

"Welcoming Jesus"  
Revelation 1:1-8  
November 25, 2018  
York Center Church of the Brethren  
Pastor Christy Waltersdorff

It was the last night of National Youth Conference this past July. I was sitting in Moby Arena with several other NYC staff members during the worship service. Because of my duties in the NYC office I didn't often make it to worship but didn't want to miss this one. Although there was a closing worship service the next morning- this one- on the last night of NYC was always the most powerful for me. When planning this service, you try to pull together the most meaningful parts of the week and offer a challenge to the youth as they prepare to go back home.

Our Australian brother, Jarrod McKenna, was preaching a quietly powerful message about what it really means to follow Jesus. He told of sitting with a high school friend who was bullied because he was gay. As he sat with his friend, both of them being harassed by others, he realized he was sitting with Jesus. He told of sneaking onto Manus, a prison island off the coast of Australia where refugees were imprisoned under terrible conditions. He told of being arrested a number of times when he protested the treatment of refugees and immigrants by the Australian government. Jarrod told our youth it was up to them to go home and change the church- to remind us all that the church is to be more loving, more welcoming, more inclusive, more prophetic- more like Jesus.

He called for anyone who was willing to commit their lives to speaking and living the good news of Jesus Christ to come and stand with him at the foot of the stage. And, of course, hundreds of kids moved forward. Then he told them to go back to their seats and really think about what they were committing to. Then he invited them forward again. And hundreds moved forward, hugging each other and crying. It was a moving moment. Jarrod prayed with them and stood in silence for a long time.

Sitting in the bleachers about half way up in the arena I looked around and watched as youth and adults, cried and hugged. And I realized that this was the 11<sup>th</sup> time I had worshipped on the last night of NYC. Jarrod's was the 11<sup>th</sup> "last night" challenge I had heard. My first was as an idealistic 19 year- old in 1978. I remembered how moving it was- how much I wanted to change the church and the world. And I believed that we could do it.

44 years later, I sat in that arena and I felt a growing sense of despair and I began to weep. I wondered- how much have we accomplished in 44 years? The generation

that worshipped in the Long House at the YMCA of the Rockies in 1978- those of us who were determined to change the church for the better- we are now the leaders and pastors of the Church of the Brethren. What have we accomplished? How have we moved the church forward? Or have we?

As I sat there, I thought of the terrible divisions within the denomination- the exclusion of LGBTQ people, the refusal of some congregations to ordain women, the racist environment of the church, the harsh disagreements over everything from climate change to the peace position. I felt weary and exhausted. And I wept.

When the service was over, instead of going right back to the NYC office to work- I went to my dorm room where I sat for a few minutes, trying to pull myself together. I washed my face, took a deep breath, and went back to the office where we began packing up. We were so busy that I didn't have a chance to talk with anyone about my experience. I have thought of it often since that night in Colorado. Each generation believes that they will correct the mistakes of their elders - in the church and in the secular world. I guess my despair that night grew out of my wondering if we really do make any changes; if we make any difference. Perhaps I was losing hope that the Church of the Brethren would ever be what God calls us to be.

What have we accomplished in 44 years? Why do we in the church look so much like the world around us and not so much like Jesus?

Perhaps that was question John was addressing in his letter to the seven churches. John was a pastor, a poet, a theologian. He was in exile on the island of Patmos- although we often say he was in prison, John never says that in his letter. Probably written near the end of the first century, John says he was in exile because of his testimony about Jesus Christ. He was separated from the seven congregations in his care and the only way he could be present with them was by writing a letter that would be read in worship. And what a letter it is!

Revelation is perhaps, the most mis-interpreted scripture in the whole Bible. I don't know about you, but I was taught to be terrified of it. Our fear has grown out of our misuse of it rather than its intended purpose. Even though it is the last book of the Bible, it is not a book about endings, it is a book about beginnings. John wrote it to congregations he knew and loved who were suffering from fear and persecution. His letter is one of hope. It was a reminder that God had the first word and will have the last.

Revelation is apocalyptic literature which means "revealing," "unveiling." What is unveiled in this letter is the way the affairs of the world look when viewed through

the eyes of God as spoken by a prophet. It is not a foretelling of the future, but a "forth" telling of God's vision of and for the world. Like the prophets before him, John was commissioned to call out where and how the faith community and the world run counter to God's vision of justice and peace.

At this time in history the churches were not under heavy persecution from the empire for not claiming the emperor was their Lord and their God. What they experienced was more subtle- social ostracism and reduced economic opportunities. John wasn't worried about **persecution by** the empire. He was worried about **accommodation to** the empire. His letter was written to give the churches new eyes through which to see themselves- to unveil the Roman Empire for what it is and to show that its claim on the churches' lives was not innocuous, but actually violates all that is true about God. (Gail O'Day) John was very clear- resist the pull of the empire or else be consumed by it. There is no middle ground.

