

Text: Rev. 1:4b-8

Title: “Unveiling the King”

(Intro.) How would you support a person who’s trying to do the right thing? A person who’s trying to be faithful to a commitment? One way to do this is to remind them of what is true and important. For example, when I was in high school, I ran track. I wasn’t especially fast—there were some shorter guys who could leave me at the starting line in a sprint. But if you put a few hurdles on the track, it slowed those short guys down quite a bit, and it didn’t bother long legs much at all! In the right event, I was O.K. But there was some reality—things that were true and important—I had to keep in mind. To do my best, I needed to care for my body. I needed to get plenty of sleep, I needed to eat right, I needed to work out, and not skip practices. With the reminding of the coach and other guys on the team I kept focused on those realities, and I won some races.

People in the Roman province of Asia in the first century were trying to be faithful to their Christian commitment. But they were facing persecution because they refused to participate in the worship of the Emperor. It wasn’t that they knew that tomorrow night the bad guys were going to come get them. It was almost worse: they knew that from time to time there were crackdowns on people who refused to acknowledge the Lordship of Caesar, and that crackdown might come in fifteen minutes, or it might not come at all. They just lived under that threat, not knowing when, or if, it would come. They needed help to be faithful.

We live in the 21st century in metrowest Boston, and we are trying to be faithful to our Christian commitment. There’s no threat of persecution, but there are elements of our culture which are corrosive to faithful living.

- To begin with, most of us are over-committed, and if we have children, so are they. We run around, and we haul them around. Further, the media shouts for our attention, so we’re over-stimulated. Sustained focus is hard.
- Our worlds are divided. The people we know at work are not the people we worship with, and the people in our neighborhoods are a third group of relationships, none of which are very deep, so the fragmentation of life is distracting.
- None of us are driven materialists, but the constant barrage of advertising keeps reminding us of all the things out there that would be nice to have, so it’s hard to avoid a tinge of materialism.
- None of us are outright skeptics, but most of our educational input takes the position that the earth is the work of cosmic and evolutionary forces. If there is a God, God is part of our private world, and we’ve never really sorted it all out.
- And the list goes on. We could mention 9/11, and a low level of fear connected with the possibility of terrorism touching us or someone we love.

Faith commitment, which should influence everything we do is distracted, diluted, and lulled to the point that it easily becomes church membership and church membership becomes just one more thing competing for our attention.

(The Issue.) I repeat what I said earlier: one way to support people who are trying to be faithful is to remind them of what is true and important. If I cast that in the form of a question to you, it would be something like, how should we view our life and our world in a way that is true, and which strengthens us to be faithful to our primary commitment to Jesus Christ?

(Text.) Our text is from the Book of Revelation. That book was written for the very purpose of strengthening the churches in Roman Asia who were facing persecution. In Greek the name of the book is “Apocalypse,” a word which means revelation or unveiling. It accomplishes its purpose by unveiling just who Jesus is, and the spiritual dynamics behind the events of life and history.

What first comes to mind about the book is that it contains what is to us bizarre symbolism, and as we learned last week, apocalyptic literature is concerned with the last things. Our text comes from the beginning of the book, and contains no unusual imagery. There are, however, some things about the book to bear in mind:

- The book of Revelation is a letter. It contains individual letters to the seven churches, but it as a whole is a letter.
- It was written by “John,” and there is good reason to believe that is the Apostle John.
- It says that it was given by God to his Son Jesus to show to his servants what will happen soon. (Rev. 1:1)
- It describes itself as a prophecy.

(World View.) How should people who want to live faithfully view the world we live in? What do we want to be reminded of? Revelation was written to speak to precisely these questions. And while we are only in the first verses of the book, the fact is that a distinctive world-view emerges.

(Scripture text, Rev. 1:4b-8.) Please follow with me as I read the text: [P. 245 in the pew Bible. I suggest you leave it open on the pew beside you.]

(4b) Grace to you and peace from him who is, and who was, and who is to come, and from the seven spirits who are before his throne, (5) and from Jesus Christ, who is the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth.

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

(7) Look! He is coming with the clouds; every eye will see him, even those who pierced him; and on his account, all the tribes of the earth will wail.

So it is to 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.”

