. On the Lord’s Day I was in the Spirit, and I heard behind me a loud voice like a trumpet, which said, “Write on a scroll what you see and send it to the seven churches: to Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea.” I turned around to see the voice that was speaking to me. And when I turned I saw seven golden lampstands, and among the lampstands was someone “like a son of man,” dressed in a robe reaching down to his feet and with a golden sash around his chest. His head and hair were white like wool, as white as snow, and his eyes were like blazing fire. His feet were like bronze glowing in a furnace, and his voice was like the sound of rushing waters. In his right hand he held seven stars, and out of his mouth came a sharp double-edged sword. His face was like the sun shining in all its brilliance. When I saw him, I fell at his feet as though dead. Then he placed his right hand on me and said: “Do not be afraid. I am the First and the Last. I am the Living One; I was dead, and behold I am alive for ever and ever! And I hold the keys of death and Hades. Write, therefore, what you have seen, what is now and what will take place later. The mystery of the seven stars that you saw in my right hand and of the seven golden lampstands is this: The seven stars are the angels of the seven churches, and the seven lampstands are the seven churches.””

Symbols are all around us, and we never even think about them. All of us drove here today and didn’t get into an accident. Why not? When we got to an intersection, nobody yelled, “Stop!” at us. (Maybe the guy in the car behind us, I don’t know.) What did we see? Red, green, and yellow lights. We understand those symbols perfectly well, right? We see a red octagon and we know to stop. We see an upside-down triangle with a red border and we know to yield. Symbols are all around us. If I draw a double arch in yellow, what does that symbolize? McDonalds. If I draw a dollar sign up here, what does that mean? Money.

The only time symbols don’t make sense is when we don’t understand the context. Occasionally I’ll see an inverted question mark or exclamation point. They look super weird to us. Yet they are completely normal in Spanish, and they let the Spanish reader know from the very beginning of a sentence that they are reading a question or an exclamation. In Japanese, which is a symbolic language, different symbols come together to make a new meaning. Take the word *ni*, which means “sun.” Then there’s the word *hon*, which means “root” or “origin.” Put them together and they are *Nihon*, which is the sun’s origin, land of the rising sun...the name for Japan. Understand the symbols and things make a lot more sense.

Today we’re going to hit our first major symbols in the book of Revelation. We’re also going to find out about where John wrote it, how it came about, and how even the mysterious start of the book helps us understand how Jesus loves us and guides His church even today.

As we start, I want to refer you to our notes at the bottom of the passage in your bulletin today about our interpretive lens for Revelation. We're not going to go over those things again today in detail, but I just want to remind you of what we talked about last week, how our interpretation is always going to take into account the first-century church, the genre of the book, the cycles in Revelation, and the meaning of the book not primarily as a tour guide to future events but as insight into the nature of God and what He has done and will do, insight into His glory, and how we should live in light of Jesus' returning. We'll keep those principles in the bulletin for a while so we remember them.

This week's passage gives us some details about John's situation when he wrote the book. He was on the island of Patmos, a tiny island in the sea belonging to Greece near what was called the province of Asia, now western Turkey, where all the churches addressed by Jesus are. He's been exiled there "because of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus." There's evidence that this was in fact a penal colony where political and religious prisoners, those who hadn't done anything worthy of death, were sent to work in the quarries. He is a prisoner far from home because he unashamedly told others about how our sin condemns us before God and how Jesus' saving death rescues us and brings us into God's Kingdom instead.

But John doesn't want us to think of him as special at all, either for being in exile or for being given the revelation from Jesus. His first statement about himself is that he is your brother. Not an apostle, not as his other euphemism for himself, "the disciple that Jesus loved," not one of Jesus' three closest friends, but as a brother in Christ. He is appealing to us not from the authority that Jesus had given him, but as a fellow traveler along the journey. It also means that Revelation is not a book just for the wise or learned or those who are super close to Jesus, but for the whole church.

The only thing that really stands out as unique is how we says, "I, John." There is only one other biblical author who refers to himself in that way. That's the prophet Daniel. To the ancient church, that phrasing meant something. While exiled in Babylon, Daniel had apocalyptic visions that he wrote in his own book, and they're referenced in Revelation many times. When the author refers to himself as "I, John," we are supposed to recognize that this book is in many ways a continuation, expansion, and sometimes explanation of the strange and fantastic visions Daniel had six hundred years earlier.

