

“A New Vision

May 8, 2022

Revelation Song – Mother’s Day

How many of you can remember the last handwritten note or letter you wrote? I don’t mean E-mail messages, but handwritten notes that take time and effort. I just had a conversation with one of Ana’s teachers who actually teaches students how to write thank you notes and is surprised by many who have never done it.

Handwritten notes may be not as prevalent now, but I wonder if you’ve ever saved a note that meant something to you. It might be something you keep and look back on. Maybe it came just at the right time and offered you encouragement and support, especially in a difficult time. A note like that may not change what’s going on, but it can help us remember that we’re not alone. I have a drawer of those kinds of notes.

That’s what John’s letter is for the people who receive it - people he cared about. He wrote from exile on the island of Patmos to show his faith in Jesus, to share his love for Jesus, and to encourage others to keep on trusting in God, even though everything around them seemed to be falling apart. I’ll admit that I read this passage and felt like I could relate for many reasons this week.

For John’s audience, they claimed faith in God as the One as King - over culture and country. Now they faced a new reality - they were occupied, ruled, and persecuted by the Roman Empire that pushed its own religion and worship of the emperor as a god. So, there was a choice? Whom would they worship?

I don’t think we face the same issues that John’s audience did. This letter was written to them, but we can learn from them. But I was convicted this week by Peter Storey, who served as Bishop of the Methodist Church in South Africa and President of the South African Council of Churches, working with Archbishop Desmond Tutu - all during the struggle against apartheid in South Africa. Storey covered a lot in his sharing, reminding me of John the Seer who spoke truth to power and called the church to wake up and pay attention to who we’re called to be in the name of Jesus. I say that knowing that it’s not simple or easy, but there is a call. I think that’s what Revelation offers to us - some conviction and challenge about who we are as the Body of Christ.

What’s the church’s witness right now? When it comes to racism, war, extremism, nationalism, what do we do? What do we say? For those who gathered

here on Tuesday, I don't think anyone left without some challenge and discomfort at the Holy Spirit's movement to wake us up. It was a moment when the Holy Spirit was a Discomforter.

It wasn't lost on me that Storey's witness was offered in this space as we had prepared it for this series on Revelation. His prophetic voice made me think of John the Seer - and his indictment of the church as lukewarm and those who simply use the title Christian, but don't really act in the way of Jesus.

I'm still processing a lot of what I heard from him, but one thing that Storey said has stuck with me - that Christ was motivated and driven by love, and so must we be if we're the Body of Christ. It's not so much having courage, but acting out of love for all of God's people. That's how the world is changed. And it's not easy, and it's not fast - and it comes with a cost. If we take Revelation seriously, there's something here about our need to resist the temptation to water down what it means to follow Jesus without whole lives - heart, soul, mind, and strength - and to love God and love neighbor.

Remember that Revelation isn't so much a timetable or symbols or strange imagery, but the overall message of God's power. Raymond Brown says this: "The author of Revelation did not know how or when the world will end, and neither does anyone else." Rev. Grace Imathiu, a clergy colleague says, "Knowing what we know, it's no wonder we don't read Revelation anymore. The whole book...seems like a mistake. Let's not beat around the bush; [John] was seeing way beyond the horizon I am seeing." That's why it's strange and difficult to understand.

And I agree. John is seeing differently than we see. God is offering this cosmic picture of how things are through John. Trudging through Revelation is tough, but part of that is because we have to understand that God is calling us to see from God's perspective. Our human perspective is so limited. John's vision is this collision of heaven and earth, and sometimes it's strange, scary, and even seems too good to be true. These visions are more than we can imagine.

Remember where we've been so far. First, the vision of Christ coming and a reminder that we're called to be a Kingdom and priests who serve for the sake of Jesus - Alpha and Omega - who will outlast any other power. Then, there was the vision of the Lamb who alone is worthy to open the scroll sealed with seven seals.

Before the vision we read today, the Lamb opens the first four seals and unleashed the four horsemen who would bring war, famine, and death. Revelation speaks to how power fits into our reality. Yes, God is ultimately in control, but God

gives us free will. Our misuse of power brings suffering and disaster, which the four horsemen illustrate. We don't have to look far to see misuse of power.

