

November 1, 2020 – St. Andrew's (Sarnia)

1 John 3:1-2

See how much the Father has loved us! His love is so great that we are called God's children—and so, in fact, we are. This is why the world does not know us: it has not known God. ² My dear friends, we are now God's children, but it is not yet clear what we shall become. But we know that when Christ appears, we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he really is.

Revelation 7:9-17

⁹ After this I looked, and there was an enormous crowd—no one could count all the people! They were from every race, tribe, nation, and language, and they stood in front of the throne and of the Lamb, dressed in white robes and holding palm branches in their hands. ¹⁰ They called out in a loud voice: “Salvation comes from our God, who sits on the throne, and from the Lamb!” ¹¹ All the angels stood around the throne, the elders, and the four living creatures. Then they threw themselves face downward in front of the throne and worshiped God, ¹² saying, “Amen! Praise, glory, wisdom, thanksgiving, honor, power, and might belong to our God forever and ever! Amen!”

¹³ One of the elders asked me, “Who are these people dressed in white robes, and where do they come from?”

¹⁴ “I don't know, sir. You do,” I answered.

He said to me, “These are the people who have come safely through the terrible persecution. They have washed their robes and made them white with the blood of the Lamb. ¹⁵ That is why they stand before God's throne and serve him day and night in his temple. He who sits on the throne will protect them with his presence.

¹⁶ Never again will they hunger or thirst; neither sun nor any scorching heat will burn them, ¹⁷ because the Lamb, who is in the center of the throne, will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of life-giving water. And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.”

This is the Word of the Lord | Thanks be to God

Message: Too Many to Count

I'm preaching from the book of Revelation today and I doubt that there is any book in the Bible that has been more misunderstood.

Because it is full of signs and symbols some people try to “decode” it, or match it up to current events to try and figure out where 2020 fits in.

When I was a teenager, the *Left Behind* book and film series were the big thing, turning Revelation into a violent fantasy-action franchise,

and thereby completely missing the point
of this challenging

– but really quite inspiring and hopeful –
culmination of our Bibles.

Revelation is basically a letter, much like the rest of the New Testament.

The author's name is John, and at the time of writing,
he'd been exiled to the island of Patmos by Roman authorities.

So this letter is meant to be taken to the mainland
and then circulated among seven churches
located in what's now Turkey.

The bulk of the letter is a vision, a message,
given to John by God
to be shared with other Christians, then and now.
But it's a message from a different perspective
than we're used.

Consider a prophet, like...Jeremiah or Isaiah, from the Old Testament.
They see things unfolding in the lives of God's people right then,
and they speak God's word for that moment...
...usually, knowing God's people,
telling them to shape up
or prepare for the consequences.

And John's letter is different again from other New Testament letters,
like Paul's to his church-plants.
Paul is usually teaching or advising
about some interpersonal issue or confusion,
and so his letters take God's Word
and apply it to a concrete situation.
All very much focused on
what's happening here on earth
in ordinary lives.

But John's perspective is different.
Do you remember last week, we were talking about Moses.
And once, Moses asked God to be allowed to see his face.
God said it would be too much for Moses and it'd kill him,
but God let him experience his glorious presence
by hiding Moses in the cleft of a rock
and letting him see God's back
as he passed by.

Well, here, that safety precaution has been taken away

and John is seeing God, sort of;
or, more accurately, John is seeing reality from God's perspective.

In Revelation 4, John writes that his visionary journey
took him to the throne room of God,
and it's from there, from that perspective on creation and humanity,
that the rest of the letter unfolds.

And poor John is left trying to share this familiar landscape made foreign,
trying to describe what cannot be captured easily by words.
And weighing heavily on his mind, I expect,
was the trouble he and those seven churches would get into,
if God's view of reality fell into the wrong hands.
The message of Revelation would be so offensive to the Roman empire,
to any empire or kingdom or system of worldly power,
that things could have gone very badly indeed
for the Christians of that day.

At the time of John's vision and letter,
Rome's empire extended across Europe and North Africa
and the Middle East.
Domitian was the emperor, and he was persecuting Christians
just as Nero had before him.
Nero used to soak Christians in creosote
and then set them on fire to light his garden parties.
Domitian had a more subtle way of persecuting Christians
– by demanding that they fit their beliefs into the Roman imperial religion,
morphing Christianity into something subordinate
to Rome's religious ideas.
But more open persecution was not uncommon, either,
in some places...it was a big empire.
So the world was a dangerous place for Christians,
and rocking the boat, so to speak,
by proclaiming the reality-upending vision of Revelation...
...it would have made things even worse for them.
So, coded language and imagery
and Old Testament references
was how John wrote,
trying to capture something
for which the words simply didn't exist.
For all that complexity, though, today's text is much more ordinary:
it's an answer to a question.

What we read together is a hopeful glimpse of God's people,

standing together in God's presence
and celebrating, worshipping and praising God.

