

## **Revelation 1:4b-8**

Grace to you and peace from him who is and who was and who is to come, and from the seven spirits who are before his throne, and from Jesus Christ, the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth. To him who loves us and freed us from our sins by his blood, and made us to be a kingdom, priests serving his God and Father, to him be glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen. Look! He is coming with the clouds; every eye will see him, even those who pierced him; and on his account all the tribes of the earth will wail. So it is to be. Amen. 'I am the Alpha and the Omega', says the Lord God, who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty. (*Also see 2 Samuel 23:1-6*)

### **“A Vision of another Way”**

I, like John, had an experience at the Holy Grotto of the Revelation, on Patmos Island, Greece. Unfortunately mine was one of queasiness. It was the fourth day of the Footsteps of Faith trip and we visited the Grotto immediately after a very hot and rough 3 hours at sea on a small, old, run down, exhaust spewing hydrofoil. Having thought we were on a larger, faster, better smelling boat, I didn't take any motion sickness medicine. The grotto was filled with the aromas of powerful incense and clouds of smoke, which added a new dimension of pain to my stomach's misery.

Even with an unsettled stomach to deal with, the mysterious aura of the little cave in which the writer of Revelation is said to have received a revelation from Jesus Christ and penned it to the church, conveyed to me a palpable presence of the sacred. It also became vividly clear to me from the history of the cave and the island that the vision given in Revelation came in a very different context from our lives today.

For the Christian in exile on Patmos, a man at the mercy of the Roman Empire, (a man called John by church tradition), the experience of Christ recorded in Revelation was one of comfort. The Revelation John received, and Jesus Christ's return as recorded within, heralded good news of God's triumph over all that threatens to destroy God's creation. Yet the Book of Revelation disturbs rather than gives solace to many Christians today. There is no reason for the apocalypse of John to disturb us. We believe that Jesus reigns with God and the Spirit, over all that ever has been—all that is and all that will be.

The “medium is the message” in Revelation!<sup>1</sup> The vision was given to John and John accepted it as good news, as a revelation to rejoice over. Today we need to understand Revelation in its historic context. Many images allude to events of the first century world. But the notion that it is full of codes, now broken, that tell us exactly what will happen when Jesus returns is an attempt to make Revelation into something it is not! It is a vision of good news, of God's power manifest in Jesus return, of all wrongs made right. Revelation is not an exact map of “the end” in the scriptures. It's a vision of what the end means instead.

Novels like the Left Behind series relay a theology that a few lucky believers will be taken bodily into heaven just prior to a Tribulation period, and will be spared some horrible fate awaiting those left behind on earth! This teaching is fiction by scriptural standards, which tell us all will be judged by our just and merciful Savior. Premillennial dispensationalism, or rapture theology, is the creation of the nineteenth century fundamentalist C.I. Scofield (1843-1921). Scofield popularized the ideas of J.N. Darby

(1800-82) who first introduced the doctrine. Premillennial dispensationalist theology has only dominated Christian prophetic belief in the second half of the 20th century to today.

So what I want to know is why do we fear, why are American Christians so enraptured with rapture theology, when we know that it is Jesus Christ who will return to continue his reign of truth and justice?

Dr. Barbara Rossing who has written a book *The Rapture Exposed: the Message of Hope in the Book of Revelation*, was asked in an interview, “Did you grow up hearing about the rapture?” She replied, “I grew up Lutheran, so I never encountered ‘premillennial dispensationalist (or rapture) theology.’ My first exposure to it came in college, where I was intimidated by the people who referred to Hal Lindsey’s *The Late Great Planet Earth*. I didn’t know how to respond to the Christians who were saying, ‘If you don’t believe this you’re going to get left behind.’” Later in an interview Rossing was told, “On 60 Minutes LaHaye (one of the authors of the *Left Behind* series) referred to your Jesus as a ‘wimpy Jesus’”. Rossing answered, “If a loving Jesus means a wimpy Jesus, then Christianity is in trouble. But I don’t think it does. We have to refute those who equate a loving Jesus with wimpiness. The Jesus in Revelation is very powerful, but he conquers in a different way—not by killing people but by being killed, by giving his own life.”<sup>2</sup>

It is true that the scriptures share with us in numerous ways that all of humanity and all of creation will be judged—and we believe judged by God in Jesus Christ. What exactly will the judgment look like? The truth is no one knows. We place our trust in a sovereign, loving, merciful God.

Reign of Christ Sunday focuses us on the good news of Jesus’ rule over all as we wait for Christ’s return. One of the Monday Morning Bible Study’s readings told us, “the Feast of Christ the King was instituted by Pius XI in 1925 to celebrate the kingship of Christ as a way of combating the destructive forces of this age.”<sup>3</sup> Sounds like something we need now just as much as the church needed it in 1925. The commentary went on to say that looking toward Jesus’ return is intended to teach us that we are “drawn together in Jesus’ Spirit and we press onward toward the consummation of history which fully corresponds to the plan of God’s love: ‘to unite all things in Christ Jesus, things in heaven and things on earth.’”

When we read Revelation we have to engage our imaginations. Can what was given as a holy vision, a revelation, be broken down to mark the exact way God will bring about the reconciliation of all that is—when scripture, including Jesus’ testimony, refuses to state exactly how the judgment will happen?

King David’s last recorded words express his confidence that through his house Rulers would arise “who rule over people justly, ruling in the fear of God” and those who rule this way are like “the light of morning, like the sun rising on a cloudless morning, gleaming from the rain on the grassy land.” The One who fulfills David’s kingly line to rule with ultimate justice and righteousness is the One we see in John’s “Look! He is coming with the clouds!”

As our moment for meditation states, there is not an area of our lives that Christ does not reign over. From our creation to our death and living in God’s eternal care, we are in the compassionate and loving hands of our savior, Jesus Christ. We have nothing to fear as we anticipate Jesus’ return to fulfill God’s saving plan for the world!

In the meantime, it is our vocation to recognize and live like we trust the One who said at the end of Revelation, “Behold, I make all things new.”

We live trusting God with our lives and for our death as Jesus did. “Father, into your hands I commend my spirit.” The God “who is and who was and who is to come” is the holder of our lives. We are in good hands.

“Here at the end of the church year, after living through another cycle of hearing the story of Jesus' life, of being taught by him in miracle and parable, we come to (give thanks for the reign of Christ over our lives). After another year of living our lives, burying our dead, baptizing our babies, marrying and divorcing, struggling and thriving, we bring all of the year's experiences to the climax of this day. We lay it all back at the feet of the one enthroned on the cross, giving thanks. It's great to be a people ruled in love and mercy.”<sup>4</sup> Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> *The New Interpreter's Bible: A Commentary in Twelve Volumes*, “The Book of Revelation” by Christopher C. Rowland.

<sup>2</sup> “Living Joyfully in an Apocalyptic Time: End Game” by Barbara Rossing, in *The Christian Century*, November 14, 2006.

<sup>3</sup> Fred B. Craddock, John H. Hayes, Carl R. Holladay, Gene M. Tucker, *Preaching Through the Christian Year: B* (Trinity Press International: Harrisburg, PA, 1993) 474.

<sup>4</sup> “Royal treatment” - Living by the Word – *The Christian Century*, Nov 15, 2003 by Mary W. Anderson.