

Revelation 1:9-20  
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First Baptist Church, Vancouver  
Darrell W. Johnson

### **THE LIVING ONE IN THE MIDDLE**

(Second in a series of sermons on "The Apocalypse of Jesus Christ")

The last book of the Bible is a letter. It's a letter written by the apostle John, one of the original twelve disciples, to seven first century congregations on the land mass that was called Asia Minor, which is now the Republic of Turkey. It's a letter, a pastoral letter – the longest pastoral letter in the Bible: "John, to the seven churches that are in Asia: Grace to you and peace..." (1:4). It is a letter in which John seeks to convey to these seven congregations a drama, a "live drama" that Jesus put on for him one Sunday morning during worship. Now like all such first century letters, John's letter was intended to be read aloud. "Blessed is the one who reads and those who hear the words of this prophesy" (1:3). The picture we are to get is that of people gathered together in house churches, throughout these seven different cities, listening to someone who has stood up in their midst to read this precious document from their beloved pastor.

Now this suggests to me that the drama conveyed in the letter was crafted more for the ear than for the eye. Yes, John sees the drama, and yes, John painstakingly writes down what he saw. But it turns out that we best see what John saw when we hear his description of what he saw – we see through hearing. In 1999, I preached 38 or 39 sermons on the last book of the Bible in California, and on New Year's Eve 1999, three actors, three actresses, and a popular radio announcer from our congregation recited the whole book on New Year's Eve. It takes 90 minutes, and when you hear the whole book all at once, you finally see!

We're going to give our attention this morning to the opening act of the drama, to Revelation 1:9-20. I invite you to turn to the text in your own bible, or take out the printout that's in your order of worship, and first simply read the text with your eyes -- silently. And then, in a moment, we'll hear the text with our ears.

I, John, your brother and fellow partaker in the tribulation and kingdom and perseverance which are in Jesus, was on the island called Patmos because of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus. I was in the Spirit on the Lord's day, and I heard behind me a loud voice like the sound of a trumpet, saying, "Write in a book what you see, and send it to the seven churches: to Ephesus and to Smyrna and to Pergamum and to Thyatira and to Sardis and to Philadelphia and to Laodicea."

Then I turned to see the voice that was speaking with me. And having turned I saw seven golden lampstands; and in the middle of the lampstands I saw one like a son of man, clothed in a robe reaching to the feet, and girded across His breast with a golden girdle. His head and His hair were white like white wool, like snow; and His eyes were like a flame of fire. His feet were like burnished bronze, when it has been made to glow in a furnace, and His voice was like the sound of many waters. In His right hand He held seven stars, and out of His mouth came a sharp two-edged sword; and His face was like the sun shining in its strength.

When I saw Him, I fell at His feet like a dead man. And He placed His right hand upon me, saying, "Do not be afraid; I am the first and the last, and the living One; and I was dead, and behold, I am alive forevermore, and I have the keys of death and of Hades. Write therefore the things which you have seen, and the things which are, and the things which will take place after these things. As for the mystery of the seven stars which you saw in My right hand, and the seven golden lampstands: the seven stars are the angels of the seven churches, and the seven lampstands are the seven churches.

(Revelation 1:9-20, NASV)

Let us pray. We believe that you gave this experience to the Apostle John, not only for him, and not only for the seven churches, but for the church throughout the world. We pray now that you would make it alive for us as never before, for we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

The title of the last book of the bible is "The Revelation of Jesus Christ." Whenever I just say that phrase it stirs my soul. "The Revelation of Jesus Christ." Not "Revelations," although we are given a lot of them in the book. And not even "The Revelation," although we are given a grand revelation in the book, but "The Revelation of Jesus Christ" – the point being that the book, the letter, the drama, is all about a Person. "Of Jesus Christ." In what sense, "of"? "Of" as in "by Jesus Christ?" Or "of" as in "about Jesus Christ?" Yes -- both, as is typical of John's writings. The title of the last book of the Bible is "The Revelation of Jesus Christ, by Jesus Christ, about Jesus Christ."

More literally, the title is "The Apocalypse of Jesus Christ." *apokalupsis Iesou Christou* -- the first three words of the text. As we talked about in the introductory sermon, when most people today hear the word apocalypse, they think "oh no, something terrible is about to happen." I predict that by this afternoon, someone is going to call the storm on the east coast an apocalyptic storm. It's a tragic storm – cataclysmic – but not apocalyptic. That's not the right use of the word. When someone in the first century heard the word "apocalyptic" or "apocalypse," their response was "oh good ... bring it on!" That's because the word "apocalypse" means "unveiling", "disclosure", "opening up", or more technically, "breaking through from hiddenness." I know that's a mouthful, but that's the best way to convey the word apocalypse – breaking through from hiddenness. The word was used of lifting a cover off of a box, or opening a door, or pulling back a curtain, and you do that – you lift the cover, you open the door, you pull back the curtain – so that what is always there, but ordinarily hidden, might now be manifest. That's what apocalypse means.

