

“Alpha and Omega”

April 24, 2022

Revelation Song series

Revelation: some of us are excited, some of us might be intrigued. Some of us may be uncertain and remembering a time when we tried to read Revelation and stopped after a few chapters because it was so strange and hard to understand. But the images are with us. Some of the verses in Revelation are phrases of sacred music - both traditional and modern.

Alpha and Omega - the first and last letters of the Greek alphabet - adorn banners, paraments, stoles, and more. We talk about the triumphant Lamb. And yet Revelation is sometimes off limits - or at least it's not our focus. We don't talk about it much - maybe because we don't know what to say about it. We're comfortable when we celebrate All Saints Day or attend funerals and read from Revelation 21 - the vision of a new heaven and new earth with the promise of no more weeping or mourning. I can get behind that; it's sounds great! But what about the rest?

We need to take time and understand Revelation so that we can have accurate information about it because the interpretations are many. Have you heard any of these phrases: the four horsemen of the apocalypse, end times, the antichrist, the mark of the beast - all of it is in Revelation?

It was sometime in 2020 after Covid first hit that I received a video in the mail from an organization trying to make a connection between the Covid pandemic, the end times, and the mark of the beast. Let me say clearly: the vaccine is not the mark of the beast, but there are people who think it is.

Interpretations of Revelation are all around us. It was wild to get that video - and to realize how much is out there that's not helpful or accurate! We need to know where this letter came from - who wrote it and why. We need to understand the spirit of this Scripture.

John is writing a letter to churches. This is John the Seer (not to be confused with Gospel writer John or John the Baptist), who is exiled to the island of Patmos.

SLOW SLIDE: Map of seven churches

They are cities in modern day Turkey. Scholars figure it was written around 95 AD when Domitian was emperor of Rome. John calls it a prophecy. Revelation was the key for the people who received it to interpret their experience. Professor David de Silva says that John offers “word paintings” to show people the reality of where they

are and where they should be heading. That's what prophets do.

As the Bible Project says, though Revelation has a lot to say to us, "its meaning for us must be anchored in John's meaning for them." The time, place, and audience matter when we talk about Scripture. John's goal is to offer both challenge and hope - and to be clear that no matter how things look in their present moment, ultimately God's reign will come in its fullness.

So, Revelation isn't written to us, but it is written for us. That's still good news for us and something we can claim. How do we live our faith in the risen Christ right now? The ones who received this letter were seeking to follow Jesus in the midst of a powerful empire - Rome - and their practice of faith wasn't always welcomed. Their loyalty to Jesus wasn't honored. They were facing both political and economic pressures to follow the Empire. And just like the spirit of the prophets, John has a lot to say about those in power and how they use their power.

It's helpful to hear how John's letter starts: "The revelation from Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show his servants what must soon take place. He made it known by sending his angel to his servant John, who testifies to everything he saw—that is, the word of God and the testimony of Jesus Christ." And then there's a blessing - a beatitude: *Blessed is the one who reads aloud the words of this prophecy, and blessed are those who hear it and take to heart what is written in it, because the time is near. ...*

That word for revelation is *apocalypsis*. **SLOW SLIDE:** Revelation is apocalyptic literature, but *apocalypse* doesn't mean "disaster." It actually means "unveiling" - something that is revealed. This is about Jesus - who Jesus is and why that matters. When we read it, we don't take it literally. One scholar says that we "look through it" to see the bigger picture.

Ben Howard writes, "Revelation is a book filled with symbolism and strangeness that tells us the story of our faith on a cosmic scale. We are shown heaven. We are shown the throne room of God. We are shown Jesus returning to bring justice to the earth. We talk about some of those things, we even have clichés and rote phrases based on these ideas, but Revelation forces us to look at them straight-on and acknowledge that they are definitively not normal.

Through this discomfort and disorientation, Revelation reminds us that we believe in something much bigger and more destructive of the status quo than we typically realize. Revelation helps us to see the familiar in unfamiliar ways and stand

in awe of a God who is far beyond our understanding.” So, it’s the big picture that we look for in Revelation.

And John draws on many references to Old Testament writings, including prophets Ezekiel and Daniel. John is immersed in Scripture so much that he can help the early church to seek God’s will. For as much as Revelation is very unique as a vision, it contains numerous connections to Scripture. Take a look at this:

SLOW SLIDE: Visual of cross references

This is a depiction of cross references from Genesis to Revelation - 63,779 cross references in all. The color corresponds to the distance between the chapters, creating a rainbow-like effect. Psalm 119 is at the center point. What’s especially striking is the number of lines that stretch all the way from Genesis to Revelation. We’ll notice the connection as we move through Revelation and hear of the restoration of creation.

