

I recently heard a story told by a rather unorthodox comic some of you may know, Howie Mandel. He talked about a late night flight he was on, and the passenger next to him was absorbed in a book he was reading. It was one of those mystery, suspense type of novels that you can't quite put down.

Howie was trying to rest, and this avid lector beside him kept "oohing" and "ahhing" as he devoured the pages. Obviously his vocal reactions to the book's intensity were not conducive to Howie's sleeping. As the flight neared its end, the reader abruptly stuck his napkin in his book, placed it on his fold down tray with just three chapters remaining and quickly headed to the restroom. In his gate you could see he was anxious to return to his seat and finish his book.

Howie leaned over and looked down the aisle, and as he saw the red occupied sign light up with the closing of the latch, he reached over, found the final chapter in the book, grabbed the pages together in his right hand and quickly tore them out them, stuffed them in his pocket and pretended to continue sleeping the rest of the flight. As I heard Howie Mandel make this confession public, he presented the pages from his inside coat pocket and asked apologies from his neighbor the reader with whom he had never spoken before getting off of the plane.

Now I am an avid reader. I inherited my passion for reading from my mom. I too devour books. So I can imagine the despair of getting to the end of your book only to find that the last chapter has been removed.

If we are truthful with ourselves, is that not effectively what we do with the last book of the Bible, Revelation? We remove it from our reading. I think that's what I've often done, until this week. Last Sunday Shannon preached a thought-provoking sermon "No Child 'Left Behind'" based on our lectionary reading from Revelation 7.

Following the service, one of our senior adults who has spent a lifetime in church said to me, "I really enjoyed Shannon's sermon, and I don't think I've ever heard one quite like it." Neither had I, and what I've come to learn is that we should not be surprised.

Revelation appears so seldom in our lectionary, the cycle of readings from the Bible that we use to guide our worship. One place it does almost always appears is at the grave. If you are familiar with our funeral liturgies, you might remember: "I am the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end." (Rev. 22:13) Rev. Frederick Schmidt, an Episcopal priest, puts it this way: "In most of our churches you have to die to hear the Book of Revelation read. Then, of course," he says, "it's too late to learn anything new about it."¹

Thanks to Shannon's sermon last week, I too felt compelled to turn to today's passage from Revelation as the foundation of my preaching, and I've learned some new things about this bewildering book. My hope is that by the time we are through today you too will insist that we not remove these pages.

One of the reasons we stay clear of Revelation is we down right don't understand it. We don't like it. It is difficult to decipher. While we have shied away from this final book of the Bible, many others have used it as their foundation for a theology that has permeated our culture, our politics and even our own (mis)understanding of God. Shannon did a good job of confronting the theology of the Rapture last week, and I wish to simply bring a few other partners into this dialogue today.

¹ Frederick W. Schmidt, "Leaving Behind Left Behind: Reclaiming the Book of Revelation in a World Left Behind," *Congregations*, Spring 2007, Volume 33, Number 2, The Alban Institute, pgs. 6-11.

I mentioned earlier Frederick Schmidt. This Episcopal priest has recently written an article which is subtitled, “Reclaiming the Book of Revelation in a World Left Behind.”² Schmidt talks about how for so many Revelation is read as a kind of roadmap used to decipher events and catastrophes in our contemporary world.

He goes on to say, “It is counterintuitive, if not simply strange, to suddenly begin reading the Book of Revelation as a roadmap to the contemporary reader’s experience... essentially (this) reading of the text of the Apocalypse asks the contemporary reader to assume that over two millennia ago in Asia Minor, a Greek-speaking writer wrote to a Greek-speaking congregation, and, upon completing (his work), concluded, “I don’t have any idea what this means, but people living 2,000 years from now on a continent that has yet to be discovered, in a country that has yet to be founded, living under circumstances no one can now imagine, (they) will understand it.”³

That’s ludicrous. This erroneous reading of Revelation has led many people deeper into fear, suspicion and disdain for others, for creation and even for God. A second reading of Revelation tends to focus on the mythical nature of these writings, highlighting the images and the symbolic nature of the Apocalypse. This too in and of itself is an inadequate reading of Scripture. If we are to discover the Word spoken for us today through Revelation we must turn to the original historical context that birthed this book.⁴

The first centuries of Christianity were embedded in the Roman Empire, and the sharp criticisms of this apocalyptic work take their aim directly at the injustices of that imperial system. While Revelation’s messages of resistance and hope are initially foreign to us now as is the reality of the Roman Empire (messages that would have rung loud and clear to the original recipients of this letter), we too in this day and age live in a world of Empire. Our own nation undoubtedly strives to play that dominant role in our current world order.

Barbara Rossing, Lutheran pastor and theologian and perhaps one of today’s premiere scholars on the Book of Revelation, reminds us that the root meaning of Apocalypse is to reveal, to pull back the curtain and unveil something.⁵ Rossing champions that the central message of Revelation is Hope for us all and the central character of Revelation is Jesus Christ, the lamb. What the Apocalypse intends to reveal is the sickness of the current world order, and that holds true for the Roman Empire as well as it does for today and all time as we know it. More importantly, what the Book of Revelation intends to reveal is a new world order, one that is established by none other than God through Jesus Christ. This new world order is to be anticipated with hope and joy, not with fear and trepidation.