You might know that the apostle Paul really likes this word. If you trace it, you'll see that he uses it a lot in his pastoral letters. For example, in Romans 1:15-17, he talks about being "eager to preach the gospel" in the capital of the empire. Why is he eager? Because the gospel is "the power of God for salvation". Why? Because, says Paul, "in it the righteousness of God is revealed" ... *apokaluptetai*. The righteousness of God is revealed; the righteousness of God breaks through from hiddenness. God's way of righting all relationships is finally uncovered, and revealed to the world. That's why Romans is such a powerful book.

In his letter to the Galatians, in Galatians 1:12, Paul speaks of his own conversion as due to an apocalypse. When God was pleased to reveal His Son in me... *apocalupsai*. God was pleased to unveil His Son to me. God was pleased to disclose His Son to me. God was pleased to have His Son break through from hiddenness to me. And to me! And to you! And those we love.

So... the title of the last book of the Bible is “The Apocalypse of Jesus Christ, by Jesus Christ, about Jesus Christ.” The title is “The unveiling of Jesus Christ, by Jesus Christ, about Jesus Christ.” The title is “The breaking-through-from-hiddenness of Jesus Christ, by Jesus Christ, about Jesus Christ.” No wonder then, that the book is so full of songs and hymns, for what else can we do when we experience and an apocalypse but worship? “And I fell down at his feet,” says John. Of course! You don’t just sit there when you have an apocalypse.

Now, as I pointed out in the introductory sermon, and will point out again and again as we make our way in the next weeks, Apocalyptic literature like the document that we’re looking at this morning, has two practical purposes. Apocalyptic is very, very practical. Two practical purposes, and if we keep these practical purposes before us, we will not go astray as we hear and read the rest of the book. Indeed, if we keep these two practical purposes before us, we will discover fresh joy and fresh strength for discipleship.

The first practical purpose is to set the present moment, in all of its uncertainty and ambiguity, in light of the unseen realities of the future. For if you can know the future, if only for a second, it helps you understand the present differently. In fact, if you can know the future, it will determine how you live in the present – it will help us live differently. Jesus Christ is coming. He is bringing with him a new heaven and earth. He is bringing with him a new city – the city that we city-builders have all longed to build. If we can grasp, just for a second, what that city looks like, it changes the way we see our cities. So the first practical purpose of apocalyptic literature is to see the present moment in light of the unseen realities of the future.

But more importantly, the second practical purpose is to set the present moment, in all of its insecurity and uncertainty and ambiguity, in light of the unseen realities of the present! Things are not as they seem. Or more precisely, things are not just as they seem. There is more to this present moment than we can know with our secular eyes, our unaided intellect, emotion and imagination. And it’s the purpose of apocalyptic literature to open up that more, and to set the present moment in light of the realities of the present.

And it turns out that the greatest unseen reality of the present is a Person! The greatest unseen reality of the present is the incarnate, crucified, risen, ascended, and coming Jesus of Nazareth. Do you believe this? Does the church in our time believe this? The greatest unseen reality of the present is a Person. And John would say to us that unless we believe this, we haven’t got a clue about what is going on in our world right now.

The year is 96 AD... John, as he told us, is on the island of Patmos, a prison island which the Romans maintained off the coast of Turkey. This is where Romans would send criminals, particularly political trouble-makers – think Guantanamo Bay. Why is John, the apostle of love, as he was known, on the island of Patmos? What is John’s crime? What did John do to make himself into a political trouble-maker? You may know that the Emperor at that time was a man named Domitian. Domitian was a profoundly insecure man – as many dictators are. And in his insecurity, he ordered that all the citizens of Rome should worship him as “*Domine et Deus*” – “Lord and God.” All Roman citizens were to go to a temple dedicated to one of the Caesars, take a pinch of incense, throw it onto the altar, and say the words “*Kaeser Kurios*” – “Caesar is Lord.” You could believe anything else you wanted, as long as you would say the words that bound the empire together – *Kaeser Kurios*, Caesar is Lord.