When the fifth seal is opened, John sees the souls of the faithful who have died for their faith. They cry out to God for vengeance, but are given white robes and told to wait. Then, John hears that 144,000 from the twelve tribes of Israel are marked with God's seal of protection.

That's when we read this vision - a multitude from every nation, tribe, people, and language, who have come through a time of suffering. They are robed in white and wave palm branches - a sign of victory. Think back to Palm Sunday when people hoped for Jesus to bring victory over the Romans as they shouted "Hosanna!" This great multitude in white robes is praising God and praising the Lamb for salvation.

We learn that they have come out of the great tribulation - great difficulty - and have washed their white robes in the blood of the Lamb. We get it - it's a figure of speech meant to grab our attention. You can't take it literally, but we can take it figuratively. The image means that these people were willing to face rejection and even death - to go the distance with God and be faithful.

Their faith was costly. It's one of those moments when we realize the cost of discipleship. One writer says that John wrote to others to control their fear, renew their commitment, and sustain their vision in a time when all anyone could see was cruelty, death, and hopelessness. Even these saints have been through struggle.

Their witness is powerful, and this image of the multitude is, too. It's a picture of the Kingdom of God, even though it seems impossible sometimes - that we'll gather together with people who don't look, sound, dress, worship, live, or whatever it is that keeps us apart. We'll gather together around the throne.

This is the vision God gives - that we'll come together in worship because of Jesus. Of course, we want this. It's a wonderful vision. But we have a lot to get over - including deciding if we'll focus on being loving rather than being right. And that's an equal opportunity challenge - all of us struggle to truly accept each other in God's grace.

And the multitude receives God's blessing - no more hunger or thirst, no more scorching heat - perhaps what they've experienced because of their faith. We know from history the devastation that Rome brought. It's not their praise that God blesses, but their faithful action and perseverance in faith. It's not that they've earned salvation, but they've been faithful in responding to God's saving work in

their lives. Again, it's not an easy way, but this vision offers hope and encouragement to people who received it.

And the truth that John offers is that the reality of suffering as a part of faith in Jesus. I don't say that flippantly, but there are moments when we claim that faith in God that means God will protect us and those we love from harm - that we won't struggle or suffer. Have you ever asked those questions? But that's not the promise of our faith - no suffering or pain. The promise is God's presence in it.

I want to be clear - we don't glorify suffering, nor can we avoid it. But ultimately, we believe that suffering can be redemptive. It may not be clear how that will happen, but we trust in God's work for good in all things - not causing suffering, but bringing something good out of it.

We are in the season of Easter, and every day we place our hope in resurrection - that God is doing something good to bring new life. Jesus' death was horrific, and yet believe in God's power to bring new life. I don't say that flippantly on a day that's loaded as some of us celebrate easily on Mother's Day and others are feeling incredible pain.

Redemption may not come quickly, but it will come. The struggles we face can be moments of witness for others. Again, God doesn't cause them so that others can learn, but God can bring learning out of them. It never diminishes the pain or loss, but God can bring new life and hope and peace. Even as I offer it today, it's difficult to embrace when we're struggling. Whatever we face, we know that God knows them.

The promise continues - the Lamb will be their Shepherd and lead them to living water - water that gives life. And God will wipe the tears from their eyes. For me, that's a vision of a heavenly Parent - providing, caring, comforting us. That's a vision - and a promise - and it's really Good News!

Jesus is the Lamb and the Shepherd - the One who demonstrates sacrificial love that saves us from sin and the One who cares deeply for us - even giving his life. For those who first read this letter, the reminder of God's saving work in Jesus is key. In the midst of persecution from outside and struggles inside the community of faith, they needed to hear those promises again of what Jesus had done for them and that their faith had God's power behind it - power to overcome the worst of their situation with the promise of something better - the power of resurrection. That doesn't mean it's easy. It may take time to see the full vision, but the promise is that God is working.

This new vision is one to claim - that God loves and cares. Even when we face struggles or watch those we love struggle, even though faith takes us into challenging places, we follow Jesus who knows what we face. We follow Jesus who is with us to the end. That's the promise of this vision. May it sustain us today and every day. We are not alone.

Thanks be to God. AMEN.