

March 7, 2010
The National Presbyterian Church

The Grand Symphony

Revelation 6:1 - 11:19

Rev. Earl F. Palmer

Sunday Worship at 8, 9:15 & 11 a.m.
Classes for Adults, Youth, and Children at 9:15 a.m.

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We're in a journey together through the last book of the Bible: the book of Revelation. These last two weeks we've looked at two great chapters, which I believe form the centerpiece of the entire book, with the two grand chorales we hear in Chapters 4 and 5. Chapter 4 is a psalm to God the Creator: "Holy, Holy, Holy, Lord God Almighty who was, is and who will be the Lord of time. By thy will all things were made, and everything exists by your decision" (Revelation 4:8,11). That's the first song. God is the Lord of time and the Creator. The doctrine of creation.

The second song is in the fifth chapter. It answers the great question of history: the scroll with its seven seals. Who can open the scroll and make sense out of history? The Lamb is able to. And so the song, the second song is sung. "Worthy is the Lamb who was slain, and by his blood we are

redeemed from every nation, from every tribe” (Revelation 5:9). This is the doctrine of redemption. In my view, what now follows in the book of Revelation are like symphonic variations on these two grand songs. One way to understand the rest of this book is to think of Chapters 6 through 22 as four symphonic movements. We’ll look at the first today. Each of these movements is filled with imagery that is baffling, but the part that’s clear in each of the four symphonic movements are the songs similar to those in Chapters 4 and 5. At key moments in the symphonic part, we will hear songs of hope. There are terrifying portraits that can’t really be fully understood, but the songs are crystal clear. It’s probably best to use the ‘lean’ rather than ‘luxurious’ model of interpretation and stand back in wonder. As we watch the unfolding of these scenes, hear the songs that are sung. Let us now watch the first of these symphonic parts unfold.

Chapters 6 through 11 are comprised of two sets of sevens, just as there were seven seals on the scroll. Now we’re going to meet two sets of sevens. The first are seven seals that are opened, one by one. The opening of these seals begins with the four horses of the apocalypse. The first horse, the white horse of terror and tyranny; the second horse, the red horse of blood and of war; the third horse, the black horse of poverty and famine; and the final horse, the pale horse, the horse of death. These are all portraits that are terrifying.

And then the fifth seal opens and we see the brave martyrs who have been slain. And then finally the sixth seal is when the surprise happens. At the end of the sixth seal, just as these terrors keep becoming worse and worse and more and more frightening, then suddenly we hear a song. And that song, just as in Chapters 4 and 5, becomes the important teaching moment

a great Brahms aria from the book of Job, and the opening word of that aria was, “Why, why?” Job is asking the question: Why? It’s the great question of Job. Why, why is there light, when everything seems so dark? And that’s really a wonderful song for this text that we’ve just read. Why? All of these dangers, and then this amazing breakthrough with the number seven. Seven belongs to God. The cease, the *sabbath*, the rest, belongs to God. And then the song comes. Don’t be afraid, your life is in God’s hands. And that answers the Why.

Heavenly Father, thank you for this text that prepares us for the Lord’s Supper today. Bless us as we now pray and receive common bread and common wine, the signs and seals of our Lord’s life given in our behalf. Now bless us as we receive it. In Christ’s name we pray, Amen.

1 Lilje, Hanns. *The Last Book of the Bible: The Meaning of the Revelation of St. John*. Muhlenberg Press, 1957.

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I like what Hanns Lilje said. He was a German pastor, contemporary of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who also was imprisoned because of his part in the Confessing Church movement. But he came out of his imprisonment alive while Bonhoeffer did not. Bishop Lilje wrote a commentary during his imprisonment which I think is one of the finest commentaries on the book of Revelation. Listen to what he says, “The consolation which the book of Revelation proclaims is not based on the fact that it extols human heroism.” We met heroes in both of the trumpets and also the seals, we met heroes. But that’s not the hope. Otherwise the word to us would only be that we need to be heroic. And if you’re heroic like they were, then you can survive. That’s not the consolation. “But the consolation is that it proclaims the future victory, the real victory of Jesus Christ himself - his love, his faithfulness.”¹ And that’s the message of the book of Revelation.

We do need brave people. And we’re grateful for them, and we want to be brave too. But our hope is founded in the bravery of Jesus Christ, of his powerful love who died in our behalf, who disarmed sin, and death and the power of evil at the cross. He suffered too. And the fact that he suffered ahead of us is the grand hope of this book of Revelation. Because he won, he won the victory for us. And therefore we’re in faithful hands when we’re in his hands.