This brings us to our passage which Bob read to us a few moments ago from the 21st chapter of Revelation. This is part of the final chapters of Revelation, the conclusion of the whole Bible, where a vision of two cities is presented to all who will listen. Taking a few steps back to chapter 17, the first city presented to us is Babylon, which in short order clearly is a reference to Rome at the time of the writing of Revelation. This city is

² Schmidt, pgs. 6-11.

³ Schmidt, pg. 8.

⁴ Schmidt, pgs. 8-9.

⁵ Barbara Rossing, lecture at Trinity Institute's 37th National Theological Conference, *God's Unfinished Future: Why It Matters Now*, January 23rd, 2007. I'm gratefully indebted to Rossing for the clarity of this lecture and the whole concept of Empire in Revelation. All her ideas in this sermon come from this lecture. It can be seen webcast at http://www.trinitywallstreet.org/calendar/index.php?event_id=40241

“characterized as a whore who actively seduces all those around her.”⁶ The seduction of imperial power and wealth is rampant in their time (and in ours).

Frederick Schmidt, in the piece I mentioned earlier, explains that the judgment depicted in Revelation is to be levied against (the Empire). And the case against the city is justified on the grounds of: “idolatrous worship (Rev. 18:3) [placing other things before God]; violence against the church and others (Rev. 18:24); “blasphemous self-glorification” (Rev. 18: 3, 7, 9); and the wanton use of its wealth (Rev. 18:3, 11-19, 23).”⁷ Let those who have ears hear.

Yet the core message of Revelation is one of Hope and not of despair. It is ultimately a message of New Creation and not of destruction. Our vision in Chapter 21 begins, “Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea (chaos) was no more. And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them as their God; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them; he will wipe every tear from their eye. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away.” And the one who was seated on the throne said, “See, I am making all things new.” “Write this, for these words are trustworthy and true.” (Rev. 21:1-5)

This, my friends, is the vision of God for the fullness of time as given to us in the Book of Revelation. It is not a world of tears, death, mourning, crying, chaos and pain, as some would lead us to believe, but a world where these things will be no more. “Behold, I am making all things new,” says the Lord.

German theologian Jurgen Moltmann in addressing the final judgment urges that our future expectations shape our present world views.⁸ He says, “If we hold the expectation of an exclusive final judgment, then we can justify (in the now) the exclusion of those who do not belong to us. We can justify the categorization of people into friends and foes – the one who is not for us is against us and we against them.” Moltmann reminds us, “(Biblical) Judgment was originally the counter-history of the victims of injustice. It was a hope-filled view that God’s justice would ultimately prevail.”

And God’s justice is a creative justice, Moltmann says, not a retributive justice that establishes good and evil. “Victims will receive justice and the perpetrators of injustice will die to their evil actions in order that they too will be born again into a new creation alongside their victims...Victorious divine justice will not separate humankind into blessed and condemned at the end of the world but will unite them for God’s great day of reconciliation on this earth...It is a saving and fulfilling ‘yes’ of creation...’Behold, I make all things new’” This is the radical, creative justice of God, a gift offered to us all.

Then what do we do with verse 8? Well our lectionary comfortably leaves it out (the reading for today goes Rev. 21:1-6), but I chose to include it because it holds a message for us. Revelation is a letter written to the seven churches that are in Asia (Rev. 1:4), and ultimately to the church of all time. We often misread the warnings of Revelation to be directed at others, when actually the letter is addressed to us. “As for the cowardly, the faithless, the polluted, the murderers, the fornicators, the sorcerers, the idolaters and all

⁶ Schmidt, pg. 10.

⁷ Schmidt, pg. 11.

⁸ Jurgen Molton, lectures at Trinity Institute's 37th National Theological Conference, *God's Unfinished Future: Why It Matters Now*, January 23rd & 24th, 2007. I thank for Moltmann for fresh theology. All his ideas in this sermon come from these lectures, which can be seen webcast at <http://www.trinitywallstreet.org/onlinetv/?series&series=49>

liars,” verse 8 says, “their place will be in the lake that burns with fire and sulfur, which is the second death.”

Now didn’t we just hear a loud voice from the throne saying, “Death will be no more”? Moltmann reminds us that it is Christ who will appear on Judgment Day not as the divine revenger or the ultimate terminator, but as the crucified One who has risen as the final conqueror over sin, death and hell. Where do you stand before the throne? Would all of you (not to mention any of the other items on the list) who have never acted cowardly or been faithless or lied please raise your hand?

Barbara Rossing accurately describes Revelation’s warnings as urgent wake-up calls to the church for how we are to live out our lives in this world. These are prophetic words that are intended to shape our daily ethics as individuals and as a people. Moltmann says, “If death is no more and (Christ has destroyed) the power of hell, then the question of if only a few shall be saved is irrelevant...Whether they share our beliefs, we (should) respect and see every human being embraced by the mercy of God, whoever they are – God loves them, Christ died for them and the Holy Spirit is working in their lives. For God’s sake we can’t be against them.”

Friends there are competing claims for our Christian faith in this world – Christ as the Terminator or Christ as the Redeemer, a God of creative justice or a God of retributive justice, an earth that must be destroyed for the salvation of a few or a new creation in which all things will be made new, God’s economy built upon justice and well-being or an imperial economy built upon injustice and violence, Babylon or New Jerusalem. Revelation, the last chapter in the Book, the end and a new beginning, exhorts us to choose a vision, to choose the city we will inhabit. Whose will it be?