

BEING THANKFUL FOR PARADIGM SHIFTS

First Congregational Church, Oshkosh, WI

Sunday, November 22, 2015 - Text: Revelation 1:4b-8

Ask University of Notre Dame graduates who the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse were they might quickly respond “Stuhldreher, Miller, Crowley, and Layden.” They’d be correct if the question were in reference to the famous football team’s backfield in 1924. Ask poet William Blake and you would get the answer “The Four Zoas” (the four beasts around the heavenly throne pictured in chapter 4 of the Book of Revelation). Ask Victor Ibanez in the early 20th century and he would refer you to his novel of the same name (a world-wide best seller at the time) that was converted into an easily forgettable Rudolph Valentino film. Ask a contemporary Christian the same question you might get varying answers from “Huh?” to “War, Pestilence, Famine, and Death” like that portrayed in the 1970s Vietnam film “Apocalypse Now.”

Our text for today comes from the only apocalyptic book of the New Testament: Revelation. An Apocalypse foresees the end of the world as it is known or perceived. In popular literature of our time such writing usually describes a present that is hopelessly and irretrievably evil contrasted with a future when things will change into a better, more just, more perfect time. Sorry if in that sentence I revealed the plot of yet another Star Wars film.

I have often hesitated to preach on Revelation. I know the history of the making of the Bible. I am aware how often texts from this book have been misused so as to propel certain political or religious views. And I agree with biblical scholars of no less stature than Martin Luther (who believed in his day that Revelation should be dropped from the Bible). I am simply wary of its application to the field of homiletics. For example, are we ever expected to welcome a “great hail out of heaven” – such as a nuclear holocaust – to cleanse humanity as the prerequisite gift from the Almighty to usher in eternal peace (like that introduced by the “Left Behind” series)?

But, today I accept the assignment of the Lectionary from Revelation as my text mainly because it comes from the softest part of the book itself. The book does fall into at least four distinct parts:

1. John politely yet sternly addresses the seven churches in chapters 1-3;
2. John shares violent, almost hallucinatory images wrapped around Israel’s expectations of the Messiah in chapters 4-11;
3. John writes in a fearsome voice about the fall of Jerusalem accompanied by the moral collapse of the Roman Empire in chapters 12 -20;

4. John closes with a beautiful poetic vision of the new heaven and earth.

Jesus is not the central figure of Revelation. His name appears only five times in the first three chapters. It doesn't appear again until near the end of the book. The very idea of a surreal and monstrous apocalypse such as the one envisioned in most of Revelation is foreign to a sane rabbi from first century Galilee. In the gospel accounts of Jesus' teachings one cannot find reference to Zoroastrian numerology, Egyptian geometry, Babylonian imagery, or dramatic Persian symbols of unpredictable destruction. So why choose to speak on a text from Revelation? A couple of words in the opening of this enigmatic book speak to me. I believe these words are important for our time. They are:

Grace and peace to you from the God Who is and who was and who is to come.... I am the Alpha and the Omega...who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty

An ancient Greek philosopher named Heraclitus once wrote “*no one can step in the same river twice.*” In his treatise on the ubiquitous nature of change, this ancient person was standing on the threshold of very contemporary scientific understandings of the physical universe in which we live. As far as we know, nothing in creation is static. All is in motion. Permanence is an illusion that entices our minds to interpret

change as an unwelcome interruption of the norm rather than a description of it.

What endures are values, beliefs, thought systems. And, none of these forever. We are constantly learning, growing, evolving as time itself passes. For at least twenty-five centuries variations of the proposition that there is a God Who was, is, and is to come have dominated western thinking. Concepts such as those described in the use of the Greek alphabet are applied to our understanding of God – the first and last, the beginning and end – are bedrock to who we are in western civilization. Inclusive of three major world religions (Christian, Jewish, and Muslim) these words have been formative not only for our ancestors but for us as well.

I believe that these words, coming to us from ancient faith communities and translated into the fabric of our contemporary culture's value system in so many ways, are vital to our surviving what are inarguably trying times of life. They have enabled persons to stand in the midst of chaos, uncertainty, and vast collapses of whole civilizations down through the ages and to move forward toward that habitation whose builder and maker is God. They can serve us well in the face of paradigm shifts for they keep us focused on what may endure as opposed to what doesn't matter anymore.

What does it mean to you to be among a people who are blessed with grace and peace, who worship a God Who was and is and is to come, Who is Alpha and Omega (A and Z in our alphabet), beginning and end? And, how does that stance in life play in regard to the vast paradigm shifts taking place in our world right now?

Some say we are witnessing the collapse of nation states in our world. Some say we are living in the midst of another significant step in the reformation of faith systems in the world. The Pope said recently, in light of the advance of terrorism around the world, that we have unwittingly wandered into the Third World War. We are only in the fifteenth year of the 21st century. Can all of this be happening?

The Book of Revelation was written at such a time as ours. It is intensely pessimistic for the most part. The book suggests that things will get much worse before they get better. The violent pessimism of Revelation has given it, over the past fifteen centuries, a special appeal to the disaffected. In recent years a spate of racist and anti-Semitic hate groups have sprung up in the United States, known generally as “survivalists.” They justify their fully armed communes and their terrorist tactics by their misreading of the dark prophecies in Revelation that were aimed by its writer at the Roman Empire and the weak stance

of Christian churches in the face of its oppression. These organizations with names like Posse Comitatus, the Silent Brotherhood, the Christian-Patriots Defense League, the Covenant, the Sword, and the Arm of the Lord (to name just a few) seem to thrive on hate and disdain for any who do not see the world as they do. They are not grateful for any paradigm change that might challenge their world view. Are they, or any other fundamentalist sect within any of the world's major religions, correct in their interpretation of this part of Scripture? *Their hope, wrested from literal interpretations of the Bible, lies not in living in this world but escaping into another*, wrote Kathleen Norris in 1993 in her beautiful book Dakota: A Spiritual Geography.

What if the prologue to the Book of Revelation, with its confident proclamation of God's grace and peace, God's love and compassion, God's unending intent for the building of a humanity that might reflect the ideals of Jesus, are the main point of this mysterious book? What if the prologue and epilogue of Revelation is to be seen as the outcome yet to be realized by God's people who live in the world in every generation as that body of believers who find, even in times of vast change, ways to be grateful for paradigm shifts so that a new heaven and a new earth might be established? What if the Alpha and Omega of this book is the point of the book – and, not its specific condemnation of an empire long gone from this world along with its pomp and circumstance?

Looking at some paradigm shifts of which we are aware the question remains, can we be thankful that times come to be? I think we can. We, as people who have been blessed by God's grace and peace, can see the realm of God Jesus proclaimed is among us and is possible perhaps even more clearly when all around us it seems everything is changing. As we are confronted by times in the world it is good that we remember our calling. It is good that we check our history for other times like the present to recall the stories of our journey. In doing so we remind ourselves who and whose we are, why we are here, and who are our neighbors? "If there is anything worth calling theology," wrote Mary Pellauer, "it is listening to people's stories, listening to them and cherishing them."

When we find ourselves in times of challenges to what we thought were settled issues in the past, we can rediscover our call to be Christ's body in the world for that calling has not changed. We can grasp the notion that generations in the past made adjustments to ancient truths and moved forward when necessary. So can we. We can stay open to the God Who is still speaking to our hearts and minds today – and thereby move forward in courage and trust. For we are, if nothing else, the people who are blessed by a God of grace and peace, Who was, Who is, and Who is to come. Amen.