We celebrate the Lord’s Supper to celebrate that fact. The Lord’s Supper was given by our Lord on the night in which he was betrayed, just before the cross. He shared this supper with us so that we could remember what he was going to do, and rejoice. That’s why we call it the Thanksgiving, the Eucharist, to give thanks that his victory will be won on Good Friday by Jesus Christ. And it has been won. And therefore we, the people of God, are privileged to celebrate it now. The Wheaton College Choir just sang for us

in the first symphonic part. And here it is, as we get to that sixth seal that is opened, then suddenly a song breaks loose.

And I looked and there was a great multitude and no one could count, from every nation and all tribes and peoples’ languages standing before the throne and before the Lamb, robed in white and they cried with a loud voice, ‘Salvation belongs to our God who is seated on the throne, and to the Lamb.’ Amen, blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor to our God forever and ever.” [And then a very beautiful part of the song, that makes a promise. And it says,] *We worship him day and night within his temple, they will hunger no more and thirst no more. The sun will not strike them, nor any scorching heat, for the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd* (Revelation 7:9-17).

As that song is sung we are assured that Jesus Christ is our shepherd right in the middle of all that is happening around us and to us.

I wondered, why the terrifying parts then? Why not just sing the song? Why these four horses of the apocalypse? Why this section on the fact that there is terror? Because those who read John’s book are living in a time of terror. This book is written to people who are in danger. It’s written to people who were singled out for persecution after the fire of Rome in 64 A.D. since I believe that this book is written before the fall of Jerusalem in 70 A.D. when Roman troops will destroy the city of Jerusalem. The time is harsh and frightening. The Christians may be wondering how they’re going to make it. And so this book is comforting because it does bring up all these fearful portions but the one thing that’s interesting in the portrayals of each danger in the terrors of the first six seals that are opened before the seventh, is that they’re all boundaried. Even the four horses of the apocalypse are boundar-

ied. They have power, but not ultimate power. There is a restraint. There is a limitation on each threat. We need to face danger, but we need to know a greater truth than the danger. We know that all evil is finally boundaried by God.

Then we come to seven trumpets. The second part of this first symphonic movement tells of the seven trumpets that blow. They are also terribly frightening. We have trumpet one, trumpet two, trumpet three, and all of them tell again of horrors. In fact, in this section we meet the devil who is depicted as a star that falls into a bottomless pit. How do we understand that? We really can't understand it. We just stand there and look at it. It too becomes a part of the imagery that's baffling and probably should not be over-interpreted. Just stand there. Because, again, as the intensity of the trumpets builds, finally we get to a point where it says in the fifth trumpet that three woes will come next. As if this wasn't bad enough to have all of these locust-like warriors that are fighting, now we have three woes. And we have woe one, and then woe two. But again, the woes are limited. There is a boundary. It's a third of the earth that suffers, not the whole. And then finally we're ready for the third woe when a surprise comes. At the seventh trumpet we have a surprise. We expect the third woe, and instead probably the most famous of all the songs in the book of Revelation is sung. As the seventh angel blew his trumpet, we're expecting now the third woe, and there were loud voices in heaven saying, "The kingdom of this world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Messiah. And he will reign forever and ever, Amen" (Revelation 11:15). As you know George Friedrich Handel includes this very line in the "Hallelujah Chorus" of his master-work, *Messiah*.

And then the twenty-four elders fall on their faces. They worship God sing-

ing, "We give thanks to you Lord God Almighty, who was and is and who will be. Who is the judge of all the earth?" (Revelation 11:17). Notice as the trumpets build towards seven, yet, as with the seals that are opened, the number seven always belongs to the Lord. It belongs to the Lord's grace.

And now finally the Lord's temple in heaven was opened and the ark of the Covenant is seen. The ark of the Covenant is the covenant of promise. It was sprinkled with the blood of the lamb on the day of *Yom Kippur* to remember the protection of God's people. The Law and all of the promises given to God's people are symbolized by the ark of the Covenant. This text in Revelation 11:19 almost looks like a scene out of "Raiders of the Lost Ark." Remember the last scene in "Raiders of the Lost Ark" when the ark of the Covenant was found and there were flashes of lightning. The filmmakers drew that scene's flashes of overwhelming light right out of the book of Revelation. "Then God's temple in heaven was opened, the ark of the Covenant was seen within the temple and there were flashes of lightning and rumblings and peals of thunder, an earthquake and heavenly and heavy hail" (Revelation 11:19). And that's the end of the seventh trumpet.

Notice what we've seen in this first dramatic symphonic movement of Revelation 6 through 11. We've heard of two sets of seven, and within each set of sevens the danger is real, but it's boundaried. And that's comforting to us. But the second fact is the most comforting of all. The dangers build with intensity, from one to six, but then the seventh always belongs to the God of grace and truth. The number seven is the boundary around all of these dangers. The seventh danger and the chorales that follow are totally clear and easy to understand. The imagery may be mysterious, but the songs are easy to understand. Where's the hope in all this? Why is this a book of hope, a book of hope for us, just like it was at the midpoint of the first century?