

Revelation 1:1-20
"The Poetry of Faith"
Lee A. Koontz
April 11, 2010

Chuck and I recently decided that it would be worthwhile to preach a series of sermons on Revelation. The first reason is that Revelation is the most misunderstood book of the Bible. I think it's safe to say that many people's perceptions of the book of Revelation are shaped by things that simply aren't found in the book itself. In this series, we'll look at what Revelation says about itself, not what Tim LaHaye, Jerry Jenkins, or late-night televangelists say about it.

I'd be willing to bet that in any average church, more people sitting in the pews have read a volume of the *Left Behind* book series than have actually read the book of the Bible on which it is loosely based. But that's because Revelation is a very difficult book to make sense of. You're not alone if you've started reading Revelation and after just a few verses found yourself wondering, "What in the world???" It doesn't take many verses to send most people fleeing back to the quiet comfort of the 23rd Psalm.

Despite your horrific impressions of Revelation, the truth is that it describes the great triumph of Jesus Christ over all things,

good and evil. It amplifies the good news of Easter. So, it's an appropriate message for us to hear immediately after we've celebrated the Resurrection.

Our first reading from Revelation comes from chapter one.

[Read Revelation 1:1-20]

The first word of the book in the original Greek is Ἀποκάλυψις (Apokalupsis), or "Apocalypse". Most English versions of the Bible translate that as "Revelation", but it really means something more than that.

An *apocalypse* is a literary style in which a vision of God guiding history toward a final goal is given by a divine or supernatural being to a human recipient. Examples of apocalyptic literature from the Bible include the book of Daniel, which we heard in our Old Testament reading. Apocalyptic literature also exists outside the Bible in the texts of other faiths and traditions, and everywhere we find apocalyptic literature, we find the language of imagination. Apocalyptic literature is poetry. Revelation, for example, was not written by John to be some world almanac of future events. If we read it as if it's a movie script for the end of the world, then we make it do something that it's not meant to do. If

we read it as if it's some kind of decoding device that allows us to link events in the news with the end of the world, or figure out the satanic beast is code language for the United Nations, or that the antichrist is Barack Obama, or that the world will end in 2012, then we take the Word of God down a dangerous path. Scripture becomes something that we use to serve our own agendas, and suddenly authority rests no longer with God and God's Word, but with us and our limited notions of what's right and wrong with the world. We turn the Bible into a Rorschach ink blot test, reading more into the ink than we get out of it.

Revelation is not prediction. It is prophecy. There is a huge difference. Throughout the Bible God uses prophets not to predict future events, but to speak God's word. A prophet is one who says "Thus says the Lord", and it's clear from the beginning that Revelation is written in a similarly prophetic voice. John of Patmos receives a vision from God to be read aloud to others: *Blessed is the one who reads aloud the words of the prophecy, and blessed are those who hear and who keep what is written in it; for the time is near.* The "time" that "is near" is the time during which followers of Christ will meet the challenges, horrors, tragedies, and evils of the

world, and actually have to put the Word of God into practice.

Revelation is very much about the Christian life here and now, for all Christians, in all times and places. John's message is God's word to us.

There are, of course, plenty of examples out there of what it looks like when you take the poetic language of Revelation too literally, as if it is an almanac or movie script with fixed dates on the calendar or some kind of secret decoder ring for the end times. We've all seen images of the four horsemen of the apocalypse, or artistic depictions of the many calamities described in the book of Revelation. They are unquestionably frightening, and most are just downright bizarre to look at. Things get really crazy really quickly when we take every word of Revelation literally.

You see, Revelation is poetry, and if you take poetry too literally then you end up in some weird places. In one of Carl Sandberg's most famous poems, he says that "the fog comes on little cat feet. It sits looking over harbor and city on silent haunches, and then moves on." If we take images like this too literally, then we find ourselves thinking that there are actual cat feet and cat haunches in the fog bank. The purpose of poetry is not

to explain things literally, but to present a truth in more descriptive and effective way. Can you imagine if "America the Beautiful", for instance, spoke only of tall, brownish grass and really high mountains? There's something about singing of "amber waves of grain" and "purple mountain majesties", that evokes images of truth and beauty in our minds. Poetry does something that no other language can do. It doesn't merely explain things - it immerses us in things.¹ It helps us experience the world, not explain it. It's the language of emotion and spirit, and what other language could be used to describe God's ultimate relationship with the world? When John of Patmos sat down and put his pen to paper to describe the vision God had given him, he did so using the language of poetry. No other language would do.

