

Revelation 2020: Closing & Lingerin:

The end is at hand! Repent!

I'm mostly kidding. Let's pray!

Prayer:

Introduction:

So. I've tried to position us to look at Revelation in a way we may never have before: as something understandable, reasonable, helpful, and hopeful. I've presented us with a different way of reading Revelation than many of us have been used to reading it...but frankly, "old habits die hard," old understandings aren't quickly traded for something new--which isn't necessarily bad.

But if we allow it, the stuff we've talked about the past couple of seasons will slowly be forgotten, just taken over by the much larger force of the much longer exposure to whatever view of Revelation we've had before this. A year from now wondering "When is all that stuff from Revelation 6 through 19 going to happen?"

This Morning:

And so this morning we're re-hashing things. And to give us a little structure, and move us forward, I'm going to begin at the end, with the passage that was read to us today. And we need to see the urgency there, the seriousness there, and the longing that Jesus would come, would return to us.

The End: Urgency, Seriousness & Wanting Jesus' Return:

Over and over, in the last part of this passage we see the reminder that there is not a lot of time for us, John's readers, to decide what team we're playing for. Jesus says twice that he's "coming soon," John is told that these things "must soon take place," that "the time is near."

If we're John's churches, there is a clear message here: Do not waste time. Do not dilly-dally. Rome is just about to fall, it's toppling over, and Jesus will prove his faithfulness, his power, and his judgment when it ends.

We in this room have a harder time feeling this urgency, because we're just not in the same place John's churches were in. We aren't facing daily persecution because of our faith, wondering daily if the world that seems painfully against us will ever end. John was telling the truth, frankly. The Empire as a persecutor, its emperor and his ilk, they were not in charge for much longer after Revelation was penned. Rome was exorcised, and when the devil who had empowered it dropped away so did the empire.

And we don't need to manufacture some fake sort of urgency in our lives, right? But here's the reality that we must remember: You could die tomorrow. Each of us could be "going soon" to the Lord, even if the Lord isn't "arriving soon" upon the entire world. And the reality is that the seriousness of what John's churches were called to *is still really serious for us*.

We still need to hear "***Blessed are those who wash their robes, that they may have the right to the tree of life and may go through the gates into the city.***"

Outside are the dogs, those who practice magic arts, the sexually immoral, the murderers, the idolaters and everyone who loves and practices falsehood.” We still need to hear this because the New Jerusalem life we’re promised hasn’t happened yet, and some of us may be tempted to trade our washed robes for cheap clothing made out of unmet expectations, success, fear, self-sufficiency--you name it.

We are just one choice, then one more choice, than a few more choices done over a long enough time, to being those who stay outside wide open gates instead of entering into the joy of our king.

So Revelation ends with a reminder that the choices we make are utterly important, have more importance than we credit them. And I want us to leave Revelation being able to say to another person, “Look, here’s why it matters that Revelation is in the Bible.” So let's talk about that.

Strategy & Structure:

Remember with me the structure and strategy--these things are so closely tied together--of Revelation. John is seeking to persuade his first audience that there is no room in their lives for both Christianity and the Imperial Cult of Rome, which was the Empire-wide, State Religion that demanded they worship the Emperor and his family as Gods, as saviors of the world. And this Imperial Cult was mixed into every aspect of life of the Roman Empire--there was no separation of Church and State.

To not take part in the Imperial Cult meant, potentially, to die. And John reveals that the true story behind the Roman

Empire is that the devil has taken it over so that he can more easily persecute Christians, because he can't reach Jesus. The Roman Empire is demonic, and taking part in the Imperial Cult means taking part in demonic things, and even though it will cost you in all sorts of ways, and potentially kill you, you cannot be both faithful to the Lamb of God and take part in the Roman religious system. John isn't out to build bridges in Revelation; his is a black and white world.

And what's more, God is bringing judgment upon Rome; and it's coming soon. We're told that Jesus is the one who was, who is, and who is coming. When he shows up, he will bring judgment against God's enemies, and rewards for those who have stayed the course.

And John is given a vision of this same judgment that Rome is soon to receive three times: First, as a series of seals opening in a scroll only Jesus, the butchered Lamb, can open. Next, as a series of trumpets sounded by angels. Finally, as bowls of plague poured out upon the Empire. And each time John sees this seven-fold judgment, it's a starker picture; and in between each time he's given the vision, we see God's temple opening wider and God's judgment coming out from it onto Rome, so that by the time John sees the result of this judgment in Revelation 18 and 19, where Rome drinks the medicine they have been forcing down the throats of Christians, it is terrible and literally, maybe, godforsaken.