It's a nice image on its own,
but if you look at what comes before and after it,
this saintly crowd in their white robes
seems startlingly out-of-place,
a pause in the midst of a
truly exciting and long-anticipated moment:
God's justice has finally begun to reshape and redefine creation.
John uses the image of cracking open seals,
one after the other,
to show God's justice building in ferocity,
like pebbles before an avalanche.
All the things God's people have prayed for and cried out for
– enough food and clothing for everyone, fair treatment in the courts,
an end to poverty, mercy and compassion
instead of punishment and violence –
things that we pray for every Sunday together,
when we pray for our world and our community,
when we pray for God's kingdom
of justice and peace to come.
At long last, God is wiping out all the broken human systems
of empire and government, of economics and production.
Judgement that is really fair and just,
not the kind that exists to serve
the powerful at the expense of others,
that's what has come.
You can see why an empire like Rome,
why any empire or state,
would not take this vision, this promise God's making, very well at all.
And the kings of the earth, the rulers and the military chiefs,
the rich and the powerful, and everyone else,
hid themselves in caves and under rocks
in the mountains,
trying to hide from God
and from Jesus, the Lamb.
And they ask a terrified question: in the face of this fierce, divine judgement,
who can stand?

The answer is that the uncountable multitude
of God's ordinary, every-day believing saints –
with God's help, they can stand.

Ordinary believers who stayed faithful
 through everything the world could throw at them,
 through long years, through illness, and grief,
 through family and career,
 through sadness and doubt, hope and joy...
 ...those faithful believers,
 they stood fast in their faith,
 and they can stand.

If we join John and his guide in looking more closely,
 we see that there are too many of them to be counted,
 and that there is every sort of person present
 – every race, tribe, nation, and language,
 to use the Biblical words.

They are a startlingly diverse crowd,
 and yet united where it counts most:
 they have all passed through the suffering of human life
 and now stand in God's presence;
 free from sin and grief and brokenness,
 restored, rescued and worshipping God.

They know that praise, glory, wisdom, thanksgiving,
 honor, power, and might all belong
 – not to those kings and generals,
 to the rich and the powerful, trying to hide in their caves –
 it all comes from and belongs to God.
 They know that salvation
 – the rescue of his people –
 that victory belongs to God.
 And they know that they are loved,
 because in this house of God,
 this dwelling place they're been gathered into,
 there is no hunger, no thirst, no scorching heat of the sun.
 And God must move among them somehow, too,
 quite personally and close-up
 because he wipes every tear from their eyes.
 This huge crowd of the faithful serve God,
 by worshipping, and singing, and shouting in victorious joy.
 And although this sounds like a pretty good ending to the story,
 if you fight through the rest of Revelation,
 you will find that this vision of worship
 and the too-many-to-be-counted crowd

of faithful believers
 is really just a preview of what
 new, resurrected life will be like
 in the new heaven and new earth that God promises us.
 The purpose of apocalyptic writing in the Bible
 is to tell us some hidden truth about God and God's reality,
 and about the course of human life.
 John's seven churches were in danger;
 of persecution, of accommodating
 their Christian beliefs and practices
 to the demands of Rome,
 of the ordinary slings and arrows
 of human existence.
 The dangers and challenges we face today,
 as ordinary believers, are different
 but no less burdensome to us.

If we take anything from today's Scripture text,
 it must be that,
 no matter what happens, in the world, in our lives,
 with God's help, we can stand...
 ...and if we fall down, God will help us get back up,
 and stand again.
 If there is one thing we must be uncompromising about
 when it comes to being Christian,
 it's that we believe in Jesus,
 in the salvation – the rescue – and the love
 that he brings into this world,
 and everything new and just and right
 that flows from that rescue and love.
 But it also puts what we do together, as a church, in new light.
 A famous Christian writer once said that
 "Christianity, if false, is of no importance,
 and if true, of infinite importance.
 The only thing it cannot be is moderately important."
 If we believe John's vision, this revelation of God's perspective on reality,
 if we believe it's true,
 then worship – our service of worship –
 just became infinitely important,
 central even, to our identity as God's people,
 to our faith
 and to our capacity to stand.
 Whether we are part of a large church or a small one,
 whether we worship at home right now because of COVID or ill health,

or we brave coming to church in person,
 we have started our worship now,
 and eventually we will join
 that uncountably vast congregation of believers
 who have gone before us to worship God
 face-to-face.

Should you ever delve into reading the rest of John's Revelation,
 you will no doubt find the imagery and the symbolism and the references
 all very obscure.

It's easy to get lost,
 to struggle to find where ordinary,
 every-day holy believers and saints fit into it all.
 And it can sound more frightening than hopeful at times.
 God's message of grace and justice and love
 is a dangerous message...

...but not for those who stand in the faith.
 John's first readers likely would have found this letter
 more readily understandable than we do,
 but I have no doubt that it would have been
 as overwhelming and too-big as we find it today.
 But here, in this little interlude in John's letter,
 this glimpse of God's people, too many to count,
 they see *themselves*

– and we can see ourselves, too –
 as God intends all of us to be:
 worshipping and serving,
 rescued and loved.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.