Now, John, I think by this time in his mid 80s, was not about to bow his knee to a mere mortal who had usurped the place that only the living God has the right to occupy. So John, I think gently, refuses the emperor's edict. And in so doing, John becomes an "atheist." He's an atheist because he doesn't believe in the spirit of the empire. He doesn't buy into the spirit of the state, of the nation. This confession ("Caesar is Lord") binds the empire together, and because John refuses to say the words, he is now a trouble-maker and must be dealt with. And so he is sent to Patmos, where in the words of Thomas Torrance, he's "left to rot and bleach on the rocks."

Now, this is a personal crisis for John. "So this is what happens to the disciples you love? I serve you all these decades and then in my latter years, I'm in a place where I feel abandoned?" It's also an ecclesiastical crisis, because apparently John served as a sort-of bishop to the seven churches, a pastor to the pastors of these churches. And now he's gone ... on an island, and the churches on the mainland are left without their leader. It's also a theological crisis, because John's experience now is calling into question the very gospel he has spent his life preaching. The situation is engendering fear and a lot of apprehension, probably not only in himself, but in the churches back on the mainland. If Jesus is Lord (*Iesous Kurios*) as the common cred of the churches declared, if he is in fact the ruler of the kings of the earth, cannot Jesus take care of his disciples? Can't he take care of his pastors? Can't he take care of his churches? Have you ever faced such a crisis, when something happens in your life that calls into question the very foundation of the gospel?

"I was on the island called Patmos", says John. "I was in the Spirit on the Lord's Day." That's where you want to be on the Lord's Day -- in the Spirit. No matter what sanctuary you're in, you want to be in the Spirit. "I was in the Spirit", that is, I was working with the Spirit, cooperating with the Spirit, as the Spirit was enabling me to worship in those crummy theological-crisis-producing circumstances. "And I heard behind me a loud voice, like the sound of a trumpet." This not just flowery language. Anyone steeped in the Old Testament, as John was, would know what the sound of the trumpet meant. What do trumpets do in the Old Testament? They call people to battle, and they call people to worship. Indeed, trumpets regularly announce the very presence of the living God. In a prison? On Patmos?

John says he "turned to see the voice". I love that phrase -- see a voice. Have you ever seen a voice? And when he turned, he saw the seven golden lampstands. Again, anyone steeped in the Old Testament like John was would have realized what was happening, because just outside the Holy of Holies, on the south wall of the temple, was a seven-branched lampstand (Exodus 25.31-39). It was the job of the priests, "clothed in a robe to their feet" to keep those candles burning. Do you see what is going on here? John is discovering that the miserable rock-pile turns out to be the sanctuary of the living, Holy God! In the Spirit on Patmos, John discovers that even a prison can become a sanctuary of the Holy One. Set the present moment in light of the unseen realities of the present!

"And I saw in the middle of the lampstands." Some translations have "I saw among the lampstands." No -- in the middle of the lampstands, in the very middle of the lampstands. John discovers that Jesus Christ is there with him on Patmos, but Jesus is also showing John that he's there in every one of those congregations on the mainland. Not just above his churches, looking down, not just outside his churches, looking in, but in the middle of the churches, in the middle. In the very middle of this church; in the middle of this gathering.

For the rest of our time, I want to simply focus on three main features of this first unveiling of the greatest unseen reality of the present.

First, voice. Voice is the dominant image in this text. The word occurs three times – chapter 1, verse 10: “I heard a loud voice behind me...” Verse 12: “And I turned to see the voice...” And verse 15: “And His voice was like the sound of many waters.” Voice. I think this is Jesus’ way of saying that the most essential discipline of discipleship is listening. In the next two chapters of the book, in Revelation 2 and 3, John records seven messages that Jesus dictates to the seven churches, and they all have one common exhortation – “hear”. “Hear what the Spirit is saying to the churches.” Seven times. Voice. Listen. Hear.

Now, I want to show you something really cool. The centrality of the voice in this text is brought out in the way that John describes Jesus’ apocalypse. John employs a literary device common in first century middle-eastern speaking and writing, and common in twenty-first century middle-eastern communication. The literary device is called a chiasm. The word chiasm comes from the Greek letter chi, which is like our letter X. But scholars use the term chiasm to refer to only one side of the chi, of the x, the part that looks like a sideways V. Think Canada Geese flying in formation. We westerners tend to think in a linear way; we read and write in a straight line, so to speak. Middle-Easterners tend to think in a chiastic way; they read and write in this sideways V. So, instead of a straight line,

1  
2  
3  
4  
5  
6  
7

a chiasm, moves differently:

1  
    2  
        3  
            4  
                5  
            6  
7

The “point” of the sentence is not found at the end of the sentence as in Western communication, the point is found at the pivot of the chiasm. The major point is not the seventh line, but the fourth. This is how much of the Bible is put together. Take for example, Psalm 25.

