

“Living in Christ’s World: Do You Have Ears?”

Reading: John 10:14-30; Revelation 2:8-17

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We have our yearly church conference coming up next Sunday, when we reflect on the last year and look forward to the coming year. One of the reports in the conference is the pastors’ letter, when we speak a pastoral word reflecting on things that have happened and helping set the course for the future. If I were to stand up next Sunday at the conference and read a pastors’ letter describing in detail the apocalyptic visions I’ve been having recently, and how I’ve been taken up into the throne room of God, how I’ve spoken with angels, how I’ve seen ancient mysteries revealed and the future laid out in front of me, and I described demonic monsters and dragons and promised that huge cataclysms were about to shake the earth, probably a couple of things would happen. There’s a good chance at least a few of you would believe me and take those visions very seriously, and maybe we would even start a new movement in the church based around my visions. Probably more of you, however, would be, shall we say, skeptical, and I’d bet more than one of you would be calling the district superintendents.

Why wouldn’t you take me seriously? Or why don’t we take seriously the various modern-day seers of apocalyptic visions we hear about from time to time on radio or TV? There are all kinds of examples from history and from recent times of people either predicting the end of the world or claiming to be Jesus or His prophet. Most of the time, most of us just roll our eyes at those kinds of claims. They’re either a liar trying to bilk people out of their money or they’re insane. If we take the Bible seriously, though, we don’t reject the entire idea of someone having such visions, because we’ve got the definitive apocalyptic vision right here in the book of Revelation; this is the one all others are judged by. So why would most of you automatically assume that I’m not telling the truth with my apocalyptic visions while you consider John the Revelator’s visions a word from God?

Or maybe a more interesting question to ask is this: when most of us immediately dismiss a modern-day seer of visions, why are there people who take them seriously? Why do people still join cults or give money they can’t afford to some preacher they hear on the radio, when it seems so obvious to the rest of us that it’s all a sham? After all, the book of Revelation and indeed the entire Bible is obviously a sham in the eyes of a lot of people in our world, and yet here we are spending our time reading it and studying it. We’re the gullible fools in their eyes.

There are a lot of factors involved in why certain people fall for certain shams, and a variety of reasons why we accept John’s testimony as Scripture while almost all others are suspect at best. But maybe one reason why some of us are drawn to prophetic visions is because there’s something at the core of us that hopes against hope that maybe God might actually have something to say to me, and if God revealed mysteries to that preacher on TV, maybe God really does speak to us in profound ways, and there’s hope for me. And maybe part of why we’re skeptical of those apocalyptic seers is because we see that guy on TV and we think if God had a message to give us, surely He could have come up with a better messenger than that. Somebody like John, who is traditionally assumed to be the Apostle and early disciple who had a particularly close relationship with Jesus, sure. He’s someone special. But the rest of us? God surely doesn’t speak to us like that.

But part of the whole point of this book of Revelation is that the risen Christ is indeed speaking to His people. He doesn't give us all apocalyptic visions — which we should probably be thankful for, honestly — but He does have something to say to us, and it's not just the special people or the saints who are included in God's message. John's Revelation is daunting and shocking and sometimes frightening to read, but it's really intended to be a message of hope. All along we've been insisting that the question underlying the Revelation is this: what do we do when God's plans seem to have failed, when we've waited for salvation but continue to suffer, when we've worked hard for His kingdom but don't see a lot of fruit, when the direction of the world and our lives does not seem to be God's direction? And the Revelation is that God does speak to us, He does have a message to reveal to us, and the message is that He *is* in control and He *will* be triumphant in the end.

Last week we began the book with a vision of Jesus Christ. It was a vision of the resurrected Jesus, Jesus after Easter, after He has conquered death and been given glory and power. It was a message to the church that in times of trouble and all throughout life, it is the presence of the powerful risen Christ that is the true answer to life's questions. The revelation of what God is doing begins with the presence of Jesus. But then, in our reading for today, the revelation of what God is doing includes the church. A lot of people don't know how to make sense out of these letters to the seven churches in Revelation; they seem to interrupt the flow of grand visions and they feel tacked on. But no, they're very deliberately put here, because the message of how God is going to be faithful to His promises can't be understood apart from the risen Christ, and it can't be understood apart from the church. It is to the church that Jesus is giving this revelation. The Revelation begins with Christ and His church.

Our theme for this season is "Living in Christ's World;" we're spending time in the book of Revelation because it shows us like no other book what the resurrection of Jesus at Easter means for the world, and it has huge implications for our lives. Jesus gives these strange letters to these seven churches because the church is the key to the unlocking of God's plan: if you want to see what's going on, the church is the place to do it. Or, more accurately, if you want to tune your ears to hear what God is saying, this is the place, because one of the phrases Jesus repeats to each church is, "whoever has an ear, let them hear what the Spirit is saying to the church."

