

The Seven Seals

Rev. 6.1-8.5

Isaiah 25.6-9

September 28, 2014

First Congregational Church of Essex

Even though the text we read was from Isaiah, the text we are hearing from this morning is in Revelation, where, as we will see the Isaiah prophecy is fulfilled. I appreciate Pastor Tim allowing me to continue his series in Revelation because it is the first time he has invited me to preach here and not asked me to talk about stewardship.

I am going to invite you to take a pew Bible and open to Revelation 6 because we are going to cover a large section, more than two chapters, in a short time and we will not read it all but I want you to see the flow.

The book of Revelation, as I am sure you learned from your Pastor, was written by the Apostle John from exile on the island of Patmos to the seven churches of Asia Minor. St. John was the Bishop of Ephesus, so these churches in modern day Turkey were churches over which he had Pastoral responsibility, and they were enduring great persecution, tribulation and distress. John is given a vision by the Holy Spirit, and in the very first scene of the vision, God puts his hand on John's shoulder and says, "Don't be afraid, John." Don't be afraid because everything you are facing – all the persecution and trouble and death and tribulation – and everything your church people are facing, is in my control. So write this vision down and send it to them to encourage them. In essence, that is the message of this book. "Don't be afraid, I am in control."

So for the next three chapters you had the seven actual letters, and the last two Sundays you looked at chapters 4 and 5. Earl Palmer, who for years was Pastor at UPC in Seattle and is the author of a commentary on Revelation on which I am substantially leaning in this message, says the book of Revelation is like a suspension bridge, and the suspension bridge hangs on two towers. Those towers are chapter 4 and chapter 5. Grasp chapters 4 and 5 and you grasp the central theme of the vision. Everything else hangs on, and amplifies, what God shows John in these two chapters.

In chapter 4 John saw God high and lifted up. God is sitting on His throne and elders and living creatures are all around and John hears a great chorale. Those worshipping God do so in poetry, poetry that all through the book of Revelation has been put to music and sung in churches ever since. This is the chapter that gives us the great hymn Holy, Holy, Holy, and that is the first chorale. The great first theme, the first tower holding up the suspension bridge, is that God is worthy because He made everything there is. He made us, He sustains us. Life has its existence because of the decision of God. That is the first great song.

The second, in Chapter 5, starts with John telling us that God on the throne has in his right hand a scroll that has writing on front and back, and that scroll is sealed with seven seals. All the commentators are agreed that the scroll represents history itself. And a mighty angel asks the question in a loud voice, “who is worthy to break the seals and open the scroll?” The question is this, and it is a question that moderns as well as ancients ask: who can make sense of history? Who can tell me the meaning of life? I have just begun an early morning men’s group in the Financial district of Boston, and one of my new friends, an investment banker, who has had every worldly success he could ever hope for and is admired by all his peers, said to me, “What am I here for? What am I supposed to do with my life?” The answer to those questions are what the scroll contains.

But John tells us that he looked around and no one was found worthy to open the scroll: No one in heaven, no one on earth, and no one under the earth. No one in heaven means the angels, or the righteous dead who have gone before us. They don’t know the meaning of history because they are part of the created order. No one on earth knows – no guru, wise man, president or leader in the political or social arena. And no one under the earth. That is the realm of the devil and his demons. They are also created creatures and they will come to their end. They don’t know what God knows. Beth and I live in Salem, the Witch City, where there is a good deal of emphasis, and not a few dollars made, on consulting creatures in the realm of the dead – those over the earth or under the earth. I want to tell them don’t bother. They are wasting their time. Those creatures don’t know.

When John hears that no one can open the scroll and make sense of history, he weeps. He represents people from all history. A fundamental source of weeping is the sense that one’s life is random and meaningless.

But then he hears a voice. He is told not to weep, because the Lion of the tribe of Judah can open the scrolls. And so he turns and looks and sees not a lion, which he was expecting, but a little lamb that looked like it had been slain. It is Jesus Christ, the mighty God, who took the form of weakness and vulnerability and was slain on our behalf. He was the one next to God on the throne. He was the one worthy to open the scroll.

And then the second great poetic chorale, sung to the Lamb by all the creatures of heaven. You are worthy to open the scroll. Because you were slain and with your blood purchased men and women for God. You are worthy to receive power and wealth and wisdom and honor and strength. Praise and Glory to you for ever and ever. And the four living creatures said AMEN.

