

“Jesus Is on the Way”

May 29 2022

Revelation Song series – Memorial Day weekend

For the last six weeks, we've been drawn into the Book of Revelation - visions of angels, God's judgment, the righteous worshiping God who sits on the throne and the Lamb — Jesus Christ, the promise of the Kingdom of God in all of its glory. I'm grateful for this time because of digging in and trying to discern what God is saying to me as a follower of Jesus — and to all of us as the Body of Christ.

I'm always particularly struck when I read this last chapter. John has just shared the vision of the New Jerusalem the beauty and awe of it - the promise of God being with God's people. He falls down in worship before the angel who has shown him the vision, but the angel tells him not to do it. The angel says, "Worship God!"

That's really the message that John sends to the seven churches in Asia Minor - "Worship God!" Remember that John writes a letter - probably something that could be read aloud when early Christians gathered together. Revelation was meant to encourage and strengthen these early followers who were new to faith in Jesus Christ.

All along, God's vision to John has centered around following Jesus, staying connected to him, and remaining faithful to him. These early Christians in Asia Minor were living in the midst of persecution and trying to wade through false teachings. They were worshiping God and up against the Roman Empire where the emperor wanted people's worship. It was a power struggle of the most serious kind, and much of John's writing is a critique of empire - especially when it comes to the focus on military might and the economic machine - and our human tendency to worship anything except for the one true God. We worship idols pretty easily.

And so, the visions that John has received and passed on deal with power. Ultimately, through John, God tells the people that God is more powerful than any earthly power, though that might be tough for them to understand in their current situation. As we've lived in this season of Easter, Revelation reminds us that God's power is beyond anything we can think or imagine: power enough to bring resurrection to new life, enough to overcome whatever it is we face with the promise of new life. I love that promise; it's great to hear, but hard to claim right now.

And the end of Revelation brings us back to what we've heard before - a last reminder of what we need to take away. We hear those words — that Jesus is the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end. We hear the blessing on those who wash their robes — those who kept the faith and have witnessed to the Gospel in their lives — even up against the power of evil, those who identify with the suffering of Jesus to the point that they stand with those who suffer. Maybe that's a word for us - we need to stand with those who suffer. They risked their lives for the sake of Jesus Christ. Their faith costs them something.

I'll confess that as we've studied Revelation together, I've gone through lots of emotions about God's Word to me and to us. Sometimes I feel like I've been doing pretty well — I'm pretty good at living for Jesus. I've followed where God has led me. I tithe. I give my time. I serve. I stand up for Jesus and stand in his grace. I do my best to love — some days better than others, no worse than anyone else.

I've been convicted at times, too. What does all of this really mean? What is God saying here? Am I doing enough? There's so much more to be done! Can I ever feel good about my faith? Sometimes it seems too easy — maybe I'm not sacrificing enough. What does it mean to wash my robe in the blood of the Lamb?

Still other times, I've become cynical. Do we in the 21st century church have a clue about what it means to follow Jesus Christ? Do we have any idea what it means to risk our lives for the sake of Jesus? The people who received John's letter were up against incredible odds, and they made incredible sacrifices to be faithful.

Even today, there are people who worship underground and out of sight because they don't have freedom to express faith openly. We have that freedom. Many have sacrificed it all for that freedom. We remember them today and hopefully beyond today. Even so, we take that freedom for granted. We don't have to think about it. There are times when we put everything else ahead of that freedom to worship Jesus and the faith we claim.

We all worship something or someone. We struggle against idol worship. For John, the question to him and to those who receive God's vision — in any time and place — is whether we'll worship God or put our loyalty elsewhere. So, the angel's words are powerful — they cut to the heart of it. Worship God! Worship isn't confined to this time, but it's all our lives and how we live.

We hear Jesus say, "I am coming soon!" a few times in these final verses. The people in John's time waited for Jesus to come anytime. We don't have the same perspective or urgency. Yet, we say it when we gather around the Communion table:

Christ has died. Christ is risen. Christ will come again. But do we ever think it will be soon?

Sometimes we're caught up in a vision of going back to what we know - to how things were. That's been especially true with Covid. How many of us have said at least once, "I just want things to go back to normal?" Well, whatever normal was, it's not coming back. Things are markedly different, but we can stand in the assurance that the promises of God are true. Christ will come again. *Normal isn't coming back; Jesus is.* It's not a threat, but a promise.

Maybe you've seen the bumper sticker somewhere before: *Jesus is coming. Look busy.* The question is, when Jesus returns - whenever it is - what will we be busy doing? Will we be caught looking up, scanning the latest newspaper, or reading a novel trying to figure out if it's the end times, or watching our favorite channel? Or, like those before us who have "wash[ed] their robes" in the blood of the Lamb, will we be found doing the work of the Kingdom here and now, making this world more and more into what God created it to be in the first place? That has everything to do with justice, mercy, and love.

SLIDE: Andy and Opie - *we're not on the planning committee; we're on the welcoming committee.* We don't know, but we're called to be ready.