1. I lift my soul to you, O Yahweh. I trust in you. Do not let me be ashamed. None who wait for you will be ashamed.
2. Make me know Your ways, O Yahweh. Teach me Your paths.
3. Remember Your compassion ... do not remember the sins of my youth.
4. Good and upright is Yahweh. Therefore, He instructs sinners in the way.
5. Pardon my iniquity, for it is great.
6. Yahweh will instruct the one who fears Him in the way he should choose.
7. Do not let me be ashamed, for I take refuge in You. I wait for You.

It appears that the point of the Psalm is at the end – trust in Yahweh, wait for Yahweh. It appears that the Psalm is about this exhortation to trust. But that’s not the point.

The Psalm is constructed as a chiasm:

1. I lift my soul to you, O Yahweh. I trust in you. Do not let me be ashamed. None who wait for You will be ashamed.
2. Make me know Your ways, O Yahweh. Teach me Your paths.
3. Remember Your compassion ... do not remember the sins of my youth.
4. Good and upright is Yahweh. Therefore, He instructs sinners in the way.
5. Pardon my iniquity, for it is great.
6. Yahweh will instruct the one who fears Him in the way he should choose.
7. Do not let me be ashamed, for I take refuge in You. I wait for You.

Isn’t that beautiful? Do you see how 1 and 7 go together (ashamed, wait, trust)? And then 2 and 6 go together around the word ‘way’. 3 and 5 have to do with sin and iniquity. And 4 has to do with Yahweh. The point of the Psalm is the character of God. The burden, or the weight, of the Psalm is that Yahweh is good and upright. Because he’s good and upright, you can trust him. Because he’s good and upright, waiting on Yahweh is not wasting time, because he’ll instruct you in a new way.

Now, let’s go back to the Revelation of Jesus Christ. In chapter one, verses 14-16, we are not to read what John says about Jesus Christ in a straight line. We are not to read:

1. Head
2. Eyes
3. Feet
4. Voice
5. Hand
6. Mouth
7. Face

If you read it in a straight line, the portrait of Jesus jumps all around, and it doesn’t make sense. We’re to read it chiastically.

1. Head
2. Eyes
3. Feet
4. Voice
5. Hand
6. Mouth
7. Face

We are to read across the chiasm and to read head and face together, eyes and mouth together, feet and hands together, and then finally, the voice.

Eugene Peterson helps us here. Peterson suggests that head and face are coupled because they are “the first and last impressions.” Jesus’ head – white, like wool, like snow. This is telling us that this One who is in our midst is immensely wise; He’s been around a long time, and He knows a few things about life. His face, shining like the sun in all of its fullness. I don’t know how John handled that part of it! This suggests that the One who’s in our midst radiates with the glory of God.

The eyes and mouth go together, says Peterson, because they are the “organs of relationship”. His eyes are like a flame of fire – a way of saying that Jesus’ eyes are pure and they’re purifying. When he looks into us, he knows how to purify us just with a look. Out of his mouth comes a sharp two-edged sword. A lot of art portrays this as a long sword, but it’s a short sword, for Jesus has come to do battle with our minds and for our souls. He wants to dig out all the lies in our hearts, so that we know the truth about him and about us.

The feet and hands go together, says Peterson, because they’re the parts of the body that express capability. His feet like burnished bronze. It meets that his feet are hot, and where he walks he brings purification. And in his hand, he holds seven stars. These turn out to be the angels of the seven churches, but I think in the first century they also refer to the seven planets that people thought ruled the world. Whatever cosmic, ecclesiastical, or personally powers there are in the world, he holds them in his right hand. He’s got the whole world in his hands!

And then, finally, the voice. Like the sound of many waters, says John. Able to drown out all those other voices that are clamouring for our attention and allegiance. Again, the whole point is: listen. The essential discipline of discipleship is “listen to me”. The implication is that the seven churches in Asia Minor were not listening to Jesus. That’s not hard to imagine, is it? Congregations not listening to Jesus. In fact, they were listening, it’s just that they were listening to the wrong voices. They were listening to the threatening voice of Domitian, to the seductive voice of Empire, to the voices that promise comfort and security through wealth and military power. They were heeding the voices that say it is possible to confess Jesus as Lord on Sunday but live for idols Monday to Saturday. Listen.