And so for John's churches, John wants them to know: "Come out of Babylon," part ways with Rome and all its demonic claims and all its devilish power. Stick to the

Lamb who has saved you and will save you when he comes, even if it costs you your life. Because you are promised a new life, promised resurrection in a new world without pain, and death, and sin, and any of the devil's works.

We ourselves look forward to that same reward.

The Best Application:

And when we as Christians come to Revelation and want to know how to apply it well, we should do what we always do with Biblical books, which is try to look at the way our situation matches or doesn't match the Bible's first audience.

We draw connections between our situation and theirs. *Of course* this is easier with a letter from Paul or a Gospel than it is with this crazy symbolic book written in a writing style we aren't used to at all.

But it's not impossible to bridge the gap between our lives and this book; it just takes a little effort. In places where the church is being killed because they will not give into the demands of the state religion, this book is easy to apply; it's more difficult for us, but not impossible.

So what can we take from this book and hold in our hearts as we live for the Lord?

To Take Away: "Come out of Babylon"

We could, if we wanted, look at John's powerful call in Revelation 18 that God's People "Come out of Babylon." This is Revelation's heartbeat, the point: "Come out of her,

my people.” Beg or Borrow to get away from Rome, because Rome will soon drink her own medicine, the blood in her cup, and if you’ve been to her party, you’ll drink it too. So Exit Rome. John is telling his churches to untangle themselves from the Imperial Cult's web, which intruded upon every part of their lives: *the political*--because to be a good citizen, you had to worship the emperor, *the economic*--because the emperor’s face was on every coin, and proclaimed him as God and as savior of the world. So when we go to apply “Come out of Babylon,” we look around at our lives, look at what’s close to us and nearby.

We remember that John’s churches were all entangled in the Empire’s mess, in the Imperial Cult, and so we try to figure out what we are all entangled in without really noticing.

We ask what is like “Babylon” today? What shares its characteristics? We know that markers of Babylon are things like the persecution of Christians, but even more generally, Rome is the killer of “all who have been slaughtered on the earth,” as John says at the end of chapter 18.

Rome was also the place all the luxuries of the world flowed into, and it’s merchants were “the world’s important people.” Part of coming out of Babylon, John tells us in Revelation 13, means that we won’t be able to even buy or sell, to take part in the economic life of their society.

And when we talked about this, I suggested that the thing we pay attention to is our participation in the economic life of the world, because Rome’s evil is so deeply tied to its

own economic life. We work to make sure that when we buy and sell, it doesn't slaughter people--metaphorically, through, say, child labor, or really, through, weapons of war. We try to not buy things made in places where Christians are persecuted by the state simply for following the Lamb, places like China or Egypt or Morocco.

And so the next step, which we can't do now, but we should welcome as individuals and as a church, is to not forget this "Come out of Babylon," call, but instead, sit with it, slowly & prayerfully develop answers to all sorts of questions: In what ways am I tied to a Babylon-like economic system? How can I disentangle myself? How can I begin to think about the stuff I buy before I buy it? What do I do with my money?

And so: "Coming out of Babylon," can over time become a powerful metaphor for financial stewardship, a flag we wave against any use of our money that's devilish. Many of our Christian friends won't turn to Revelation for this, but keeping the cash that passes through our hands from "slaughtering" people is an image that lasts.

To Take Away: Luxury vs. Needs

Following this, we could look in Revelation at the way the merchants hoped in their luxuries. When Rome falls, what most people grieve is the loss of the wealth that it had grown fat on. It's the merchants and the traders who cry the loudest.

And so, building bridges between that situation and our own, we should examine our relationship with our stuff, with our money, with our wealth and our desire for more.

We should consider if we have what we need, and what a miracle that is. We should wonder what we truly hope in: our balance sheets or the sacrifice the Lamb has made for us? We could go further: Are we so used to meeting our own needs that we no longer hope the Lord will take care of us?