Pastor Rob Bell produced a video in his Nooma series in which he plants two trees, and he explains that we live between the two trees. In Genesis, God offers Adam and Eve the blessing of the Garden, including the tree of life and knowledge. They decide to go beyond what God has offered them and take the fruit of the tree of knowledge. Here in Revelation, the tree of life is the promise of everlasting life, life lived with God in eternity. We live between the two trees.

In the New Jerusalem, there is full fellowship with God. There is the river that flows from the throne of God with an endless supply of life-giving water. Jesus Christ is the One who allows us to have a restored relationship with God - paradise lost has been found again because of God's grace.

But Revelation calls us to a decision. Early on, we heard about the seven churches and their struggles. Yes or no, hot or cold — remember that being lukewarm is the worst way to be. John cuts to the chase — whom do you follow? To whom are you loyal? It's still a call to action — not out of fear for what will come, but out of a desire to be a part of God's Kingdom.

The call is for each of us today. We've been through John's vision, and the challenge is in front of us: who am I? To whom am I loyal. Whom do I worship? Where do I need to change?

Jesus is the One who is the fulfillment of God's justice. God has demands on us. What we do is important. How we act is important. How we live is important. What we stand for and whom we stand with is important. We are called to witness to the Good News of Jesus Christ - the saving love of the One who came that we might know God and have life abundant. It costs something to show that love and life to others. What has it cost you this week to follow Jesus Christ? What sacrifice have you made for his sake? I'm asking myself the same questions.

One person observed something interesting: An obituary often lists a person as an "active member of the church." Their observation was this: should there be any other kind? If we claim to follow Jesus and be a part of the Body of Christ, we're called to action.

That's been on my mind, especially this week. Just two weeks ago, we lamented the reality of gun violence after 10 people died, 3 were injured, and a community was traumatized in Buffalo, New York. That day, there was a shooting at a church in California. This week, 21 are dead - including 19 children - in Uvalde, Texas. What will we do? How will we respond? Our Book of Resolutions in the UMC says, *Acts of senseless violence should not be an acceptable occurrence in any community.* We should all be enraged, and yet, here we are again.

Our faith compels us to pray for those who died and for their families, but our faith also compels us to act in ways that advocate for a safer world. My prayer has been that we care enough to make needed changes, and that means speaking truth to those who have power to make changes. Bishop Thomas Bickerton wrote, "My outrage and anger demand a statement, but my love of people demands action. If you are a church body, don't settle for just active shooter training. Determine that you will actively work to transform lives from violence to peace, elect officials that will not settle for inaction, and inject communities with the grace and love of Christ that will alter the course of our current behaviors. Let's go on the offense today and play whatever role we can to change the cycle of violence, end racism and other behaviors that treat people less than they were created to be, and create a narrative that will compel people to live a life with a heart of peace."

In these final verses of Revelation, there is the assurance that Jesus is coming again. For those who witness to the Gospel, who stand for justice, who take bold stances, who stand in unity with those who suffer, Jesus coming soon is welcomed. They can't wait - *Come, Lord Jesus!* I've felt that way this week - anytime, Jesus!

But even as I pray that, I have to look at myself. I have to make sure that I'm seeking the Kingdom of God first - worshipping God alone, loving as Jesus loves, seeking justice as a way to peace, and showing God's grace.

Our actions and commitments have a price, and this last bit of Revelation calls us all to repentance for the ways we haven't followed Jesus. We can make excuses for why we haven't done what we should, but the call is to make a change — to reclaim the relationship that we have with Christ and walk in the way that leads to life. Each of us has failed in our walk with Jesus Christ by our action or inaction. Each of us needs forgiveness. Each of us needs to hear God's Word again.

And the invitation to walk with God isn't limited to you and me. Revelation says, "The Spirit and the bride say, "Come!" The Holy Spirit and the bride — the people of God, the church — are the ways that God calls people into relationship with Christ.

We hear the word "community" a lot today — many times to describe different connections that we have. Sometimes it's face-to-face community; sometimes it's over an Internet connection — an online community. But community is usually something we choose to be a part of. Community is generally defined as people I feel comfortable around.

In the Kingdom of God, though, community with one another is how we see God. It's in the Body of Christ that we share the love of God and hold each other accountable as people who follow Jesus together. It's in relationships with each other that we get a better, fuller picture of who God is in Jesus Christ. It's together that we get the challenge to follow Jesus more wholeheartedly and engage the world around us with the grace and love of God. I need you as my community. We need each other as community.

When we worship God, God does the work of bringing others into the community. It's together that we see more clearly who God wants us to be. When we worship God together, when we spend time in fellowship, when we learn together in Bible study, when we serve together, when we struggle together and pray together, we reflect the Kingdom of God to the world.

"Worship God!" the angel says. It's the call to each of us. "I am coming soon!" Jesus says. I pray that prepare the way for the Lord and live the faith we claim with justice, mercy, and love. And I pray that the prayers we pray aren't simply words, but a movement to act, advocate, help, and make changes for the good of God's creation. Come, Lord Jesus. AMEN.