Now the second major feature of this unveiling. The voice speaks! And he gives two commands. Two commands. These turn out to be the two great commands of the last book of the Bible. The voice says, “do not be afraid” (v. 17), and “Look!” (v. 18). It turns out that we obey the first by obeying the second. It’s when we look that we’re no longer afraid. When I am afraid, it’s because I’m not looking. Or, as I should say, I’m not looking in the right place. I’m looking at all the cultural factors, at all the political factors, at the rise of militant terrorism, at the escalating collapse of the moral order, at the growth of addiction, but I’m not looking at Jesus. I’m not looking at the risen and ascended Lord of life.

“Look”, says Jesus, to John on the prison island. Look! “I was dead... but look! I am alive forevermore. I am the First and the Last. I am the Living One. You’ve got to look at me!”

Now, it turns out that we look by listening; we see by hearing. Martin Luther once said that Christian “faith is an acoustical affair.” Faith comes by hearing. Luther exhorted people to stick their eyes in their ears. You will not see until you hear, and it is when you hear that you see. And when you see, you’re not afraid.

The third major feature of this initial apocalypse... “in the middle.” The voice speaks from the middle. Not just from above, not just from outside, but from the middle. Yes, from the middle of the churches (v. 13), from the middle of the candlesticks. But as John will discover as the drama unfolds, He speaks

from the middle of other places – from the middle of everything. In Revelation chapter five, we hear that the Lion has triumphed. John turns, expecting to see a Lion, and he “saw ... a Lamb, as if slain, standing in the middle of the throne” (Revelation 5.6). In the middle of the throne. Now there’s no way the Lamb can be standing in the middle of the throne unless he’s standing in the middle of the Almighty who sits on the throne. Which means that he stands at the very middle of everything! This voice speaks from the middle of everything. Do you believe this? Does the church in our time believe this – that Jesus Christ, stands at the centre, and is the centre?

This initial apocalypse of the Apocalypse of Jesus Christ takes me back to something we talked about last spring – the marginalization of the church. If I’m reading the Christian landscape correctly, especially in the western world, many – if not most – believers and church leaders are feeling marginalized. Marginalized vis-a-vis the culture, marginalized vis-a-vis the great forces of our times, marginalized vis-a-vis the power structures that seem to control our lives. Many people feeling marginalized.

Understandably so! The surrounding culture does not seem to care that the church is even here. It seems as though the church has just disappeared from the radar screen of our culture. You might have seen a couple of months ago, a proposal by Ikea to build a new city outside of London. A marvellous city, but there isn’t one place of worship in that new city. It’s okay... New York city started without one too. For the first ten years of its existence, it didn’t have one either. But the church is off the radar screen.

As I see it, in light of the last book of the Bible – the crisis for us right now is not that the church might *be* marginalized, the crisis is that we *feel* marginalized. For one only feels marginalized if one thinks he or she is not in the centre. We only feel marginalized when we think we are not in the centre. So, we feel marginalized relative to Hollywood, which we think is the centre. Or we feel marginalized relative to Ottawa, because we think or feel that Ottawa is the center. Or, we feel marginalized vis-a-vis Beijing or Washington, DC, because we think or feel that Beijing is the centre or that Washington is the centre.

Well... things are not as they seem. Hollywood is not the centre of the universe. I’m not dissing Hollywood... I’m just saying that Hollywood is not the centre. Ottawa, Beijing, Washington DC, are not the centre. Apple and Microsoft are not the centre. Wall Street is not the centre. I’m not dissing any of those capitals or corporations, I’m just saying they’re not the centre. The centre is a Person. The centre of everything is a Person. What is not in sync with the Person is on the margins! What is not true to Him is on the margins!

The church in our time feels marginalized because we have allowed our souls to give in to the illusions around us, and we are now assessing our own worth and our ministries against false centres. Listen! Look! In the middle. The risen and ascended Jesus speaks from the middle.

I think I hear Jesus saying to me, and to the church in our time, “you get discouraged because you get disoriented. And you get disoriented because you get distracted.” I think I hear Jesus say, “You think that in order for you to have influence in your city, you need something more attractive than me. You think you need something more concrete than me, something more marketable than me, something more believable than me.” And Jesus says to us, “No. What you need is an apocalypse – to see the present moment in light of the unseen realities of the future, and to see the present moment in light of the unseen realities of the present. I am the great unseen reality of the present. Listen to me! Look at me! I have the keys! I have the keys of death and of Hades. No one else has them. And if I have the keys to death and Hades, then I have the keys to everything else! Look! Listen! Do not be afraid. I’ve got the keys.”



Let's be still, and I invite you right now to name anything you're afraid of, anything that's causing you fear. Name it to the Lord Jesus, who is very present here. Invite Jesus to use the keys to set you free.

Go now in the assurance that wherever you go, Jesus has your back. Go in peace.