

**Series: REVELATION**  
**Sermon: Introduction**

**Revelation 1:1-8**

The revelation from Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show his servants what must soon take place. He made it known by sending his angel to his servant John, 2 who testifies to everything he saw—that is, the word of God and the testimony of Jesus Christ. 3 Blessed is the one who reads aloud the words of this prophecy, and blessed are those who hear it and take to heart what is written in it, because the time is near.

4 John,

To the seven churches in the province of Asia:

Grace and peace to you from him who is, and who was, and who is to come, and from the seven spirits before his throne, 5 and from Jesus Christ, who is the faithful witness, the firstborn from the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth.

To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood, 6 and has made us to be a kingdom and priests to serve his God and Father—to him be glory and power for ever and ever! Amen.

7 “Look, he is coming with the clouds,” and “every eye will see him, even those who pierced him”; and all peoples on earth “will mourn because of him.” So shall it be! Amen.

8 “I am the Alpha and the Omega,” says the Lord God, “who is, and who was, and who is to come, the Almighty.”

**Sermon**

I remember my first airplane ride as a little kid. We were going from Amarillo, Texas to Lincoln, Nebraska on one of those tiny commuter planes powered by a rubber band. I had no idea what to expect. My folks tried to explain everything that was going to happen, how the plane worked, what the wings did, how the captain used a compass to find Nebraska, what we would see when we got into the air. But with all of this info, I still did not really know what it was going to be like. Until we were in the air. Only then I knew what they were talking about. I remember being in line for my first big roller coaster as a teenager. Never been on a roller coaster before. There was an hour long line, just enough to have you freak out about a dozen times. My friends tried to explain what it was like. And I could see people going up that track, go over that hump, and scream as they hurtled toward the ground at a very high velocity. Screamed with joy, I hoped. But I didn't understand it until I was the one on the track. I'm done understanding it. When I graduated high school, I thought I knew what college was going to be like. Sure, the occasional class, but it was independence and no one telling me what to do. Instead, it was like a lot of classes, a lot of papers, and me saying, “I have no idea what I want to do.” I really didn't understand it. To truly understand something is to live it. Experience it. Getting married is like that. You think you know what it means, then you do it. Having a kid is like that. You might think you know how it will change your life, then you do it. Oh boy, oh boy, oh boy. Many things have to be lived to truly understand it. I know Jesus said a lot about heaven. What it is like. And while I believe in heaven, I only have a vague idea of what it is, a conceptual theory, but if you asked me exactly what it looks like, I'm not sure, but I trust the one whose been there. This morning, we are starting a five week series on the Book of Revelation. We will try and understand what John was getting at with his vision, but we also know that our knowledge of what Revelation means is a dim reflection of the truth until we live it. This morning, I want to give a quick overview

of the themes of Revelation, what the book is, what the book isn't, and the historical backdrop to the scripture's writing. In doing such, we can see what the book says to us today, within our 21<sup>st</sup> century context.

For many, Revelation is a book of fear. It is used as a motivator to get people to believe, and believe in a hurry before time runs out. The truth is that Revelation is a book of hope and encouragement. It is a book filled with imagery and metaphor, much of which is confusing. Because it is confusing, many churches and pastors have ignored it. Many pastors, or Christians for that matter, don't look at revelation because it seems very mysterious, or downright scary. Or we believe it to be a place where well-meaning faithful folk go to find end-of-the-world scenarios. When Christ is coming back. For two thousand years, we've had prophesy after prophesy, prediction after prediction of the end of the world. In these last few years, we've had flood and famine, war and terror, mass shootings, tornado, tsunami, global warming, genocide, cats and dogs, living together and who knows what. You pick up the tabloid and it shares the end of the world is eminent. You read the paper and you think, maybe their right. And we focus on the book of revelation for the vision of the Apocalypse.

Out of curiosity, when you hear the word, "Revelation", not in a biblical sense, but in a secularized setting, how would you describe the world, Revelation? (Revealing, aha, so that's it!). Now, let's take a look at the word "Apocalypse". How would you describe the word, Apocalypse? (End of the world, death, destruction). Interesting. The book was written in Greek, the language of the day, and our word Revelation is the Greek word Apocalypse. They're the same word. Ultimately, they have the same meaning. So, if someone asks if you believe in the Apocalypse, you can respond, yes, I believe in the revelation. It's the same word, but they get interpreted differently.

Generally speaking, I think four common ways of looking at the Book of Revelation (Or Apocalypse). Interpretations range from "it's all metaphor" to "it's a blueprint for the future". Major theories would include: 1) The prophecies and events described are concerned only with events in John's day, and have no bearing on today or the future. In this view, Revelation is more about 1<sup>st</sup> century Roman persecution of Christians than it is about anything else. 2) Revelation is a description (and preview) of history from John's time to the end of the world. In this view, it is possible to identify in Revelation major historical events that have already occurred. 3) Revelation is a description of events that will occur in the "end times", or at the end of the world. Thus, none of the events after Chapter Three have yet occurred. This is the view that you hear most often on television and in literature today. 4) Revelation is a metaphor for the ultimate triumph of God over evil. Thus, one shouldn't expect to find actual events (past, present or future) in Revelation. It's all metaphorical truth.