I don't know that I've always got an ear, frankly, at least not in the way Jesus means. When your ears are as big as mine, it's quite clear that you have them; the real problem is whether they're listening. And maybe the reason is that I'm not always sure God has anything to say to me. I'm not sure He bothers with someone as insignificant and unimpressive as me. Someone like John the Apostle, sure. He's someone worth sending a revelation to. Not someone like me. Not someone like those gaudy preachers on TV; they don't deserve it. Maybe you've felt the same way, and you've felt like everyone around you must be so much holier than you are because they're clearly feeling God's presence and hearing God's voice so much more than you are. Or you've seen the bigger and cooler churches around, and you've heard the stories of what God does there, but He surely wouldn't bother transforming lives in a little church like this one.

Does God bother to speak to us when our circumstances are less than perfect? I'm not even talking about someone living in outright rejection of God, I just mean when things aren't perfect. Or does He only speak to the especially holy people or the really big, cool churches? There are many things we can learn from these letters to the seven churches, but maybe one of the most important is

that *yes*, God does have something to say to us, even when we're not perfect. *Yes*, God certainly does have something to say to a small church like ours.

I say that because of what Jesus has to say to these other churches in Revelation. Remember, He has just appeared in mind-searing glory to John, literally knocking him off his feet, and He's about to show John mind-bending mysteries of God's work behind the veil of mortal sight, but He pauses to speak messages of hope an assurance and repentance to seven small, struggling, imperfect churches. You can read all of them and see what I mean: they're struggling with doctrinal issues, with persecution by the authorities, with general feelings of stagnation and spiritual dullness, and with letting sin and immorality run loose in the church. And yet He speaks to them, He calls them to repentance, He gives them the hope of change. These churches, *even these*, small or struggling or messy as they are, are places where the work of God goes on and the mysterious plans of God are revealed. These people, *even these*, are not excluded from being a part of the unfolding of God's plans, and they're not exempt from God's messages, if only they have the ears to hear.

So don't think God can't have anything to say to you, or that He doesn't bother saying anything to little churches like ours. He doesn't always open the door of heaven and invite us all to take a tour, but if our ears are tuned to listen for Him, He still speaks to us. So what are some of the things we learn from these letters? What are some of the things Jesus might be saying to us today? There's a lot we can unpack from these letters; we only read two out of the seven, but there are several things we can learn quickly.

Once again, one of the big things to learn from these letters is that the church is the key to the unlocking of God's plan. If you want to see what's going on and have your life formed to be a part of that plan, this is the place to do it. This may not be the safest place to do it, though. It's not safe, but it's good. I say that because in many of these letters, there is either the present reality or the future expectation of persecution and trouble. Many of these churches are struggling because, well, their way forward is difficult and perilous. As God unfolds His plan, there will be resistance. As the kingdom of Christ marches forward, there will be confrontation, and if you're on the front lines, you're going to be right in the thick of it. To the church at Smyrna, Jesus says, "be faithful, even to the point of death;" and several others He commends for their patient endurance and faithfulness through trial. But to all of them He also promises rewards for holding fast. To one He promises to make them a pillar in the temple of God, to another He promises the right to eat from the tree of life. They're strange promises, but He's drawing images out of the story of what God has been doing all along, and the point is that if we hold fast, Jesus promises to be faithful and include us in His completed work of redemption.

What's more, Jesus makes it clear to these churches that He knows of their struggles and their perseverance matters. He calls them to repent, even when their failures seem very severe, because there is hope of change, and change actually matters to God and His plan. It's not too late for these churches to take part in what God is doing. This is good news for us: what we do actually matters; it can make an eternal difference, and your response to the suffering or failure or sin in your life can help reveal the work of the risen Christ in the world. Jesus sees what we're going through and what we're doing. He's watching, not from a distance and not as a threat, but as one who dwells among His churches, watching like a good shepherd over His flock. God's plan is not only for the future, it's for

changing the present, too, and so your choices and your repentance and your beliefs make a difference in the here and now and the forever.

So if you want a boring life, stay out of the church. But if you want to hear what the Spirit of Christ is saying, you'll hear Him best in His church. The question is whether we have ears to hear. The question is whether we trust that God actually has something to say to someone like me, and to people like us, and whether we're listening for what He's actually saying rather than what we want to hear, and whether we're willing to act on His word when we hear it.

I've previously used the church at Ephesus as an example of a sad story. When Paul writes his letter to them, he speaks of them in glowing terms and is gushing in his description of how powerfully Christ has been at work there. Some years later, when Jesus sends His message to the Ephesians through John, He warns them that they've lost their world-changing love of God, and He calls them to consider how far they've fallen. It's a sad story because it's the last word in the New Testament about that church, and it's sad to see someone start well and end poorly. But I recently learned that while that's the last word in the New Testament, it's not the last word in church history. A few years after Revelation was probably written, a church father named Ignatius wrote another letter to the church at Ephesus, and he congratulated them "on changing your old way of life and setting your love on God alone." They heard Jesus' message. They had ears to hear. What is the Spirit of Christ saying to this church today? What is He saying to you?



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