

09-13-20
Revelation 1

The Alpha and the Omega

Lois Harder

A lot of what I learned for this sermon came from a podcast called the Bible Project that Pastor Caleb introduced me to. The Bible Project.com; I encourage you to check it out. It's a whole team of people who produce it, of course, but it was the brainchild of two Bible scholars, one of whom is a PhD in Semitic languages and Biblical studies. So, this fellow has spent a whole of time trying to understand the languages that the Bible was written in and their meanings. I found his work fascinating and helpful – I hope you will too!

Is anybody ready for some hopeful news? Let's unpack this "revelation" a bit and see what we can find. The gospel, the "good news" that we find in this book IS definitely good news; but it's God's kind of good news, so... it might seem a little hard to get ahold of at first. But it's there! And like the other messages in the Bible, it helps to find this message of hope in its historical, cultural, context in order to understand it in our own. The name "revelation" is our first clue.

As the guys on the Bible Project say, it helps if we can check our English understandings of this word at the door. Revelation is the English word translated from the Greek "apocalypsis", or, what we would recognize as apocalyptic. Now... what comes to your mind when you hear apocalyptic or apocalypse? I think of movies like, "Apocalypse Now" or "The Terminator" or books like World War Z or most anything written by Stephen King. Not exactly hopeful. But here's the thing. In Greek, apocalypsis means uncover or expose, or reveal, thus, our word revelation. And get this. The way this word, apocalypsis is used in the Bible, does NOT mean "the complete final destruction of the world, as described in the biblical book of Revelation" as it says in the google dictionary. Now granted, it might mean the end of the world, as we have known it, but as we know, God has plans and ideas that extend waaaaayyyyyy beyond what have known or can know. And that's where the hope lies.

There are lots of examples of this idea of apocalypsis throughout the Bible . Let me just give you a couple of examples. Remember old Noah – after he and his family got off the ark? He was checking out his newly grown vineyard, sampling some of its fine wine and he got pretty drunk and was lying naked in his tent. The text says he was apocalupto – exposed, uncovered, revealed. Then there's the prophet/priest Ezekiel – he had all sorts of dreams and visions sent from God, described with the word apocalypsis – things that were uncovered, exposed, revealed to him.

Now, about dreams and visions. When WE talk about having dreams, we're usually referring to a phenomenon that happens while we're asleep and we think of dreams as a window into our own, inner workings, something that's happening inside our own subconscious that we're working out. And maybe we remember it or maybe we don't. Maybe we keep a dream journal or, if it's a particularly disturbing dream we might ask Bryant or some other therapist to help us analyze or try to figure it out. But when people in the Bible had dreams or visions, it was understood as something generated *by* God and *from* God. Something completely outside of the

dreamer that was a window into the divine. The Biblical understanding of receiving dreams or visions was that the dreamer was in a God-induced, altered state, a state where heaven and earth came together, and they were receiving a message from God about the true nature of reality as God sees it. They understood that they were being shown a glimpse of the way God sees things. So that, as bad as things may have been in the dreamers' reality, these dreams and visions were thought to be a gift from God that revealed (apocalypsed) to them, a new reality, a new way of seeing the world, a way of seeing what God sees.

A couple more examples to help us grasp this... the book of Daniel, again, what we call apocalyptic literature. Daniel's reality was that he and several other government officials, were taken captive when the city of Jerusalem was sacked by King Nebuchadnezzar. In this case it was Neb. who had the dream and Daniel who prayed that God would apocalypse (reveal) the meaning of it so that he could keep his job (and his neck) in the service of this foreign king. And, as we remember, God DID! And Daniel told Neb. "Well, you've seen lots of empires in your dream, and right now you're in charge of the one that's the most powerful. But all of these empires will fall and yours will fall and GOD'S empire will finally overcome all the others – including yours." Now that, of course, was not what Neb. wanted to hear, it made him angry and he demanded everyone's allegiance. Remember? Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego refused to pledge their allegiance to anyone but God and got thrown into the fiery furnace where they were seen walking around, not being burned up at all, in the presence of an angel. And, of course, Babylon and the other empires did, eventually, fall.

Now on to one of the greatest New Testament stories of someone who was apocalypsed...the Apostle Paul. In his letter to the Galatians, chapter 1 verse 12 he writes, "God apocalypsed his Son to me!" And we know the event he was talking about because it's described several times in the book of Acts – his experience on the road to Damascus. Paul, in a God-Induce, altered state, was given a biblical vision, a kingdom vision of the world the way God saw it. Now this story doesn't use the English word apocalypse. It uses words like bright light and blindness, a revelation of God's plan that shattered Paul's previous notions of reality.

So back to this final book of our Bible – Revelation. It's not a secret, predictive code about the end times. It's a letter that uses lots of symbolism and veiled references, written to real people in 7 churches. Some of them were apathetic and wealthy, some were morally compromised, some were faithful and suffering violent persecution. For all of them, the temptation was to deny Jesus, to wallow in their wealth and compromise or to try to avoid persecution and just join in the evil of the Roman empire. Jesus calls them all to overcome that temptation, to follow him faithfully, to trust in his sacrificial love.