We are tempted, of course, to reduce God's relationship with the world to a list of doctrines or laws or tenets, but it's clear that our God in Jesus Christ is much more than that. Faith is much more than that. Every year our newly elected officers have to present faith statements, and they don't usually just recite a list of doctrines or beliefs. Instead, they talk about what God has done in

¹ Austin Farrer, *A Rebirth of Images*, p. 6.

their lives, and how God has guided them and shaped their faith through the years. What they say sounds a lot like poetry, and how else would you describe God's relationship to you? The poetry of faith says far more than any list of doctrines every could.

I'm reminded of a scene from *Dead Poets Society*, which is one of my all-time favorite movies, in which the students begin reading chapter one of their textbook on poetry by J. Evans Pritchard. It reads:

To fully understand poetry, we must first be fluent with its meter, rhyme and figures of speech, then ask two questions: 1) How artfully has the objective of the poem been rendered and 2) How important is that objective? Question 1 rates the poem's perfection; question 2 rates its importance. And once these questions have been answered, determining the poem's greatness becomes a relatively simple matter. If the poem's score for perfection is plotted on the horizontal of a graph and its importance is plotted on the vertical, then calculating the total area of the poem yields the measure of its greatness.

That, of course, misses the whole point of poetry! You can't plot it on a graph! The students' professor (played by Robin Williams) comes into class and instructs them to think of poetry in a different

way. In fact, he instructs them to rip out the pages of their textbook that suggest poetry can be plotted and graphed. "Rip out the entire page," he says. "And gentlemen, I'll tell you what: don't just tear out that page, tear out the entire introduction. I want it gone, history. Leave nothing of it. Rip it out. Rip! Be gone, J. Evans Pritchard, Ph.D. Rip, shred, tear... I want nothing left of it."

Thereafter he tries to teach those clean-cut, detail-oriented students that the words of poetry are *alive*. They speak about things like love and loss, victory and grief, things that can't be plotted on a graph. That is precisely what Revelation does for us and our faith.

We may read the previous sixty-five books of the Bible and think we can reduce God's Word into an easy-to-understand list. We can plot God's relationship with us on a graph, or a calendar, and our faith is made of nothing more than doctrines, tenets, and theological statements. But then Revelation comes along and speaks in a language that defies our plotting and graphing of God and faith. The last book of the Bible doesn't contain anything that isn't in the first sixty-five, but it does present the truth of scripture in new and imaginative language. Revelation rips out entire pages from our neat and tidy conceptions of God, and instead reminds us

that God's Word is *alive*. It speaks to us about things like love and loss, victory and grief, creation, redemption, and salvation. It is a witness to the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, which is more powerful and real than any list, graph, or calendar could show.

Consider how John's vision introduces Jesus Christ. When John says that "his head and hair were white as white wool, white as snow", he is poetically speaking of Jesus' purity and righteousness. When he says that "his eyes were like a flame of fire", he is poetically describing how Jesus looks upon us and the world. Fire is cleansing, purifying, able to burn away imperfections and flaws. When Jesus looks upon us, he sees our sinfulness, our imperfections, but in his eyes it is as if they've been burned away. When John says that "his feet were like burnished bronze, refined as in a furnace", he's speaking of the sure foundation upon which Christ stands, a sound and steadfast foundation that no other person or nation can claim. When John says that "his voice was like the sound of many waters", and "from his mouth came a sharp, two-edged sword", he is telling us that Jesus speaks with power and authority, that he pronounces both judgment and salvation to the

world. He holds the very stars in his hand, and his face shines like the sun. Everything on the earth and in the heavens is arranged around the risen Christ.

We might read those words literally, and perhaps expect Jesus to show up with flaming eyes, bronze feet, and a sword in his mouth. But that would miss the point. Revelation is telling us the truth about who Jesus Christ is in our lives here and now, using language that is poetic. It's language that resists our tendency to reduce faith into easy-to-manage sound bites of theology.

There's one final point that's worth noting on this first Sunday after Easter. When John introduces Jesus Christ to us in this first chapter of Revelation, the vision is one of Christ standing in the midst of seven lampstands, which are symbols for the seven real churches in Asia Minor at the time of Revelation's writing. Think about that for a moment. Jesus first appears not on some glorious mountaintop or splendid heavenly landscape surrounded by singing angels. He appears in the midst of the churches, right where we are. God has sent Jesus directly into the midst of the common and the flawed, the imperfect congregations of Jesus' followers. If that's where the risen Christ appears, then he is here, with us, right now.

Therein lies the hope of the world, not just that Jesus will someday come to judge us or rescue us, but that the risen Christ is with us right where we live - in our love and loss, victory and sorrow, creation, redemption, and salvation.

Thanks be to God. Amen.