

Christ Who Is and Who Was and Who is to Come

A Sermon Preached at the Lutheran Church of the Holy Trinity, Vallejo, CA by Anne Carey
April 7, 2013

Texts: Acts 5:27-32
Psalm 118:14-29 (28) or Psalm 150 (6)
Revelation 1:4-8
John 20:19-31

Well, here we are again, gathered for worship and not a clergy stole among us. Some would call our situation being sheep without a shepherd. That may be, but personally, I think that metaphor has outlived its usefulness. I spent four weeks in New Zealand a few years back and (to coin a phrase): I know sheep. Holy Trinity, you're no sheep. You are a strong and resilient people, you have a committed, hard-working Worship Committee, and we've been here before. You know that you can survive and even thrive in this in-between time, because you know that we belong to God, is with us at every moment. So let us begin our worship with prayer. Let us pray:

Into your hands, O God, we place ourselves: our minds to know you, our hearts to love you, and our wills to serve you, for you are our God, and we are yours. Amen.

It is a fixture of our liturgy, indeed of most formal Christian liturgy, to begin with confession. Confession of our failures and shortcomings, our sins (to use a bolder word), clears the metaphorical deck of this vessel called "church" and makes us ready to participate in the actions of Word and Sacrament. So it is appropriate to begin this time by confessing one of my own failures, and that is my lack of faith in you, dear friends. When Marilyn and I began to talk about our hope that you would embrace the idea of bringing the new hymnal into our life together, I worried about how that might work out. I feared that there would be only a lukewarm response. My imagination extended as far as the possibility that we might be able to have as

many as 25 of the new hymnals. At last count we have 60 here in the sanctuary, and you have contributed funds for another ___ yet to be purchased. I am completely chagrined by my failure to appreciate how open you are to newness, and I am bowled over by your generosity. You are amazing! Please forgive my lack of faith in you, and please feel free to remind me about all this when the future brings other opportunities for change, as it absolutely will.

And now to the task before us, to consider how our readings this morning may inform our understanding of what God is calling us to be and to do with our minds, our hearts and our wills. I am indebted to the great biblical scholar and theologian Walter Brueggemann for his ability to see how the narrative of Jesus's resurrected and life-giving presence in the Gospel reading leads to the courageous preaching of Peter and his companions as reported in the Acts, and then how the continuing sweep of the Easter story, as Brueggemann writes, "eventuates in lyrical expectation of the coming rule of God" in the reading from the Book of Revelation. It's not always clear to me how the various selections that make up the lectionary readings fit together, but in this case it seems as if whoever was doing the selecting got it right. In this season of Easter, we are reflecting on the power of the Resurrection to erupt into our lives, to evoke boldness in our witness and our action, to move us to the practice of hope, to make all things new. The poet Gerard Manley Hopkins had this in mind, I think, when he wrote these lines referring to the risen Christ: "Let him Easter in us, be a dayspring to the dimness of us" (from *The Wreck of the Deutschland*). In this season, we are to be about the business of Easter-ing out of our dimness.

Now: as is my custom when up here, I plan to continue ignoring the unwritten 11th commandment of preaching in a Lutheran setting. You all know it by now: Thou shalt preach on the Gospel text. I have to say that I was tempted to spend our time together in trying to figure

out what Jesus means when he says that if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.

Undoubtedly there is much to be learned from the story of Doubting Thomas, and over the years you might have heard much concerning that episode in John's gospel. But this morning and on a couple of Sundays to come, I invite you to turn with me as we attend to portions of what to me is in many ways the most fascinating, and certainly the most misunderstood and misinterpreted text in all of scripture: the Book of Revelation.

It must be acknowledged that Revelation does not enjoy a very high standing in the history of biblical interpretation. It's not only the last book in this collection we call the Bible; back in the fourth century, when the leading lights of the church were deciding what would go into the collection, Revelation was the last writing to be deemed worthy of inclusion. If they had been creating a biblical bracketology, something like college basketball's March Madness, Revelation would have been the 16th seed. Later on, Martin Luther only reluctantly included Revelation in his German translation of the New Testament, while dismissing its usefulness for communicating a clear message about who Christ is for us. The vivid images and fantastic visions in the Book of Revelation were for Luther just sources of confusion for people, and they made the text so hard to understand that he questioned its presence in scripture at all.

Right down to the present day, some interpreters of Revelation have focused on the violent struggles the book depicts. The best known example of this way of seeing Revelation is the spectacularly successful series of novels called *Left Behind*, which have sold 65 million copies worldwide and spawned three movies, four computer games, a music album, and five graphic novels. Unfortunately for the Book of Revelation, the *Left Behind* writers failed entirely to convey an understanding of the gospel messages of Jesus about, oh, loving your enemies and

praying for those who persecute you. Maybe they have inadvertently proved Luther's point about the potential of Revelation for confusing people.