Now, here's something directly for us to think about. *Being a follower of Jesus means we share together in suffering, in God's Kingdom, and in patient endurance.* John is saying this to the universal church. Affliction and distress are part of the package for those who serve Jesus. Not the ordinary stress of living, which is plenty, right?

But issues that come up precisely because we live for Jesus. Some people argue and fight with us simply because we believe that God has given us the truth about right and wrong; some folks will defriend us for trying to live in purity. We may miss out on promotions because we spoke up against injustice in the workplace. We may have a smaller home or a car that's banged up because we know we shouldn't chase after the things of this world, because we won't do whatever it takes to pursue those things. And some are directly persecuted just for having faith, like those we pray about each week where they face misery and even death for being believers.

But we are also members of the Kingdom. Those sufferings are not the only result of faith in Christ. We are co-heirs with Jesus, sons and daughters of the King, eventually to rule and reign beside Him. We are promised that through Christ, we will have a place in the new heavens and new earth someday.

Ultimately, the balance between the two, the suffering we experience now and the glorious Kingdom we will someday experience in its glory, is perseverance, the patient endurance in Jesus. What all believers share is that continuing belief, that continuing hope. Yes, we suffer, but we also endure, knowing that what awaits us is worth the trials we face. And these are true for all believers. We should never think that we suffer alone or in silence. We are the church, brought together to lift one another up; we go through it all together.

Moving on...John mentions the Lord's Day. This is the first time we ever see this phrase in Scripture. Sunday had become known by Christians as the day of worship, enough that they had started using that special term for it. John writes, "I was in the Spirit." Sometimes modern people have used this phrase meaning they felt the Holy Spirit inspired them to raise their hands in church or to speak in tongues or to do something else their church has said that Spirit-filled people do. That's not what this is about.

John is in a state where he is focused completely on God – who He is, what He has done and is doing, listening for Him to speak, praising and worshipping, meditating on Scripture. The only way this can happen is through the Holy Spirit leading us into that place. It's setting aside time just for God to let Him do what He wants in our lives. I'm convicted by that...how might our lives and our church change if we each set aside time on Sunday apart from worship just to pursue God? Maybe a lot. We aren't going to focus on it today, but we should be mindful that Sundays aren't just another day with an hour at church service thrown in.

"I heard behind me a loud voice like a trumpet" – the trumpet was used to announce the great religious feasts of Judaism, it was for royal announcements, so the voice of Jesus like a trumpet tells us the king is speaking. He said, "Write on a scroll what you see and send it to the seven churches: to Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea." Writing on a scroll in ancient prophecy was a pattern for coming judgment; it also signified importance and permanence. The seven churches here are in a ring throughout the province of Asia. Like we mentioned last week, seven is a symbol of completeness – it was meant for these churches, but they stand in for all the churches in the world. Their successes and failures for which Jesus praises and condemns them are symptomatic of all churches, really in all times.

At this point, John naturally looks to find the voice. When he does, he sees seven golden lampstands, and someone like a son of man among them. We're going to get to the lampstands and what's going on there in a minute. What I really want to do next is focus on this description of Jesus. I'm not going to hit all the symbols, but the important ones. He's got on a footlong robe with a golden sash. This is the apparel of the high priest. Jesus is appearing to John as the one who serves before His Father on our behalf. The hair white like wool is another reference to Daniel. In Daniel, the one with hair white as wool is called the Ancient of Days. It's God. This is yet another place in the New Testament where we see Jesus is in fact divine, part of God Himself.

His eyes like blazing fire is the fire of both refinement – purifying the saints of impurities – and of judgment. The voice of rushing waters, His face shining like the sun – all descriptions of His power and glory. He carries a sword meant to destroy the nations and their evil, and his bronze feet are that sign of finally conquering His enemies. John uses all of these similes to capture the feeling of what it was to see Jesus like this...it's not to capture a literal picture of the glorified Jesus. It's to impress upon us the wonder, majesty, glory, awe, and honestly, sheer terror that comes about when someone sees the full reality of Jesus as He really is.