As a church, we can ask these questions, too: Do we hope in our pastor? Our Leadership? Our vision statement or marketing strategies? Our ministries? Or do we hope in the Lord? And it's got to be Jesus, right? Jesus has got to carry us, and Jesus will come through for us as he came through for all John's churches.

But Revelation forces us, if we let it, to ask both as individuals and as a congregation: "Where is our security and our hope? In the Lord? Or in our plenty?" If we have what we need why do we long for more?

And these questions--about our money, and about our stuff--are ones we will struggle with until the world ends, you know? Because they come with the world, which we are not meant to ignore.

To Take Away: The End of the All Things

And one of the most frustrating things about Revelation is simply that it does not give us the mechanics of the end of the world...but we really expect it to. How the world will end? When it will give way to final judgment, to New Heaven & New Earth & New Jerusalem? We're just not told! But we have been taught for *so long* that Revelation does teach us this, exactly this, and nothing else.

The “How’s & When’s” don’t show up. The “Why’s,” though, do. We know that the world is broken, we know that sin & death weren’t part of the plan, we know that evil must be judged, and to have resurrection bodies we need a world heavy enough to hold them. This all makes sense. We know that the devil must die and with it death and all death’s doings.

And we are called to live with urgency, as we’ve already seen. To live as though Jesus might return at any time. And if we’re doing this, then we don’t need to know “when” Jesus will return, because when he does we’ll be ready for him.

To Take Away: Rewards & New Heaven/New Earth/New Jerusalem Life:

Revelation is a book that promises rewards for those of us who persist in following the Lord. And the best of these, the one that holds all the rest in it, is the promise that God is making all things new—both us and the world.

We look forward to a resurrected, renewed life in a resurrected, renewed world; an existence that is full and bright and meaningful and powerful. No grief, no pain, no hurt, no trouble, no fear, no chaos no futility, embarrassment, or shame. Only peace and the presence of God, resurrected life in a resurrected world...if only we can overcome.

And we should fight to overcome whatever we need to overcome in order to claim the citizenship in the New Jerusalem that God is holding out for us. That vision needs

to drive our choices, our attitudes, our hopes.

How would you treat others differently, if you kept the promise of your citizenship in the New Jerusalem always before you? How would you pray if you couldn't forget that what God wants for you is rest, and enough of all the things that make life worth living and freedom from hoarding and greed and self-protection? How would you treat the earth around you differently if you knew that it was going to be resurrected someday, too? Who would you despise if you remembered every person around you could call home for eternity a place where there is no fear or pain or chaos or enemy?

We are permanent people, living permanent lives that stretch out into a future so full of goodness we can't imagine it. Revelation invites us to remember this reward of ours, and hang onto it, and as we live our lives, live them as though New Jerusalem is true. Not something made up to bribe little kids do their chores, but given to reward beloved children for trusting their good parent.

To Take Away: Weakness as True Strength

We should look at Revelation and remember that the power of God in Revelation is the power of chosen weakness; it's the butchered Lamb that is the Lion of Judah. It's Jesus' death that stands behind every victory and triumph over evil in this book.

John has visions that seem bloody, and trouble our sensibilities, but if we peer behind these visions, we see that no violence ever takes place, except in one respect: the violence that the devil brings against the Lamb and the

Lamb's followers. Jesus' death is the image of God's power in Revelation, and it's the witness that Jesus' followers give to the truth that God's power comes in the Lamb's death that is *their* power in Revelation.

Weakness and words are power in this book. Jesus' weakness as the butchered lamb, and the words of condemnation that he speaks against the enemy of God, the devil. And the power of Jesus' followers is only in the way they mimic Jesus, the way they keep the testimony of Jesus, by both speaking about what God has done through the Lord, and by dying like the Lord died, taking it on the chin. We triumph over the devil "by the blood of the Lamb and the word of their testimony," by not loving our lives so much that we avoid persecution, and death, even, for some Christians in some places.

The devil doesn't realize it, but every time he attacks a Christian in the book of Revelation, he hammers a nail in his coffin. And this is still true today. For us, for Christians, our power is derived from Christ, from what Jesus has done, and from nowhere else.

We triumph against evil by taking it on the chin, by forgiving our persecutors, by acting with love toward those who hate us. We speak truth against our enemies--gently, kindly, but truly: and it is condemnation. Our weakness is our secret weapon, that violence and hate and evil cannot overcome, because our weakness comes from the Lord's weakness, which when the curtain is pulled back turns out to be the strength of God, it turns out there was a Lion of Judah hiding there.

