

Revelations on Revelation Part 3  
February 25, 2024  
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**20** Then I saw an angel coming down from heaven, holding in his hand the key to the bottomless pit and a great chain. <sup>2</sup> He seized the dragon, that ancient serpent, who is the devil and Satan, and bound him for a thousand years <sup>3</sup> and threw him into the pit and locked and sealed it over him, so that he would deceive the nations no more, until the thousand years were ended. After that he must be let out for a little while.

<sup>4</sup> Then I saw thrones, and those seated on them were given authority to judge. I also saw the souls of those who had been beheaded for their testimony to Jesus<sup>Ⓜ</sup> and for the word of God. They had not worshiped the beast or its image and had not received its brand on their foreheads or their hands. They came to life and reigned with Christ a thousand years. <sup>5</sup> (The rest of the dead did not come to life until the thousand years were ended.) This is the first resurrection. <sup>6</sup> Blessed and holy are those who share in the first resurrection. Over these the second death has no power, but they will be priests of God and of Christ, and they will reign with him a thousand years.

<sup>7</sup> When the thousand years are ended, Satan will be released from his prison <sup>8</sup> and will come out to deceive the nations at the four corners of the earth, Gog and Magog, in order to gather them for battle; they are as numerous as the sands of the sea. <sup>9</sup> They marched up over the breadth of the earth and surrounded the camp of the saints and the beloved city. And fire came down from heaven<sup>Ⓜ</sup> and consumed them. <sup>10</sup> And the devil who had deceived them was thrown into the lake of fire and sulfur, where the beast and the false prophet were, and they will be tormented day and night forever and ever.

<sup>11</sup> Then I saw a great white throne and the one who sat on it; the earth and the heaven fled from his<sup>Ⓜ</sup> presence, and no place was found for them. <sup>12</sup> And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Also another book was opened, the book of life. And the dead were judged according to their works, as recorded in the books. <sup>13</sup> And the sea gave up the dead who were in it, Death and Hades gave up the dead who were in them, and all were judged according to what they had done. <sup>14</sup> Then Death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. This is the second death, the lake of fire, <sup>15</sup> and anyone whose name was not found written in the book of life was thrown into the lake of fire.

Holy Wisdom, Holy Word.

Noted author and Princeton University professor Elaine Pagels writes in her 2012 book, *Revelations, Visions, Prophecy, & Politics in the Book of Revelation*, that Revelation has captured the attention of people for 2,000 years, with its tales of great trials and war and tribulations, and the final judgment. Pagels writes that “Even today, countless people throughout the world turn to [Revelation] to find meaning, and many Christian groups claim to see its prophecies of divine judgment being fulfilled before their eyes. Millions fear being ‘left behind’ when the end comes, as Tim LaHaye’s best-selling book series warns, and believe that they are seeing its prophesied battles playing out in catastrophic events of recent history.”<sup>1</sup>

This is all scary stuff, isn’t it? It is ominous. It can make us afraid of what our ultimate fate may be. Will we be left behind? Will we be caught up in these great battles? Will we endure a frightening end and face the dragon? The beast? The lake of fire?

Now, I want to turn your attention back to what I said in the first sermon in this series, that John, the author of this work, was in part writing to seven churches in Turkey and trying to provide encouragement to them because of problems they were having. Some were of their own making; some were suffering under persecution for their faith. A primary interpretation of Revelation is that it is a book of protest against the evil Roman empire, which ruled that part of the world then. In addition, much of the imagery in this book is borrowed heavily by John. It is not all his imagination, but a lot of it is imagery from the Old Testament. John borrows liberally from the Old Testament in his writing of Revelation. Frankly, he plagiarizes a lot from Old Testament prophets, such as Daniel and Ezekiel.

Revelation is an ancient genre of literature called “apocalypse.” According to David Aune, an apocalypse is typically a narrative written in first-person where the author writes a revelatory vision of the future or of a heavenly world or both. Aune notes that the only other book-length apocalyptic book in the Bible is Daniel.<sup>2</sup>

Today’s reading is full of violent depictions of war and conflict between good and evil. There is the dragon locked up for 1,000 years while Christ and those who have died for the faith reign over the world in peace and harmony for a millennium. Many people in their reading of Revelation believe that a literal 1,000 years of peace under Christ’s rule will happen before the final judgment, just like it says in Revelation. Others view this time frame as symbolic, including Presbytery de Cristo Pastor Brad Munroe, who writes that the 1,000 years referenced in Revelation are like the 1,000 years in Psalm 90, where

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<sup>1</sup> Elaine Pagels, *Revelations: Visions, Prophecy, & Politics in the Book of Revelation* (New York: Viking, 2012), 1.