And that is the second great pillar. First that God almighty created and sustains the world, and second that Jesus Christ has purchased people for God from every nation and for all eternity by his unselfish self sacrifice.

And now we come to chapter 6. Earl Palmer calls the rest of the book, from chapters 6-22 the symphonic part of the book. He sees four symphonic movements and they are symphonic in that they are variations on the main theme. Over and over again in these next highly symbolic chapters, in the seven seals, seven trumpets, and seven bowls, we will see the main themes re-established but in a symphonic way. He calls them symphonic, because you don't as much interpret them as you feel them. The sections which I am going to show you in a minute and continue all the way to the end of the book are hugely fantastic in their imagery. And we can't interpret them. They are hard to understand – in fact I agree with most scholars that we can't understand them. The tension and the terror builds and builds in a great crescendo and don't understand it but we sure can sense it, and that is what we are supposed to do.

But there is one thing that we can understand. In the midst of each of these terrifying revelations there is a pause and a song. A chorale is sung in the midst of each of the seven seals, trumpets and bowls, and you can understand the chorale as clear as crystal. There is no mystery about what the songs mean. I tell you these are the greatest songs of the Bible. The great Hallelujah chorus that Handel wrote comes out of the song sung during the terror of the seven bowls. And another great song from the Messiah, “the kingdoms of this world have become the kingdom of

our Lord, and of His Christ,” comes out of the song sung during the terror of the seven trumpets. You are not going to be able to interpret the terrors, but you will be clear about the songs. And that is what you hang on to.

Palmer makes the point that when it comes to Biblical interpretation, lean is better than luxurious. There have always been luxurious read-ins, especially in the last 100 years, that do not help. People will see Russia and China and the World Bank in the book of Revelation. When I was a young man Henry Kissinger was supposed to be the Anti Christ. Don't fall for it. If God wanted the images to represent something specific, He would have made that clear. But he didn't. when you get to the chorales, that is what is clear.

So let's look at the first set of sevens, the seven seals in chapter 6. I am going to show you that there are six seals where danger and terror builds and builds, followed by a pause, then a seventh. The same will be true next week in the trumpets. Six building, then a seventh. The seventh is the Shabbat, the Sabbath, and the seventh belongs to God. He is in control. He is at rest, and no matter the terrors that we are facing, we remember that we rest in Him.

The first seal is in 6.1 (6.1-2) Here we are going to meet the four horses of the Apocalypse. Notice in verse one and with every horse that follows that the horse is summoned by one of God's four living creatures. He says in a resounding voice, "Come!" The horsemen of the Apocalypse do not ride willy nilly at their own behest, they are summoned and bounded by God. I want you to see this theme of boundary all throughout this chapter.

The first horse is a white horse with a rider who has a bow and is given a crown. He is a conquering figure bent on conquest. All of these horsemen bring greater and greater degrees of terror, and remember that John is writing to people who are in the midst of great persecution themselves. Depending on when you date the book, they are enduring either the persecution under Nero or under Domitian, but in either case they are being severely persecuted, they are being slain. They would resonate with this terrible rider of conquest because they were being conquered.

The second rider bidden to ride in verses 3-4 is on the red horse, and he is war. The third rider is the black horse and he is famine. Verse 5: "I looked and there before me was a black horse! Its rider was holding a pair of scales in his hand. Then I

heard the voice of one of the four living creatures saying, “two pounds of wheat for a day’s wages, and six pounds of barley for day’s wages.” These are starvation economics. This is the rider of famine.

But notice the boundary. “Do not damage the oil or the wine.” (end 6) There is famine, but it is boundaried by God. It is penultimate, not ultimate.

The fourth rider is the pale horse. (read 8). Note “they,” which means all the horses. THEY were given power over a fourth of the earth to kill by conquest, war, famine or death. But horrible as it is, that is the extent of their power. They can kill no more than God allows. They are powerful, but He is the greater power.

And now the fifth seal. Verse 9 – the souls under the altar. (read 9-10). These are the ones who have been killed by Nero, or by Domitian. They have paid with their lives. And right here is THE question. “How long, Lord?” When are you going to do something? This is the question on their lips, and on everyone’s lips in the 2000 years of history where Christians worldwide face terrible circumstances like the Kurds are today. “Lord, when are you going to step in here and do something?”