We have to remember that John did not write this letter to become the last book of the Bible. It was a letter written to people he knew and loved. It was written to be read aloud in worship. He didn't need to explain the context to them because they were living it. Where we go wrong is when we forget that this letter is a particular message to a particular group of people in a particular situation at a particular time and place. The future John announces is either the immediate future of his first-century readers or the ultimate future of the victory of God at the end of history, which John thought was imminent. If Revelation was actually a book of predictions about events of our time- it would have had absolutely no meaning to its original recipients. When interpreted responsibly, Revelation has a message **to** our time, but it does not make predictions **about** it.

Christians in the New Testament thought they were the last generation. The error in John's worldview doesn't nullify the validity of his message. He probably also believed that the earth was flat. Without sharing their chronology, we can share their sense of urgency, the sense that our generation is the only generation that **we** have in which to fulfill our calling.

Eugene Peterson believed that the intent of the Revelation is to put us on our knees before God in worship and to set the salvation-shaping words of God in motion in our lives.

John wrote to people who were losing their vision of who Christ was and who they were called to be. They were getting weary and confused. That's why they went to worship- to be reminded that God started it all and that God would be with them every minute of every day until the end. And when was the end? That wasn't their concern. And it isn't ours either. John called his people to leave behind the values

of Babylon, the empire- injustice, violence, oppression- and to move into the grace of the city of God.

*Gail O'Day writes, "Revelation envisions the end of evil, not the end of the world. The dramatic battle scenes and images of death and destruction portray what the world is like and will be like when the power of evil is allowed to run unchecked. Human power as an agent of destruction has no place in Revelation. Human power as the power to resist the pull of empire, to offer allegiance to God and not the state, to work for justice against the injustice of the political empires, to resist the lure of economic reward when the cost is participation in the empire-*

*this form of human power has a large place in Revelation. For John, power is defined not by which empire has the largest army or gross national product, but by the model of the Lamb who was slaughtered and yet still lives. The only true power is the power of God unveiled in the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus."*

John's purpose was to "re-orient" his congregations- to direct their gaze away from the seductive power of the empire and direct it toward God- who was the first and the last. He knew the antidote to their failing hope was the promise of transformation and new life. He wrote with a powerful sense of confidence that he hoped was contagious.

And I hope it is still contagious today. The empire that threatens us is one of commercialism, self-indulgence, militarism, and increasing isolation. This empire is just as dangerous and destructive as the one John experienced, if not more so. Then and now, this letter can serve as "smelling salts," awakening the spirits of any who have lost consciousness under the domination of the empire.

When we become complacent in our faith the wild and imaginative images of Revelation force us to wake up and pay attention. We are so easily lured into a false sense of complacency. We don't turn our backs on the world around us, like the Amish do. We are right in the middle of it. We have to make our way, make a living, make do with the world as it is. But John reminds us that we don't have to be satisfied with it. And we shouldn't be.

So many things are happening in our nation and in our world today that I never expected to see. It feels as though we have gone off the rails in spectacular and dangerous ways. The gift John gave us when he wrote this letter to his congregations thousands of years ago is the reminder to see the work of God in the seemingly ordinary, unremarkable moments of our daily lives. To be aware, every moment, of the presence and the power of God. And then to live our lives in ways that bring honor to that God. John wrote his letter to offer comfort to his people,

not to terrify them They understood the code, the bizarre images- because every one of them came from their scripture.

He wrote to comfort those who were losing hope. He wrote to challenge those who were tempted to compromise with the powers of the empire; those willing to accept its rule of injustice, persecution of the weak, and oppression of the needy. John wrote to those whose faith was dulled to the dangers of walls erected in the name of national defense; lies cloaked as truth; and greed hidden in plain sight. He wrote to shake up those who were comfortable with lukewarm religion. I hope we are listening to his words.

John's letter was intended to kick-start the faith of those who were dozing off and to re-energize the faith of those who remained close to God. It was written as a promise of hope in the midst of hopelessness; a promise of new life in the midst of death; a promise of joy in the midst of sorrow. It was written to encourage the Christians living in that place and time to renew their commitment to God and to sustain their vision of a present and a future with Christ.

John's letter has power for us today as we decide what kind of church we will be; what kind of people. It has power for us as we grow into the congregation and the people God has called us to be.

As we go forward, as Christians living in this time and place,

- How will we serve Christ?
- How will we care for one another?
- How will we help to heal God's broken world?
- How will we live as disciples of Jesus Christ, the one who was and is and is to come?

As we look ahead to the beginning of the season of Advent next Sunday, we must ask: How will we welcome Jesus? And I hope our answer will be: by the manner of our living. By the manner of our hoping.

May it be so.

Amen.