This is the salutation and opening lines of John’s letter. The question we are asking ourselves as we begin our examination of the text is how it helps us form a worldview which will undergird faithful Christian living.

1. Notice that the passage both begins and ends with a statement about God: He was, he is, and he is to come. There is an allusion here to God speaking to Moses from the burning bush, but there’s also a clear message: God encompasses all time.

In vs. 8, God also says: I am the Alpha and the Omega—the first and last letters of the Greek alphabet, and by implication, everything in between. God closes with the description: He is the Almighty.

We know this, but we need to be reminded: God encompasses all; nothing is outside his knowledge and control.

2. The next mentioned is of the Spirit. It is an unusual description, but it is clearly the Holy Spirit, and the presence and ministry of the Holy Spirit is an active part of our world view.

3. The focus of the book, and the focus of this passage is Jesus Christ.

a. He is the faithful witness, who was faithful even to death. To the original recipients, Jesus was a model, in that he was a martyr, and they may face that. What this tells us about our world is that we have God’s truth reliably conveyed to us. We can trust what we have been told about God because the faithful witness has brought it to us.

b&c. The phrases, “firstborn from the dead” and “Ruler of the kings of the earth” go together. Certainly, there is a reference to the resurrection, but the primary reference is to Ps. 89:27, a

psalm about the messiah. The writer applies the convention of the “firstborn son” to Jesus to emphasize the pre-eminent relationship to God he enjoys, and his authority over God’s creation.

Remember that when Jesus was before Pilate, he was asked if he were King of the Jews. His reply was that his kingship was not of this world, otherwise his subjects would fight. In saying that his kingship was not of this world, Jesus was not saying that his kingship was somehow esoteric or “otherworldly.” What he was saying was that his kingship was not governed by the world’s values and conventions, or its political or military calculus. Human hands had not crowned him king, and human hands could not remove his crown. Jesus is king because he is God.

Next comes an response of praise which highlights three things about Jesus’ relationship to us, and these things also are essential to our view of the world.

d&e. (In the end of vs. 5) He loves us, and has shown this by giving his life for us, to set us free from our sins by his blood. The word love is in the present tense. It was shown vividly, and on one occasion, by his death on the cross, but it is a permanent, abiding fact. Statements about God’s love are sometimes uttered glibly so that it comes to have the feel of a cliché, but it is solid truth. Further, on the cross, Jesus completed the work of redemption. We are indeed freed from our sins.

f. (Vs. 6) He made us to be a kingdom of priests to serve his God and Father. In a mystical, yet a very real way, we are united with Christ. As such, we are to participate with him in his reign. This is the continuation of a promise made to Israel, that they were to be: “a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.” Our view of the world should include our participation both in Christ and his kingdom.

g. Finally, (vs. 7) Jesus will return. It will be a highly visible, public event—“every eye will see him.” This return of Jesus and the consummation of his kingdom is the goal of history, and it is what both God’s people and God’s created order yearn to happen. (Sadly, and this is the perspective of the book of Revelation, neither God’s judgment nor Jesus’ return causes people to change their ways and turn to him, but to harden in their rebellion.)

So, in summary, our view of the world should contain something like this...

- God created the world, and God is engaged in every part and in every age. Nothing is outside his knowledge and control.
- God has visited his creation in the person of his Son, and has revealed himself to us, his people, and has given us his truth. We can trust his word.
- This is a fallen world, and each is (in the words of Paul), a slave to sin. But Jesus has freed us from slavery to sin by his death on the cross in our place. (And by the giving of the Spirit.)
- God loves us! We hear that often enough that it may have lost its punch, but it is true! God loves us!
- Furthermore, our destiny is to participate in his kingdom and to serve as priests to the Father in our union with Christ.
- Finally, Jesus is king, and he reigns now. His kingdom will be consummated by his return in power. This will be a spectacular event—“every eye will see him.” This is also the goal of history for which both God’s people and his creation long.

Conclusion. Brothers and sisters, we are busy people, and we have many worries and concerns. There are many other lenses which show a very different world than we have presented. Let me urge you to let the words of this text sink deeply into your souls—and encourage others to do likewise. It is only with these important truths inside us that we are likely to be found being faithful when Jesus returns.

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