Having said all this (and I could go on for days about the various misreadings of Revelation), I believe that we owe it to ourselves, as Christians who think, to look at this most peculiar of writings and to see what is life-giving and meaning-making for us. Remember that last week, Pastor Sandra invited us to appreciate different ways of *seeing* that were reflected in the Easter morning story of Mary and the risen Jesus in the garden. There is the kind of seeing that is simply observation, that provides a factual description of a thing or a person or an event. Just the facts, ma'am. Then there is the kind of seeing that we might think of as *insight*, seeing into and through our observations, the kind of seeing that answers the question, "What is really going on here?" When we read Revelation with the first kind of seeing, we get *Left Behind*, maybe literally so. When we read it with the second kind of seeing, we can get what the writer of this strange text, John of Patmos, was trying to tell us about what was really going on in his time. John is writing to those who have eyes to see, to those who can participate in this different way of seeing.

So what *was* really going on in John's time? Our reading this morning is addressed to "the seven churches that are in Asia," and in the following couple of chapters he goes into specific messages to the churches in seven cities in what is now western Turkey: they are Smyrna, Philadelphia, Ephesus, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, and Laodicea. These were early Christian communities that were facing varied challenges ranging from the threats of persecution to the pressures of assimilation to the dangers of complacency. In this analysis I am borrowing from the work of Craig Koester, teacher of New Testament at Luther Seminary in Minnesota. Because the number seven in scripture is used to symbolize wholeness or completeness, we can

take this writing to be directed not just to those seven churches, but to all of us, to the whole church. And so we can ask ourselves, how are we responding to the challenges that John describes?

If we are truly following Jesus, as the little and poor churches in the cities of Smyrna and Philadelphia were trying to do, are we risking disapproval by some other segment of the community in which we live? Do we have the courage to say, as Peter and the others did, that we must obey God rather than human authority? In the adult class we are studying the work of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, and when I hear Peter's words, I think of him and those other Christians in the early days of the Nazi regime in Germany. Many German Christians glorified Hitler as a prophet and elevated his ideas about racial purity to the level of Christian doctrine. Bonhoeffer, Karl Barth and others made public their repudiation of such claims in the famous Barmen

Declaration with these words:

Jesus Christ, as he is attested to us in Holy Scripture, is the one Word of God whom we have to hear, and whom we have to trust and obey in life and in death. We reject the false doctrine that the Church could and should recognize as a source of its proclamation, beyond and besides this one Word of God, yet other events, powers, historic figures and truths as God's revelation.

For their pains, people like Bonhoeffer were hunted down, imprisoned, and executed. Would I have been brave enough to subscribe to the words of Barmen? Would we as a church be strong enough to face open hostility?

Some of the seven churches were doing well enough to be more than just surviving. In Ephesus, Pergamum, and Thyatira the Christian communities were doing well enough, even as they were struggling with issues of what are acceptable forms of faith and practice. Could they go along with the religious observances of others without compromising their own convictions? Could they resist the pressures to conform without alienating friends or business associates? Can we maintain the integrity of our faith when we interact socially with those who do not share that

faith? These are live questions especially in the Bay Area, where perhaps a bare majority (if that) of the population claims an identity as Christian.

In contrast to the churches we just described, the Christian communities in Sardis and Laodicea appear to have been thriving, with no big issues between themselves and their surroundings. The dangers to these congregations came not from any overt hostility or tension with their social world. Rather, their apparently comfortable conditions of prosperity opened them to the threat of complacency. We're doing fine, they might say; no need to change anything. One commentator has called the church at Sardis "the perfect model of inoffensive Christianity." Well, the fact that I'm standing here this morning in this role suggests that the comfort of prosperity is not one of our challenges here! But the church must always be on guard to keep its prophetic edge, in order to speak truth to power. I am reminded of Ezekiel's judgment on the well-off city of Sodom: "This was the guilt of...Sodom; she and her daughters had pride, excess of food, and prosperous ease; but did not aid the poor and needy." As we move through the Book of Revelation, we find similar prophetic pronouncements.

In this brief greeting to the seven churches and, by extension, to us, John of Patmos is proclaiming the reality of God for us, today. Those early Christians lived in the shadow of empire, with a political ideology that held the power of Caesar to be absolute. Does any of this sound familiar at all? But John offers a vision of Christ that trumps the Roman Empire in all of its power and splendor. Christ, the faithful witness! Christ, the firstborn of the dead, risen from the grave! Christ, the one who reigns over all! Christ, who loves us, who frees us, who makes all of us priests, who calls us to God's service! Christ, who is coming soon! Glory and honor be to him forever and ever! This is the word of God for us, today, right now, in this place and in the world where we spend the other 167 hours of the 168 in the week.

As we will see in coming weeks, there is a constant struggle in Revelation between the true God of Jesus and the false gods of this world. That struggle has to be our struggle as well, because we are in the same boat with those seven little churches that John cared enough about to call them on the carpet. If we have the eyes to see, we will find the good news that is the content of this amazing, intriguing, puzzling text. The good news is that Christ in God is Easter-ing in us. We are all in this together with God -- God ever-present now, in the past, and most of all in the future; God from A to Z, God rich in grace, abundant in mercy, lavish in love for us and all the rest of God's good creation. If we take Revelation seriously and not just literally, we will come to see how it reveals something of the character of God. So, welcome to the journey!

Alleluia!