The early martyrs said that it was from the blood of saints that the church grew; it was the seed. We live in a world where what we need to do more than anything is to love radically, without apology, and yet at the same time say that we love because we have first been loved, and we act weak because weakness overcomes the world.

And so Revelation's vision of what power truly is can't be something we let go of, because it confronts the devil's lie that we can arrive at peace by taking the road of violence. And we can ask ourselves and one another: "Where in our lives are we faced with evil? How can our weakness overcome it? What else about us is, like our ways of being strong, derived from the Lord?"

If we love because we were first loved, we're also weak because our lover first embraced weakness, and we will be proven stronger than evil, because Christ has proven and will prove stronger than evil. And it's this Lamb, this Jesus, our Christ, who we should end with this morning.

To Take Away: Jesus

Jesus is at the beginning, center, and end of Revelation; and it should be the same with us. It is the willing sacrifice of the Lamb, who opens up the free gift of the water of life to us, that enables anything else to happen: "the grace of the Lord Jesus be with God's people" is more than a simple blessing, it's how we get to be God's People at all.

For those of us who cling to this grace of the Lord, cling to this Lamb, and seek him in all things in our own lives, we are given so many promises. Even though our lives can feel so unlike the lives of the Christians in John's churches,

we need to remember: our Lord is the same, even if our lives are different. And our Lord promises us that we will overcome. We will experience triumph. Our pain will give way to joy, our grief to parties. Death will die and pain will end and justice will come all because of Jesus. It is all because of Jesus.

Jesus is where we put our hope. Jesus is the one who tells us all we need to hear about ourselves and our church. He's the one who answers every question Revelation confronts us with. Jesus: the Lord is his name, the Lion of Judah, the Lamb: the Alpha and Omega, Beginning & End, the one sharing God's throne.

Revelation as Lived Out Metaphor:

Smoky Row, I want us to become butchered lambs. I want us to live New Jerusalem lives. I want us to "Come out of" the places where this world is most like Babylon. I want Revelation to give rise to metaphors that inform our way of living in the world. I want us to look at the world through glasses that are Revelation-tinted. Does this make sense at all? I don't know if it does, or if it's just crazy.

You will be resurrected and live in a resurrected world: that's a statement of power, right? Wonder & Awe: so live like it, right now, today. What's that life look like? Is it prayerful? Is it grateful? Is it holy? full of worship? Lamb & lion-like all at once? Metaphors speak so powerfully to us because they are not static & unchanging: they are not easy to pin down or easy to forget.

God knows we like lists, and rules: that's why we have Paul, that's why we have the Sermon on the Mount. "Tell

me what to do, and I'll do it!" you know? But these things don't always inspire: Revelation does. That's its power; it's not a list, it's poetry, and it's alive like a pestering sibling or a vague parent: it's annoying, it gets under your skin.

And I think if we can be people who take this book and try to really listen to it, try to bridge the gaps between our lives and the situations its speaking to, God will speak to us through it with a voice that is so loud we can't help but hear it.

So we're leaving it behind and I'm not upset, because it's a hassle of a thing, right? But so is anything worth doing. I hope that we can not just thank God that this series is over, but thank God that it happened in the first place.

I want us to remember to fight to come out of the Babylon we are entrenched in, to keep our hope in the Lord, not our stuff, to know that the world will end someday. While we live, we live as representatives of a homeland that is not yet our own, we are shadow of ourselves to be alive in a world that is a shadow of itself. Remember your chosen weakness is your power and this comes from the Lord that carries us, that has done a great work in each of us and among us, our Lamb and God.

Let the Grace of the Lord Jesus be with God's people.
Amen.

Extras:

And If we're on the fence about Jesus' return, I'd refer us back to the New Jerusalem: We look forward to a world in which pain, embarrassment, want, futility, purposeless, capriciousness, fear, and death are ended. Do we want what we have right now more than that?

22:6-21: Other Things & Reminders

We could talk about other things: the way John draws on Daniel here, the ways this passage points out how holy we should treat Revelation. We should discuss how encouraging it should be that John--who has seen things we can barely imagine--can go and make a gaff like worshipping an angel instead of the Lord, and what this tells us about God's own glory, about how easily we people can mis-step as we pursue Revelation lives.