And the answer: Not yet. (read 11) remember those white robes. We are going to see them again.

Then the sixth seal, 12-17. I won’t read it, but there is a great earthquake and even the kings of the earth flee to caves, fearful of their lives. The sixth seal continues and takes up all of chapter 7.

In chapter 7 we have something brand new. It is the pause I told you about before. John is given a new vision, a parallel vision. It is as if the movie cuts to a different camera to show us simultaneous action that is going on in another arena. He is first told (v 4) the number of those who have been sealed by God and protected from all the destruction going on in the earth. There are 12,000 from each tribe of Israel; 144,000 all together. They are listed there. Then second, he looks for himself in verse 9 at a great multitude which no one could number. They are from every nation, people and language on the face of the earth and are standing before the throne and the Lamb. And verse 9 tells us they are all wearing white robes. Do you remember the martyrs under the altar were also given white robes? This signifies purity and holiness, which has been given them by Jesus Christ.

The scholars I respect say that the vision of the 144,000 and the vision of the numberless multitude are two descriptions of the same group. The first one is from God's perspective, and the number 144K is stylized. It is 12 squared times 10 cubed – some perfect numbers in Biblical literature. The fact that they are from the 12 tribes tells us not that they are Israelites, but that they are God's chosen people. The number is given as a way of saying God knows every single one of them. He has a roster of all who are saved.

The numberless multitude is the view of the same crowd that John has, and from his perspective it is as far as the eye can see and from every ethnic group on earth. These are the saints from all time, each one known by God and each one made white and pure because of the sacrifice of Jesus.

This is the crowd that now breaks into a chorale whose message is clear as a bell. They sing of the salvation that comes from God and the Lamb in verse 10, and the angels sing more praise to God in verse 12, and the white robed saints, whom we are told in 14 come out of the tribulation and persecution on earth are constantly in the presence of God and in verse 15 He is sheltering them with His presence. The question of the saints under the altar was why aren't you stepping in and protecting us? Well, now they are protected, and forever. Never again will they hunger, and never again will they thirst. For the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd, and will lead them to springs of living water, and (here is a direct fulfillment quote from Isaiah 25) He will wipe away every tear from their eyes."

OK, that is the story, now what does it mean? For the Christians in antiquity as well as Christians in every age since, including today: the terrors we face are real. Just ask the Kurds being beheaded by ISIS. The terrors are real, but they are limited. The 7th and final seal, and as you will see the 7th and final trumpet are God's. The final boundary BELONGS to the Lamb.

The great question of humanity is posed. When we suffer, when trouble comes, when we are betrayed, abandoned, slandered, persecuted. WHAT DO WE DO?

Do we run? Do we hide? Do we escape thru drugs or alcohol? Do we move to Montana? Or do we face it? Do we try to live our lives? John does not hide from this question. It is the question of the martyrs – how long O Lord. The message of

Revelation is to those Christians and to us is that we can keep on living our lives in hope and confidence.

One of the powerful commentaries on Revelation was written by the German Lutheran Hanns Lilje, who said “People who don’t suffer tend to play with this book and have fun with all the images, but those who suffer never play with this book because it is very comforting to those who suffer.” Hanns Lilje knew of which he wrote, because he was in a Nazi concentration camp when he wrote his commentary.

In your daily life and mine, you may face terrors, perhaps of the immensity of those in the first century. But no matter how big or small, when you know the terrors are bounded, you can function. In the here and now, you can have hope, you can have a future, you can keep up your life. The terrors are real, but they do not have the last word. The LAMB has the last word. And it is amazing – that gives your strength enough. You can face cancer or crippling disease. You can face divorce, you can face betrayal or abandonment. If they were the last word we would be shattered. But they are NOT! Nothing is the last word except the Lamb.

And that enables you to carry on.

(Bonhoeffer *Letters and Papers from Prison* letter called “After 10 years”)

We are here and we are going to make it. That is the theme of the seven seals. We do not lose hope, because never will I leave you and never will I forsake you says the Lord. Jesus promises. He bounds the terrors and the LAMB has the last word, and that word is SAFE.