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Roland Park Presbyterian Church
Advent 1 (Year C)

Psalms 46
Ephesians 1: 3-10
Revelation 1: 4-8

**Revelation Series:
Don't Worry, It's Not the End of the World**

Just a few weeks after the tragic events of September 11th, 2001 a cartoon appeared in *The New Yorker*. It portrayed a disheveled man on a street corner holding a sign that reads: "Everything's Going to Be All Right."¹ Normally, of course, one would expect the sign to read something more along the lines of "The End is Near." But it is this twist, the unexpected message that makes the cartoon, if not humorous given the circumstances, then at least a light-hearted reminder of a time when the future did not look quite so grim.

The last book of the Bible, *The Book of Revelation* is often thought to be a prediction of God's final judgment, the Bible's version of the man on the street corner with a sign that reads: "The End is Near." Many believe that it is about an event known as the rapture, even though that word never appears in the book or anywhere else in the Bible. The idea being that at some imposing point in the future God will slam the door shut, and those who are on the side of the righteous will be rewarded, while those who are unrighteous will be punished. According to this way of reading the book, John, to whom this has been revealed, also provides us with particular signs for us to know when the rapture is near. In the final days our world will come to resemble that of a fantasy tale, with angels and dragons and plagues. Then, at the end, after everything that is to be destroyed has been, God will build a fresh utopia in the form of a New Jerusalem.

¹ David Sipress, "The New Yorker," October 12, 2001, p.97.

This is the understanding from which numerous TV shows, movies, books (such as the “Left Behind” series) profit. It has its place within some Christian theological circles, although many, including myself, find this interpretation not only completely untenable, but deeply disturbing. Yet, there have been so few attempts to provide other interpretations that many assume it must be what the author intended, if only for lack of better option. This is problematic because it leaves us with a poor choice: either we submit to this version of a final judgment or ignore the book all together. Most of us opt for the latter. The problem with simply ignoring it, though, is that it neglects anything valuable that the book may have to add to our faith. And we must assume that it has some value, otherwise, the early church would have left it out of the Christian canon. Instead, it is given the honor of being the last book.

Over the next few Sundays, in a series of sermons, I plan on making a case that another interpretation is indeed quite possible, and that it is in fact, the one intended by the author, the one that earned it the stamp of approval of being the last book of the Bible. I will not have the time to dive into too much depth. After all, the book is 22 chapters and its symbolism and references are extremely complicated. My goal is relatively modest: to give some general impressions of what the book is and what it is not, and to lift up a few major themes that we may find surprisingly germane to the living out of faith in our own time and context. In order to do this we must first attempt to strip ourselves of our false expectations.

But this is no easy task, because our misunderstandings of the book run deep. They begin with the title. Many people mistakenly call the book *Revelations*, plural, when it is actually *Revelation*, singular. The word revelation is synonymous with the

word apocalypse from the Greek *apokalypsis*, which literally means lifting of the veil or uncovering something hidden², a meaning obvious in our English word “revealed.” So the full title of the book is *The Revelation to John* or simply *John’s Apocalypse*. It is a part of a larger genre of biblical literature known as apocalyptic literature which is identified by its highly symbolic and imaginative imagery. It was most heavily used among the Jews “during times of national or community tribulation.”³ *The Book of Daniel*, along with parts of *Jeremiah*, *Isaiah*, *Ezekiel* and *Zechariah* are other biblical examples of this wide-ranging style that is known for being highly cryptic. Some take the imagery to be evidence of other-worldly visions, while others believe it to be evidence that the authors of this genre have a dual audience in mind as they write, one that would be able to understand and decode the symbolism and one that would be confounded by the imagery and miss its meaning. The popularity of this type of writing among those who were being oppressed is perhaps an indicator that they want to convey messages that would be hidden from their persecutors.

In the case of *John’s Apocalypse*, the first audience, the audience the author intends to understand his meaning is the early Christian church. Being familiar with apocalyptic literature from the Hebrew Scriptures, this audience would have immediately keyed in its symbolic nature. The second audience, the one the author is hiding his meaning from, is the Roman authorities. Scholars believe that *The Book of Revelation* was put in its final form, the form which we read in the Bible, during the reign of the Emperor Domitian. Domitian was a particularly nasty ruler who insisted on being addressed by the title “Lord and God.”⁴ Dissention and criticism were not

² <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Apocalypse>

³ “Apocalyptic Literature” in *The New Oxford Annotated Bible* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), p. 362NT.

⁴ *The New Oxford Annotated Bible* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), p. 364NT.

tolerated. In fact, anyone refusing to worship him was ordered to be killed. This caused obvious problems for the early church, who while not encouraged in their Christian practices before Domitian, were at least allowed to exist. No longer! Domitian set out to not only persecute but outright eliminate the Christians.

Faced with such persecution from the Romans, the early church had its own theological crisis. As Messiah, Jesus was supposed to inaugurate a new era of peace and prosperity for God's people, rulers like the Romans were supposed to decrease, not increase. *The Book of Revelation* then, in many ways, can be understood as the early church's attempt to reassert their faith in the hope that God's promises and purposes would prevail in the end, despite evidence to the contrary. At a time when they could be executed for such claims, these early Christians had the audacity to proclaim that the Roman's authority was provisional, but God's would be final. While the message is put in the guise of a cosmic battle, the intention is to reach people who were in the midst of a very real and very threatening situation; to give them hope that the God revealed to them in Jesus Christ, the God of love, compassion, forgiveness, peace and justice, has not forgotten or forsaken them.

Parker Palmer writes, "*Every life is lived toward a horizon, a distant vision of what lies ahead. The quality of our action depends heavily on whether that horizon is dark with death or full of light and life.*"⁵ The central question we can ask about *The Book of Revelation* is what is being revealed? Is it a vision of the horizon that is dark with death or light with life? Is it a warning of an imposing final judgment? Or is it a message about trusting God in an unfavorable present and into an unknown future?

⁵ *The Active Life* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1990), p. 139.

Despite what many of us have come to expect from *Revelation*, I believe its intended meaning is not unlike that of *The New Yorker* cartoon. In a time when things could hardly look bleaker for the church, John foolishly stands there holding a sign that says, “Don’t Worry, Everything’s Going to Be All Right.” It is a message that encouraged his contemporaries to choose hope and faith over despair, and gave them the courage to carry on, despite seemingly insurmountable odds. It gave them the confidence that a small group of committed individuals could match up against the most powerful empire on the planet. It reminded them that their trust was not in political power or military might, but in the way of Jesus Christ.

And this faith, the faith we find in *Revelation*, the faith of the early church, is something you and I, the church of the 21st century, needs now as much as ever. There is still much in our world and in our lives that might convince us the horizon is dark with death. This is where I believe we have been missing the message of *The Book of Revelation*, where ignoring its testimony is to our peril. Perhaps more than any other book in the Bible, *John’s Apocalypse* stands as a witness to the promise that, as one theologian puts it, “*what we have seen and heard and experienced in Jesus Christ is to be relied upon more than all else we see and hear and experience.*”⁶

Let us pray: *Almighty God, the One who was and is and is to come, our Alpha and Omega: we thank you that you have revealed yourself to us through Jesus Christ. Following his example, help us to place our faith in you, to trust in your purpose in all things and to live in ways that witness to your life-giving love at all times. Amen.*

⁶ Tom Long, *Westminster Bible Companion: Matthew* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1997), p. 27.