But because the urgency and seriousness that this book leaves us with is so easily eroded away by life in this world, I do want to take most of this morning to remind us of a few of the amazing things that we've seen in Revelation, because, like the parent of a teenager, I am sure that if we hear them just one more time we won't forget them.

Wrong Focus:

Listen: Don't live as though things are coming to a halt in 2020 or 2021. Live as though things may come to a halt tomorrow. We weight things incorrectly when we focus on the destruction of the world. God wants us to focus on the

rewards, on the pleasures, on the joy of the world to come, and live for them and for Christ's glory, not live in fear or obsessive curiosity. These are more often than not traps of distraction that the devil sets for us.

To Take Away: The Best Worship:

And there's more to learn about the People of God than this. We could also remember, and must remember that the church is not just any body, it is a worshipping body.

John's visions of the heavenly throne room remind us that God is magnificent, Jesus is worthy, and they alone should be worshipped. That worship is an ongoing feature of heaven; and when we join together to acknowledge God's worth and Jesus' right "to receive power and wealth and wisdom and strength and honor and glory and praise," we are joining with the worship that is going on in the heavenly realm right now.

And Revelation reminds us that the people who God has made into His people, through the work of the Lamb are people from everywhere. Being a part of God's people has nothing to do with your heritage on this side of Christ; you aren't born into it: God's people, priests--people with total access to God--they're from "every tribe, and every language, and every people, and every nation."

And so we could easily draw application from this, right? We can paint a picture of what the best worship looks like, and what it looks like is that the Lamb and God are at the center of it, that it proclaims what Jesus has done, and that the church does it best when it does it with as many tribes,

languages, peoples, and nations are represented as possible. And with this in mind, we can look around us and say, “How can we get better at this worship?” “How can we make our corporate worship look more like heaven’s?”

For us, at Smoky Row, we’re acting with great intentionality to make this happen; but we can always be doing better, and Revelation reminds us to first be aware of “the best there is,” these visions of heavenly worship, and then do what we can to live them out while we have the time.

When we gather with people who are just like us, it is easier, it is convenient, it is nice--but if it’s all we ever do, we are not acting heavenly; and Revelation won’t let us get away with it.

To Take Away: Church & Individual:

And Revelation reminds us that we are God’s children together, we are siblings of one another in a new family.

We know that Revelation was written to churches, right? And yet it is individuals who are persecuted, it’s individuals who must “wash their robes” in the “free gift of the water of life.” “God’s People” is made of faithful persons. We know this. But it means things for us.

It means that we must be able to talk about the ways individually we respond to Revelation. Each of us has a personal responsibility to take seriously Revelation and figure out how to bring it into conversation with our hearts. We can’t, as individuals, write it off.

But this is balanced by the fact that Revelation is written to churches. We can't best understand this book without the help of one another. And in fact, this book is written to unique groups of Christians facing unique situations, given unique declarations of their faithfulness or failures, and who are called--as a group--to particular ways of overcoming the evil they find themselves surrounded in.

And this is true of Smoky Row, right? We are a unique church in a unique place, with our own unique problems, failures, successes, and things we need encouraged in and reminded of. It's amazing that for the 2,000 years between us and John's churches, what it means to be a church has pretty much stayed the same, and the balance that exists between the individual and the community is still something we are always wrestling with.

Revelation invites us to continue wrestling with it. We should ask *both* "How does this relate to me?" *and* "How does this relate to Smoky Row, my church?" As participants in this congregation, even physically separate from each other, we ask "Lord, where are we failing? Where are we succeeding? Where are we blind to our weaknesses and not utilizing our strengths?" And as individuals, we need to ask, "How do I and the church fit together? How do I help answer these questions?"

Urgency:

And if we can somehow take up the urgency of Revelation, live with the awareness that "soon" really is "soon," that Jesus really is coming back, maybe we would take our choices more seriously and pay attention to our lives a little more often, instead of just going with whatever flow

we find ourselves in. Especially in this weird Pandemic season in which time itself seem paused, sometimes.

And one of the ways that we can take seriously Jesus' return, and living faithfully until he does show up, is to enter into the vision John has of the Holy Spirit and the church saying "Come on, Jesus." "Hurry up." A habit of praying for Jesus to return forces us to think about what he'll say to us, and our church, if he were to return by the time we're done praying.