These are all legitimate ways of interpreting Revelation. As a church, we do not have a doctrinal stand as to the interpretation of Apocalypse. Any of these four methods are valid and recognized. This is not a salvation issue. If you believe in the literal descriptions of Revelation, fine. I've got no problem with that. If you believe that it is all metaphor and symbolic, fine. I've got no problem with that. Someone once told me that if I do not believe in all of these events, as written, as in the Left Behind Book Series, I'll be going to hell. The Bible is clear, though, that we are saved through Jesus' blood, not by the interpretation of a biblical book; saved by the lamb, not by which version of scripture is in your bookcase. I say these things to let you know that orthodox thinking is varied on how we interpret Revelation, there is more than one way to look at it and apply it today.

So why was it written? And to whom? A generation after Jesus' resurrection, Christian churches were springing up everywhere, many thanks to Paul and the Disciples. But persecution was right around the corner. In 64, 2/3 of Rome burned to the ground. We get the proverb that Nero played the fiddle while Rome burned, although Nero was miles away from the city when it happened and the fiddle hadn't been invented yet. But due to Rome being toast, Christians made a nice scapegoat. Thousands upon thousands of Christians were soaked in tar and burned on crosses all around Rome. Others were crucified or decapitated. Thousands. At this time, both Peter and Paul were martyred. You think we've had crazy leadership over these years? Let me give you an idea on how crazy Nero was: Nero was 12 when his mom married the current emperor. She later poisoned the

emperor to give Nero the throne, but she would rule until he was of age. Nero, as a teenager, killed his step brothers to secure, for sure, his title. He later killed his mom. Not a guy to mess around with. And then Rome burned. Because the Romans figured out that he was nuts, they turned against him. The Senate ordered to have him flogged to death, but before they could do that, he committed suicide at the age of 31. Two years later, Nero's successor Vespasian, sent troops to burn Jerusalem and kill everyone there. When Domitian became emperor in 81 A.D., he proclaimed himself a god. Everyone was forced to offer sacrifices and worship him. According to the Christians, this was a bit of a no-no. Persecution, imprisonment or death were the likely fates of those not wanting to worship the emperor. Most scholars today believe that a great Christian leader, highly respected and very well known in Asia, whose name was John, wrote his Revelation toward the end of this time of trouble, tension and impending martyrdom. Whether or not this is the same John that wrote the Gospel of John is still a debate to scholars. John was exiled to the island of Patmos, the penal island for political offenders, because of his loyalty to Christ. Within this context, John wanted his revelation to give Christians encouragement to hold fast and remain faithful to the Lord. It is understandable, that the first and second century Christians thought the world was coming to an end. It seemed like Satan himself was running the world. They gave the beast a name, whose number is 666. You can get the name Nero out of certain tricks of Numerology, I have read. For these Christians, the end of the age is a great thing! Bad guys gone? No more murder or death? No more fear or prison? How is this a bad plan? We read revelation and think doom and despair. They read revelation and thought justice and peace.

He is the Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end. In the beginning, God ruled. In the end, God will rule. But we live in the in-between times. All jumbled up. Try this little experiment: Can you read this paragraph is trying to say? It might be hard, but let's give it a shot: "I cnd'uolt blveiee taht I cluod aulaclyt uesdnatnrd waht I was rdanieg: the phaonmneel pweor of the hmuan mnid. Aoccdnig to a rsearch taem at Cmabrigde Uinervtisy, it deosn't mttar in waht oredr the ltteers in a wrod are, the olny iprmoatnt tihng is taht the frist and lsat ltteer be in the rghit pclae. The rset can be a taotl mses and you can sitll raed it wouthit a porbelm. Tihs is bcuseae the huamn mnid deos not raed ervey lteter by istlef, but the wrod as a wlohe. Amzanig huh? Yaeh and you awlyas thguoht slpeling was ipmorantt."

We tend to believe that we're living in the craziest time ever. With our mass shootings, with the threat of nuclear violence. And yes, we do live in tumultuous times. Last Sunday, a deranged shooter takes out scores of innocents from a hotel room in Las Vegas, and we have the proper responses of outrage, courage, fear and resolve. I saw one headline and it said, "Worst Mass Shooting in US History". And it is horrific. But its not the worst mass shooting in our nation's history. There's always been evil. There's always been crazies out there. And I'm not counting war times. I think back in the history books to the Wounded Knee Massacre. 300 + men, women, and children gunned down. That could qualify. Or Sand Creek Massacre, where a former Methodist pastor and volunteers took out 150+ Natives, under the protection of the US flag and white flag of surrender. Or here in Oregon, in 1887 where teenagers killed dozens of Chinese miners at Deep Creek. Or the Colfax massacre. A decade after the Civil War - black citizens in Louisiana were trying to exercise their right to vote, and on Easter Sunday, before this particular election, 150 + African Americans were shot dead for trying to vote. Almost all of them shot after surrendering. Three white folk were also killed in the action. In 1920, the citizens of the Parish put up a marker to memorialize the horrific event. It says this: "Erected to the memory of the Heros, / Stephen Decatur Parish / James West Hadnot / Sidney Harris / Who fell in the Colfax Riot fighting for White Supremacy" That marker still stands. No marker for the murdered. There's always been evil. And what happened in Vegas was deplorable. And Sandy Hook, and Columbine, and Orlando, and Oklahoma City, and and and. . . The questions we have today is how to combat the evil within our own times, our own places. How can we respond in love to those who are hurting?

So, for the next few weeks, we'll explore this book of Revelation, see what it said to them, and see if it still has anything to say to us. And no matter how you look at Revelation, please remember, ultimately it is a story of good over evil, of persisting through life's challenges, and remaining faithful in times of doubt. Maybe I don't understand all of it now, but someday I'll know, in the end, God and goodness and justice and mercy always wins. Amen.