



Let us pray: Blessed Lord, who caused all holy Scriptures to be written for our learning: Grant us so to hear them, read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest them, that we may embrace and ever hold fast the blessed hope of everlasting life, which you have given us in our Savior Jesus Christ; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. *Amen.* ¹ That is the Collect for the Sunday closest to November 16th, but I thought it appropriate to start this morning with it given the text we will be talking about in a few minutes. And, it always reminds me of the prophet who literally ate the scripture to take its meaning deep within himself.

The Gospel this morning is the story of doubting Thomas. One who needed to see the hands and feet and side of Jesus before he would believe in the risen Lord. The concept was too much for him and so he wanted physical proof the resurrection was real. Parts of the Bible are hard enough for us to believe because we see contradictory passages, we see contradictory images of God, we read about miracles or other events that seem too farfetched to be credible. Sometimes we are like doubting Thomas – doubting what we read or what we hear. At those times, it can be important to remember that Jesus was Jewish and the culture and faith within which he lived. We regularly read of Jesus being at the synagogue or temple and of Jesus reading from the Scriptures and interpreting them to those present.

The Jewish people have divided their holy scriptures into some basic categories: the Torah or the first five books – what might be analogous to our Gospels. The Torah is the core and a portion is read at each service. Just like we read a portion from a Gospel when we have communion. Besides the Torah, the other books in the Hebrew Bible are categorized as Writings or the Prophets. The Writings contain a variety of different types of scripture and include apocalyptic passages such as Daniel and wisdom such as Ecclesiastes and Proverbs. We do much the same although the titles of groups of the New Testament scriptures are different. We have Gospels, Letters and Epistles.

Many people are frightened or intimidated by The Book of Revelation, our own apocalyptic scripture. It is in our canon, however, so we can't simply ignore it because it is too weird, we don't like imagery or we don't want to think about what John may have meant when he wrote it.

Each Sunday we read from the Old Testament, the New Testament, a Gospel and usually a Psalm. We are people immersed in Scripture. And, Scripture is not always easy to understand. It can be a real struggle to figure out what God is calling us to do in response to these sacred texts. A prime example is the Revelation to John.

¹ Book of Common Prayer: Proper 28 *The Sunday closest to November 16*

Acts 5: 27-32; Psalm 118: 14-29; Revelation 1: 4-8; John 20: 19-31

Note that it is not “revelations” (plural) or the revelation **of** John. The title in this case is important: The Revelation **to** John.

Filling in with the first verses, omitted in this morning’s lectionary snippet, we read:

The revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave to him to show his servants what must soon take place; he made it known by sending his angel to his servant, John, who testified to the word of God and to the testimony of Jesus Christ, even to all that he saw.

Blessed is the one who reads aloud the words of prophecy, and blessed are those who hear and who keep what is written in it; for the time is near.

This opening is important to our understanding of the entire book. First, Jesus is the revelation- the unveiling- of what God wants us to know. Second, that John received this revelation from an angel and is testifying- telling the truth- of Jesus Christ. Third, that those of us who hear these words read and who keep what we hear are blessed. Fourth, that what we have in Revelation is prophecy to assist us with the times to come.

Revelation has often been reviled because it is very often just plain weird to our contemporary ears. The end times have not come so it can seem anachronistic and irrelevant. Someone has said that “a study of Revelation either finds a man mad or leaves him mad.” I hope today finds you neither mad to start nor at the end. Rather, I hope you might ponder what we can learn from and about the Revelation to John that is relevant to our life and our faith today.

Simply trying to “decode” Revelation takes away from its beauty and its importance. Sometimes we need to learn to live with ambiguity and perhaps to rekindle our imagination. Some have said that those of us that like science fiction are often the ones who like Revelation. Perhaps it is more that when we can get out of our usual mindset of facts and figures, and move into a way of hearing and responding to Scripture that includes more than facts and figures, we can see and learn from Revelation.

John, the writer of Revelation, uses signs and symbols and references to the Old Testament in nearly every verse. If you were in Adult Ed this morning, you know that one definition of a symbol is something that points to something else. For example, a stop sign is just that – a sign that says stop. And, it can also be a reminder that stopping at that particular point is helpful if you want to stay safe. A stop sign is a caution. Similarly, the bread and the wine that we eat and drink at Communion is bread and wine. Ordinary food that nourishes our bodies. But when eaten and drunk as part of Communion, the bread and the wine are symbols for the body and blood of Jesus, shed for us and for our salvation. Bread and wine and yet much more.

As John calls what he is writing a prophecy, it is good to remember that prophecy is often different than telling the future. It is not what a carnival fortune teller will tell you about your future. A prophet speaks God’s word. A prophet calls the people back to God. And there are consequences when we fail to heed the warnings.

Acts 5: 27-32; Psalm 118: 14-29; Revelation 1: 4-8; John 20: 19-31

A bit about what we might label numerology in Revelation. In Revelation these numbers might be more properly called symbols. We will be reading from Revelation for the next several weeks so here are a few that may be helpful:

3= the divine number (love of/from father, mother, siblings)

4=the cosmic number (four corners of the earth, four seasons)

7=perfection (3+4, the divine plus the cosmos)

12= fullness, completeness, organized religion (3x4)

Thus, in our reading today, when John says he is writing to the 7 churches that are in Asia, he is writing to the universal church. Asia in this case is what we today call Turkey. Scholars believe that these churches, which are named in later chapters, were selected because of their location. A letter delivered to them was easily transmitted to other local churches. The Word of God was easily spread.

The greeting “Grace to you and peace from him who is and who was and who is to come” is a typical greeting of that day. The grace is from God, not earned but given freely and without hindrance. That grace is what enables us to live in peace. The “Him” is of course, Jesus. The “who is and who was and who is to come” reminds us that God is still active in our world. We see echoes of this in our Eucharistic liturgy: Christ has died, Christ has risen, Christ will come again. This important reminder to us that God has not forgotten us despite how it may seem when life is constantly in turmoil and there are so many unknowns and so many tragedies. God is ever present.

Our passage today closes with “I am the Alpha and the Omega” reminding us once again that there is nothing and no-where that God is absent. From the beginning to the very end, God is with us. This reminds us of Paul’s letter to the Romans that we often use at funerals. There is nothing that can separate us from the love of God, neither principalities or powers or sickness or death.

This is, fundamentally, I think, the message of Revelation. God is and has been and always will be. Nothing can separate us from the love of God.

And, it is a good reminder to us that at least now and then we need to get out of our heads- out of and away from taking everything as a fact or figure that can be proved. We need, at times, to return to our imagination. Do not be dismayed that the Revelation to John is challenging. Struggling with the Word of God is part of what we are called to do to deepen our faith and to live a life based on God.

At the close of Evening Prayer, one of the scriptures chosen is from Paul’s letter to the Ephesians (3:20-21) can help us with this text. I commend it to you:

2 Easter

April 28, 2019

Acts 5: 27-32; Psalm 118: 14-29; Revelation 1: 4-8; John 20: 19-31

Glory to God whose power, working in us, can do infinitely more than we can ask or imagine: Glory to him from generation to generation in the Church, and in Christ Jesus for ever and ever. *Amen.*