<sup>2</sup> David Aune, *The HarperCollins Study Bible* (New York: HarperCollins, 1993), 2308-2309

the psalmist writes, "a thousand years in your sight are like a day that has just gone by, or like a watch in the night."<sup>3</sup>

And then in the final battle the evil forces who surrounded Jerusalem are defeated when fire comes down from heaven and consumes them (Rev. 20:10). This is an allusion to 2 Kings 1:10, which states, "Elijah replied to the captain of fifty, 'If I am a man of God, let fire come down from heaven and consume you and your fifty.' Then fire came down from heaven and consumed him and his fifty."<sup>4</sup>

Lots of imagery from Revelation – not just what was in our reading today – has been used in song, literature, propaganda, for centuries. As Pagels points out, there has been a fascination with Revelation for 2,000 years.

For example, the lyrics in our closing hymn today – better known as the "Battle Hymn of the Republic" -- have hints of Revelation in it. The writer of our closing hymn looked to Revelation for inspiration, for meaning and hope, as she and those around her faced an uncertain and frightening time in the life of our country.

Julia Ward Howe wrote the hymn in 1861, the first year of the Civil War. According to TK, During that time, she was touring a Union camp with her pastor. As she walked through the camp, she heard the soldiers singing a tribute song to John Brown, the white abolitionist who was executed for leading a raid on a federal arsenal in 1859 in Harpers Ferry in what is now West Virginia. The music to the tune the Union soldiers were singing was pretty good, but Howe's pastor thought the words lacked something. So, he encouraged her to write better lyrics. The next morning, she woke up and quickly penned the words to the song we know today with its allusions to the Book of Revelation. The Union side adopted the "Battle Hymn of the Republic" as its war anthem and cry, Pagels writes.

According to Pagels, the hymn weaves Jeremiah's and John's prophecies into the Civil War setting and time, where the Lord returns to earth to defeat the enemy, where "He hath loosed the fateful lightning of His terrible swift sword; Our God is marching on."<sup>5</sup>

Imagery in Revelation was used by the Confederate side as well, Pagels points out. The Confederacy used a depiction of Abraham Lincoln being strangled by a dragon that is supposed to be the Union.

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<sup>3</sup> Brad Munroe, *Rhythms of the God-Life*, 2023, 332.

<sup>4</sup> Munroe, 333.

<sup>5</sup> Elaine Pagels, *Revelations: Visions, Prophecy, & Politics in the Book of Revelation* (New York: Viking, 2012), 173-174.

Thus, that is why our closing hymn was chosen today, for its roots in the Book of Revelation because it is certainly not a classic Lenten song.

And what could today's lesson from Revelation teach us today in this season of Lent? As I mentioned in a previous sermon, Lent is a time to take action to deepen our faith. I've tried to encourage us all to deepen our faith by prayer, meditation, being of service to others and sacrifice.

Revelation's battles between good and evil remind us of the struggles we have as human beings against sin. It reminds us of the struggles we have against ourselves, our instincts that can get out of line, and our urges that cause harm to ourselves and others. Lent is a time where we examine our lives closely and how we want them to improve. Most important is improving our lives in the sight of God.

Chapter 20 closes with scenes from John's vision of the last judgment. John writes about books being opened, including the book of life. Those who are not in the book of life will be thrown into the lake of fire. I know for me as a child I was terrified that I'd land in the lake of fire. Fortunately, I don't have that fear anymore because I have come to know a loving, forgiving, and gracious God in the person of Jesus Christ.

As the Confession of 1967 states, "All who put their trust in Christ face divine judgment without fear, for the judge is their redeemer." We do not have anything to fear, my friends. Our judge is our loving savior.

And as the Brief Statement of Faith concludes, "With believers in every time and place, we rejoice that nothing in life or in death can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."

That is the ultimate comfort for us. Jesus said be not afraid. Indeed, nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ. We fight our battles against evil, externally and internally. We know we are forgiven for our sins by a loving and merciful God. Our judge is also our loving savior. Let us not be afraid and take comfort in the love of God for us, the Lord's blessed children.

Amen.