John's reaction is to fall at Jesus' feet like a dead man. Like the prophet Isaiah before him, he was witnessed the glory of the King in all His splendor, and the first thing that comes to mind is the horror of realizing our sin and disobedience and our unworthiness to appear in God's presence. And that brings us another keynote for us today: *The proper reaction to the risen and reigning Jesus is to worship Him in reverence.*

This is something for us to keep in mind as we approach God. Jesus makes it possible for us to come to God as a friend. As He tells John, "Don't be afraid." All those who humble themselves before God, He lifts up. And yet, we should be very aware that we approach the Creator of the universe, the only One who has power over all things. We are about as incapable of understanding the greatness of God as an ant can understand a human being. All we can know is that He is far, far, far beyond us.

When we pray, when we address God, when we talk about God, we can ask for anything. We can come to Him crying out for help and asking why we haven't heard from Him. He can take it all. But do not come to Him flippantly or arrogantly, as if God owes you something. It was easy many years ago to dress up on Sundays and look the part of a reverent churchgoer. God could care less about how you dress, quite frankly. But He does care that you approach Him with the respect He deserves. It doesn't mean God is bad tempered or no fun; God has a sense of humor that comes through the Scripture. He loves to be near His people; His plan was set into motion so He could once again dwell with us. But His very nature, His perfection and holiness, command our utmost respect and awe.

But don't get overwhelmed either. I love this simple note: Jesus in all His majesty puts his hand on John. That's comforting, isn't it? It's a little thing, but it's that relationship that Jesus wants with His people. Jesus commands respect, and yet He treats us as dear, loved, cared for, blessed.

He goes on to say, "I am the First and the Last. I am the Living One; I was dead, and behold I am alive for ever and ever! And I hold the keys of death and Hades." Jesus establishes Himself as Lord of all, equivalent to God as the First and Last, the One who comes before all things and continues when everything else has passed away. His name is "The Living One." By very nature, by His holiness, He is life; He died, yet He is alive forever and ever.

Death couldn't hold Him because He is life in His very being. Rising from the dead was the most natural thing ever. We think of life and death as a line; everything has an end point. But not Jesus. What normally ends everyone and everything else makes no difference to Him because He is perfect. He holds the keys of death and Hades, the place of the dead, because He even reigns over them. They have only the authority He gives to them.

Jesus commands John to write, and He gives John the key to the mysterious stars and lampstands: "the seven stars are the angels of the seven churches, and the seven lampstands are the seven churches." So let's talk about these for a moment. The picture is that Jesus is among the seven lampstands. This is great for us to know and remember, another encouragement for us today: *Jesus is among us*. He is tending to His churches. He is taking care of His people – guiding us, instructing us, healing us, disciplining us, even chastising us when necessary to bring us closer to Him. Even in His glory, Jesus is near to us. He's sent His Holy Spirit to work in our hearts as well. He isn't admiring the churches from afar; He's in their midst.

The same is true for the church today. Jesus is not far from us at all. He comes close to us. He cares about us. He cares about CrossWay. We may be a tiny flock; we seem insignificant to the world, even to other churches, but we're not! We matter! As we'll see in the letters coming up, Jesus isn't worried about the size of a church. He is concerned about its faithfulness. He won't lead us astray.

If we read this right – and there's some confusion about what He means – our church even has its own angel watching out for us as well. We have a messenger of God assigned to us to keep the enemy at bay and to help us in the spiritual realm in ways we can't even fathom. Because the word for angel in Greek also means messenger, it's possible that Jesus is talking about the earthly leadership of the church, but I don't think so. It would have been easier for Him to say so.

Scripture speaks of spiritual realities that are just outside our vision, so it should be no surprise that God has His own people in charge of the case as He Himself watches over us. It's not because God cannot do anything He wants; it's that, just as He created humanity to learn how to be like Him and to glorify Him, He created an entirely different group of beings in the spiritual realm to serve Him by serving us.

As we begin to look at the letters to the church's next week, we'll get into some nitty-gritty, some issues that we still have to deal with today. But we can't really deal with the practical issues Jesus will address until we address who He is – the eternal Son of the Father, the First and the Last, the Living One, who speaks to His church, who answers prayers and intercedes for us with the Father. This week, may we all dwell a little more fully on the awesomeness of Jesus, who once came in lowliness and meekness to save us...but He does not remain that way forever. He will come again, and as we continue through Revelation, we will see that He comes in power and might. May we recognize Him for who He is and praise Him in reverence both today and always.