It's not pleasant or easy to be the dreamer, the one who receives the revelations from God. Being apocalypsed is completely disruptive and unsettling. It's an experience that can knock you down, blind you, put you in danger, change your whole perspective. But to be apocalypsed is to see what God is doing in the world! With this new perspective can also come great comfort and hope, to be able to say, "I believe that God's got this, even though things seem completely out of control and crazy." To have this vision calls us to DO something with what we've seen. Noah, Ezekiel, Daniel, Paul, Mary and Joseph (also had life-altering dreams and visions from God), John of Patmos, others in the Biblical story who had God's kingdom reality revealed to them –

these faithful saints were often struggling already, experiencing persecution, political upheaval, illnesses or plagues...the earthly reality that they were living through was hard – they were in times of crisis. But one of the themes that runs through the entire Bible is the creative, imaginative, present-and-future kingdom of God and the ways that God reveals how the restoration, the healing, the renewal of all creation will ultimately unfold.

To bring this message right into our current world situation, I'll end by sharing with you how the Bible Project hosts ended their thoughts on reading apocalyptic literature in 2020. They said, We followers of Jesus *want* to see the world the way God sees it. So how can we understand this pandemic in an apocalyptic way? We have this virus and it's super contagious and it has made the world sit at home which has been very disruptive and distressing; it's a crisis. Which means it's also an opportunity to be apocalypsed. If we pray Jesus' prayer that God's kingdom will come here on earth as it is in heaven then we have to live Jesus' ethic. And that is to live with radical devotion to our Creator, expressed through radical love to our neighbors – including our enemies. This pandemic is making more things visible to more people that were clearly there before, but many of us didn't see them. Poverty, inequities, injustices... things that we believe Jesus would want his followers to notice and pay attention to. And the ethical questions that Jesus asks come right to the surface. Who is my neighbor? Who's in need? How can I be generous? How is it that I can live through this time of global crisis and not be changed?

This is not the end of the world, they said. But it might be the end of A world, a reality that we have known might be coming to an end. And, of course, that will be painful. But let us be faithful and avail ourselves to be apocalypsed by God's view of the world and by the hope of God's promise of a healed, renewed world. Amen.

Morning Prayer – Pastor Caleb

Eternal God,

We praise you who are, who were, and who are to come, you who are always faithful through the ages.

When the world seems so shaken, we remember that you are the ruler of all, that those who are powerful on earth are not the central actors in history, because your purposes are never thwarted.

Your love continues to uphold this fragile world, promising to redeem all things.

We confess that we struggle to know how to interpret the time that we are in. Especially in this pandemic, social upheaval, and wildfires, we stay glued to the news and we worry about events that feel threatening.

Yet you are one and the same. Your love is the same, your gospel is the same, and the teaching of Jesus is the same.

We thank you that you have loved us and have released us from our sins through the suffering of Christ. We thank you for the promise of new life now and forever more through Christ who is the firstborn from the dead.

We lift up to you all the was that we are thankful in this moment. We give you thanks for this beautiful sunny day, as well as the needed rain of this past week.

We give thanks for the flexibility and energy of teachers who have learned new skills and put in hours of extra time to educate children and youth in this challenging season.

We give thanks with Lee and Di Suderman who received good news from Mayo Clinic this past week about Lee's diagnosis.

We thank you for Alexanderwohl – for the love that is present here, and the opportunity to reflect the values of your kingdom in our relationships with each other.

Each of us will have different things come to mind for which to feel gratitude today.

We also trust you as one who we can freely bring every concern and request, trusting that our prayers are heard and make a difference.

We lift up to you concerns within our church family.

We give thanks for Darla Banman's return home from her hospital stay, and we pray for her as she continues to recover after receiving an implantable defibrillator.

We pray for Leona Schroeder as she along with her family grieve with the passing of her brother-in-law Ed Thode.

We pray also for Myron Schmidt after learning that his sister Starlet Richardson passed away yesterday afternoon. We pray for Myron and Pat, for Myron's siblings, and for the Richardson family in Washington, as they take in this news, as they grieve, and as they work out how celebrate Starlet's life.

In all moments we acknowledge you as the author of life, and the source of our brief lives that you fill with meaning and opportunities for joy.

We lift up prayers for our community.

We also pray for the family of Irvin Boese as they remember and celebrate his life next Sunday.

We pray for Mark Rogers, as Mark leads a Getting Ahead class in Hillsboro through Core Communities for people of several towns including Goessel. We pray for growth for the participants in a variety of areas of life, including financial, emotional, and spiritual.

We continue to pray for students, teachers, coaches, staff, administration, and families at Goessel schools and area districts as everyone experiences adjustments and some additional stress as we find ways to make school and sports and other activities happen, while striving to slow the spread of the virus.

We lift up our prayers for our world.

We pray for those whose lives have been upended due to natural disasters, especially thinking of all the people in the West who are affected by uncontrollable fires, some evacuated or losing all that they have.

We remember people all around the world who are suffering from poverty, neighborhood violence, or forced displacement from their homes, compounded by the risks of Covid.

We trust that you know each person intimately. We pray for us to discover ways to witness to the love of Christ, to the hope, resilience, healing, and redemption available to every human being through the love of Christ.

In his name, Amen