

SEPTEMBER 20, 2020 WORSHIP SERVICE

REMEMBERING OUR FIRST LOVE – PASTOR CALEB

Revelation 2:1-7

Last week, pastor Lois started into our series on the book of Revelation. She did a very good job at showing us that an “apocalypse” is not about death and destruction, but about revealing, uncovering, exposing something that has been hidden from view.

A man named John wrote about his wild visions while imprisoned on an island off the coast of Turkey. Whoever this John was, he originally sent to encourage and correct seven churches in what is now western Turkey.

We’ll take a look at one of those letters, and how it might apply today.

I don’t know what concept you all start with when it comes to Revelation. It’s a confusing book, some people avoid it because of the way it has been abused. Some people obsess over it, thinking they’ve figured out the code to plot out future events.

There is a whole category of literature called apocalypses, both inside and outside the Bible that narrate dreams and visions and use similar symbolic language.

All throughout church history, there have been divergent ways people have used the book of Revelation, and sometimes avoidance of the book. Martin Luther, who started the Protestant reformation, said he preferred to stick with books that revealed Christ more clearly.

The scholar Michael Gorman gives five different approaches to the book of Revelation. You can see this on the second page of your bulletin.

The graphic is there to show that we can read with a focus on what the book had to say to its original readers 2000 years ago in the past, or focus on its meaning in the present, or focus on using it to predict the future.

That’s the vertical axis, and the horizontal axis is whether you see all the strange symbols and imagery as codes to unlock, or as a vivid and beautiful imagery that gives us special glasses to understand God’s truth no matter what time we are living in.

This translates into at least five common approaches. The popular approach that gets the most press, and that you see in books like the *Left Behind* series, sees Revelation as a kind of code to unlock what will happen in the relatively near future until Jesus returns.

Another approach tries to figure out exactly what it meant in the first century.

Next, the poetic approach sees Revelation as symbolic language that expresses ultimate truths about God and the struggle with evil.

The *theopolitical* view sees Revelation as Christian resistance to accommodation with the Roman Empire (and by extension the similar pressures we have today).

The *pastoral-prophetic* approach sees this as imagery meant to assure Christians facing difficult struggle that God's kingdom is still true, and to provoke us out of complacency.

Of these five approaches, I feel the final three – *poetic*, *theopolitical*, and *pastoral-prophetic* – have the most to offer and are compatible with each other.

That's how I will approach the book. Less as a set of codes to figure out future events, and more as a special kind of lens. Like special glasses to see God's truth, like an astronomer's telescope gives a glimpse into the beauty of deep space.

That doesn't mean that Revelation has nothing to say about how God's new creation will come about, but our focus should be helping us be faithful in the present in light of God's new creation.

The symbols and imagery that Revelation is so rich with can inspire our own imaginations rather than scaring us – though one teacher of the Bible cautions that this should be disciplined imagination – not wild speculation.

This will be a journey of learning for all of us. I believe that Revelation gives encouragement and correction to Christians living in times of great pressure and crisis. It sure feels like we are in such a time right now, with a pandemic, protests, wildfires that apparently are making even skies here hazy, and on everyone's minds – the looming election season.

So now I want to turn to these short letters to the seven churches, and specifically to the first of these – the church of Ephesus.

The John who wrote Revelation was imprisoned on the island of Patmos, just west of Turkey. All seven of these churches are located in western Turkey, not so far from where John is at.

In Revelation, almost everything is seven. We already have seven stars, seven lampstands, as well as seven churches. Seven represents completion – there are seven days in every week.

I see no reason to doubt that Revelation addressed specific situations in these seven churches, but by using the number seven, John also seems to feel the vision has something for every church throughout the ages.

If you know something of any of these letters, it's probably the last one: the letter to the angel of the church of Laodicea. This is where you have the lines about Christ spitting out lukewarm believers, and about Christ standing at the door knocking.

It would be great for a sermon, but sometimes I like to find ground that is less heavily trod, so I went with the first of the seven churches: Ephesus.

All seven letters are addressed to an angel that somehow represents the church. Jesus is standing among the lampstands that represent the churches – a powerful way of saying that the presence of Christ is among and with the church at large.

The style of the letters resembles the way that a Roman emperor or governor would give an edict. Most of the letters have both affirmation and criticism of the churches. All of them end with a statement like “to the one who overcomes, I will give...”

In the case of Ephesus, those who persevere through adversity are promised “paradise” and a chance to eat from the “tree of life.” It’s actually a reference to the Garden of Eden from the book where the tree of life was located.