It’s also important to understand that Revelation isn’t always read the same way by everyone. That’s clear from the mail that came two years ago. **SLOW SLIDE:** 4 views on how we read Revelation

Revelation is apocalyptic literature, which usually comes out of a time of difficulty and is written to give hope and encouragement. So, Revelation can be read in four different views:

1. *Futurist*: pointing to the last days before and just after Jesus returns - end times
2. *Historicist*: foretelling of the future starting from the time of its writing (AD 95) - a lens through which we view history
3. *Preterist*: pertains to people who lived in John’s time and explains events in late 1st and early 2nd century (mainline Protestant view, including United Methodists) - what was happening using symbols and code
4. *Idealist*: perpetual struggle between good and evil, challenges of living for God amid the culture we’re in, and hope that God offers when the persecuted who remain faithful - the bigger picture, cosmic struggle

So, the preterist and idealist views are where we’ll focus. This was written to a specific audience, but has something to say to us. Most Biblical scholarship holds to Preterist and Idealist views, and if we can focus on the bigger picture and bigger message without getting too caught up in details, that helps us.

Why does Revelation fit in this Easter season? Because it talks about Jesus. Jesus is the faithful witness who was crucified. Jesus is the firstborn of the dead - the

risen One. Jesus is the ruler of the kings of the earth - he reigns over everything.

Revelation is a fitting focus for this season of Easter because one of John's main concerns is about who we worship and why we worship. We worship Jesus because he loves us and frees us from sin. Jesus makes us to be a kingdom and makes us priests - having the ability to have direct access to and connection with God. This is what Jesus has done.

Then John moves to what Jesus will do. Christ will come again, and everyone will see him. And there's a call to accountability for those who follow Jesus. Just as Jesus is a faithful witness, so those who follow him should also be. It's important to hear the call to remain faithful to Christ - not to the emperor or the empire or anything or anyone else. That's the question for us: Whom will we worship? Which Kingdom will we choose? That's what John the Seer asks.

Who has the power? Christ who is the King over the cosmos. Even as the struggle continues for God's reign to come in its fullness, we celebrate that Jesus is King. He has overcome death and reigns with God. He is Ruler and Judge, and for those who received these words first, Jesus was coming any time, any day - within their lifetime. It's important to remember that perspective as we read.

So, the message is urgent for them. Worship Jesus - and only Jesus! We've lost some of that sense of urgency. It's still important to consider who we are, whom we worship, and why our faith in Jesus matters.

One commentator says that the focus on worship reminds us that when we gather with one another, "the story of Jesus shakes the world." Today our Orthodox friends around the world celebrate Easter - many in Ukraine. Today they're gathering and talking about hope, resurrection, and new life amid everything they see around them. I can't help but make a connection to those who first received this letter who were living in the midst of struggle and hearing John's encouragement to remain faithful. Can we imagine proclaiming "Christ has died. Christ is risen. Christ will come again." in the middle of such a time?

We are Easter people who claim resurrection. And it may be easy to speak about new life and hope right now. I'm thinking of a high school classmate and his spouse who welcomed a child in their home after a long process on international adoption or a person who is finding renewed strength and faith after a long illness.

Revelation reminds us that Christ redeems the struggle and brokenness of the world. He has triumphed over all of it. He has overcome the world. But there are moments when we live in the difficulty. The triumph doesn't seem to be complete

yet. There is deep grief at the loss of a loved one. There is uncertainty about the future. There is pain and struggle. Christ is risen. Christ is working. Christ will come again. That's one reason that the images in Revelation are so powerful.

SLOW SLIDE: Image of alpha and omega

Bruce Metzger wrote, "God is before all things and will outlast all things." For a group that was dealing with the present reality of persecution for their faith, this promise is powerful. For us, as we seek to be faithful, it's a challenging, convicting, and comforting word. We're called to consider our personal and communal faith, and understand a foundational truth: God is God, always and forever. "God is before all things and will outlast all things." That's where we start with John's vision. That's what gives us hope - God has been, is now, and forever will be.

So as Easter people, those who claim resurrection, can we find strength, grace, and hope in that promise even as we see all that's going on around us? We hold it in tension - that Christ has triumphed over everything even as we live with the reality of struggle. That's what our faith is every day - claiming the promise of God and living it out where we are. May God help us.

Thanks be to God. AMEN.