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Roland Park Presbyterian Church
19-21
Easter 7 (Year A 08)

Psalm 67
Ephesians 5:1-2, 8-10,
Revelation 22: 8-13

***Revelation Series:
Response-Able***

Today is the fourth and final installment of my series on the book of Revelation. I hadn't really thought about it until now, but it seems funny that my first sermon series among you would be the last book of the Bible. Perhaps I should just work my way backwards through the scriptures until we end up on the Book of Genesis and the story of creation. I don't know. What do you think?

All kidding aside, I hope that at the very least I have encouraged us to consider again a part of Scripture that has been often overlooked and misunderstood. If we have also learned the importance of paying attention to the whole witness of Scripture and not just those parts that we find affirming, then I will be one very happy preacher. The lessons of what happens when we look to scripture and religion to confirm our previously held beliefs are all too clear to me, and very much so in line with what I heard Alan Walden talking about last Sunday in his reflections on the Shoah. I am sure I was not the only one who found a great deal of challenge in his remarks. And as uncomfortable as that is, it is also a much needed reminder that, as the philosopher Henri Bergson once remarked, "we must think as people of action and act as people of thought."

In terms of our faith, this means that we are responsible for connecting our theology to our practice, and our practice to our theology. When we come to church on Sunday mornings we cannot simply leave work, world and other concerns at the curb, come in here, get a little religion to help us cope without ever connecting what we do in here with what goes on out there. Faith doesn't work that way. At least, it doesn't work very well that way. When you come to church, you are not an audience, you are not consumers of a product; you are worshippers, full participants in everything that goes on whether or not you realize it. You may have noticed that since I have been here, a lot more has been required of the people in the pews in terms of actively participating in worship. We have a responsive song, more unison prayers, a time to share prayers concerns, etc. Those of us who work together at planning these services are very intentional about getting everyone involved, because we believe it is important and that each worshipper should leave with a sense that if they had not come, it would not have been the same.

Why? In a culture that puts such a heavy emphasis on being a consumer, we need to be constantly reminded that faith is not a product of consumption, but a way of living. We lose so much when we treat faith as a product that is subject to personal preferences. Too many churches and religious leaders fall into this trap for fear that if we place too much expectation on our members, they will simply get up and leave. But if nothing is required, then what can we expect to be gained? As Martin Luther once put it, "A religion that gives nothing, costs nothing, and suffers nothing, is worth nothing."

This issue of responsibility takes central place in the book of Revelation and it comes to a head as the author is bringing the book to a close in the verses I just read to you: *Let the evildoer still do evil, and the filthy still be filthy, and the righteous still do right, and the holy still be holy. See, I am coming soon; my reward is with me, to repay according to everyone's work.* John seems to be of two minds in terms of our responsibility: on the one hand he insists that the wicked will get their due, yet on the other he proclaims that, in the end, God will make all things right and all will be forgiven.

Here is how one commentary I read puts it: "John was a profound thinker, a dialectical theologian who intends to present both sets of pictures, and does so using paradoxical language. Revelation intends to present pictures in which the one sovereign and gracious God is finally victorious and restores all his creation to its intended blessedness, redeeming all his creatures...John also intends to present pictures which portray human beings as responsible for their decisions, pictures of how inexpressibly terrible it is to reject one's Creator and live one's life in allegiance to false gods...By...affirming both poles of the dialectic, John, in accord with biblical theology in general, guards against the dangers inherent in a superficial 'consistency' obtained by affirming only one side of the issue. [Therefore our] task is not to seek ways to reconcile the tension in the text, but to find the thrust of Revelation's message precisely in the tension."¹

¹ M. Eugene Boring & Fred B. Craddock, *The People's New Testament Commentary* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2004), p.818.

In other words, John does not give us a quick fix answer. He affirms that God is the beginning and the end, that God is in charge of all that happens, yet he does not dismiss human agency, he does not let us off the hook. What we say and do matters. Our actions have consequences. John's vision of faith is not a simple one of a neat little package, one size fits all. It involves ambiguity and tension. We must, as the author of Ephesians writes, "try to find out what is pleasing to the Lord." But the problem for most of us is that we are not too comfortable with things being so open ended. We want the benefits without the work to get them. (I can't help but think here of our culture's obsession with dieting. More than being fit, we all want to look fit. We want the image without the work of the exercise. We'd much rather take a pill than change our life styles or habits. But, in faith as in dieting any quick fixes are just that, quick fixes. There are no short cuts.)

William Sloan Coffin puts it in these terms: "The central problem of the Christian church in America today is that most of us fear the cure more than the illness. Most of us prefer the plausible lie that we can't be cured to the fantastic truth that we can. And there's a reason: if it's hell to be guilty, it's certainly scarier to be responsible—response-able, able to respond to God's visionary and creative love. No longer paralyzed, our arms would be free to embrace the outcast and the enemy, the most confirmed addict...No longer paralyzed, our feet would be free to walk out of any job that is harmful to others and meaningless to us...Everything is possible to those whose eyes, no

longer fixed on some status symbol or other, are held instead by the gaze of [the one] who can dispense freedom and life in measures unheard of.”²

I often find myself wondering how much truth there is to Coffin’s assessment that we fear the cure more than the illness. Could it be that when we ask for God to heal us and forgive us we are only paying lip service?...that we would actually prefer things to stay as they are?...that we fear the prospect of having our lives transformed?...that we are scared that it might mean having to change our life style or our habits?...that we would prefer resignation that we are to insignificant to matter to the idea that not only can we be changed, but that we can make a difference in the world?...that being able to respond to God’s visionary and creative love is more than just nice idea, more than just church-speak?

Harvard theologian Gordon Kaufman addresses the relationship between responsibility and faith when he writes that in order to be responsible “we must...be able to imagine the future—that is, imagine what is not now the case and is not present in our experience...To take responsibility for some act or project or person or community is, in the first place, to respond to it, to become concerned about it; and in the second place, to make ourselves accountable for it.”³

The book of Revelation has many gifts to offer us if we allow it, if we pay attention to it, if we are willing to wrestle with its strange, sometimes

² *Credo* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2004) p.149.

³ *Jesus and Creativity* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2006) p.76 & 78.

disturbing message. It has the power to inspire as it has throughout the ages. It has inspired artists, musicians, hymn writers, theologians, pastors, political leaders. It reminds us of our need of grounding our lives in a reality larger than our own. And yet, we also have to recognize the flip side of this equation that if we do not interpret the book of Revelation responsibly, someone else will gladly do it for us, perhaps with disturbing consequences. Misunderstandings, misuses and abuses of the book of Revelation do abound. They have sometimes resulted in physical violence. They have often resulted in emotional and psychological violence and terror. Sadly, we cannot stop all of these abuses. Yet, if we do nothing or if we allow these abuses to scare us away and disown our own Scripture than we are not only missing out on the inspiration it has to offer us, but, perhaps more importantly, we are shirking our responsibility to faithfully wrestle with all of Scripture.

It's time for us to realize that we are not spectators or consumers of faith, but participants; that we are not only recipients of God's visionary and creative love, but that we are accountable to it; that God makes us responsible—able to not only imagine a future where God is finally victorious and restores all creation to its intended blessedness, but to partake in its coming about; that what we do in here only matters if it positively impacts what we do out there.

Let us pray: *Come into all the places where we prefer the illness over the cure, O Lord. Give us strength and courage to be faithful to your vision for our lives and for our world. Overpower our excuses, lend new perspectives to our troubled thoughts, and equip us to walk into the future with courage and with the full assurance that you are with us every step of the way; through Christ our Lord. Amen.*