Something we’ll see time and time again is how often Revelation refers to ideas and symbols from the Old Testament, such as the Garden of Eden.

For example, the idea of seven lampstands comes from the prophetic book of Zechariah. John’s names for false teachers, like Balaam and Jezebel, are people from the Old Testament. Whatever the group called Nicolaitians were, they appear to be something similar.

Going back to the Old Testament will sometimes help us understand the cryptic-sounding parts of Revelation.

The temptation that these churches face is accommodation to the ways of the Roman Empire that they are living in. We have good evidence that Christians lived and worked peacefully alongside their pagan neighbors.

But they also needed to bear witness to their true allegiance to Jesus and not to the Roman emperor.

A common dilemma seems to have been whether to eat meat that had been sacrificed to Greek and Roman gods. It was a dilemma, because virtually all meat was sacrificed to gods, and refusing to eat any would mean that you were separated from business and civic life.

So you wouldn’t know it from the strong language of Revelation, but you could kind of understand the position of Christians that felt pressure to compromise.

The key sentences given to Ephesus are:

You have abandoned your first love. Remember from where you have fallen and repent and do the works you did at first!

We don’t know specifics. We only know that the Ephesians have somehow lost the love of Christ that previously gave them energy, even though they have done well at distinguishing between true and false teaching. The Ephesian church is the only one of the seven that is threatened with losing its lampstand – losing its place among the rest.

Could it be true that the church today has forsaken the love we had at first? That's the question that the letter to the church of Ephesus most clearly asks us.

It's not that the church today and the ancient church of Ephesus are the same. I'm not saying the Spirit would have the same words to Alexanderwohl as to Ephesus, or that Christ would threaten to remove our lampstand and demote us as a church. After all, each of these seven messages to different churches are a little different.

But the words to Ephesus still invite us to our own spiritual inventory for our individual lives and for Alexanderwohl.

There is no particular date when everything was perfect at Alexanderwohl. Besides that, it's easy to have selective memory about the past that highlights the good.

But the point of this exercise is not to find a time when things were perfect. It's to reach for when in your memory of your personal life, or the life of the church, you felt a kind of energy or fire of love for God and for others. A time when you were a little less caught up in busyness than in recent years; when you had a sense of living for something beyond yourself; when you felt a deeper and larger purpose for everything; a time when you were less comfortable and settled.

This exercise may or may not yield something for you. We can't go back there, but we can ask what from the past might be a resource for the present.

In my own life, I felt a greater sense of love and desire to live for God in my high school years, when it felt I was just coming to really read and understand more of the Bible, and when I was thirsting for a way to define my own identity as a Christian.

I've changed a lot since then, and my faith has both matured and been challenged by both life experiences and seminary study.

Everything was a lot simpler and more black-and-white when I was younger. Seeing much more complexity to the world and to people, watching my home congregation go through a brutal conflict from a distance, and owning up to my own shortcomings – all of that has made me lose some of the innocence and passion I had at first.

I imagine some of you can relate.

Maybe adversity and the challenge of sorting through trustworthy and untrustworthy teachers made the church of Ephesus a little more hardened, and therefore less loving.

But I think you can do both. I think we can "grow up," become wiser and less naïve, and still keep a fire of love burning within us, in spite of this crazy life and this crazy world.

How can we recapture a sense of energy and passion for being a Christ-centered and Christ-filled community with all that God puts us in contact with?

How can we refuse to accommodate to the values of the hyper-individualistic and me-focused American way? How can we *remember* that the way of Jesus is different than the way of Empire?

As the culture wars of our country enter into the church, it is too easy for us to be selective in how we aim to be distinctive from the broader culture. Sometimes we are so focused on being distinctive one way, that we are blind to the ways that we have accommodated to currents of our culture that are bearing bad fruit.

Whether it's idolizing sexual relationships as the key to the good life, whether it's seeking to maximize our wealth or symbols of self-worth and accomplishment, whether it's our culture's fetish with guns, or buying into the superiority of being white.

Returning to our first love means making the kind of love revealed in the story of Jesus as our first loyalty. As we go through Revelation, we will see how Jesus is symbolized by a slain lamb. He exercises power through a willingness to suffer.

Those of you who meet with a Sunday school class might work with this. When do you remember a particularly deep love God and for one another at Alexanderwohl, and how can we recover that same spirit?

Let's remember our first love, and put love first.