

Sermon by Rev. Dr. Michael J. Hoyt  
Glenshaw Presbyterian Church  
Reign of Christ  
November 22, 2009

**The Eyes, the Voice, the Hand**

Revelation 1:9-20; John 18:33-37

Well, today we wrap things up and get ready to start all over again.  
We don't even get a vacation season in between!

Today is the last Sunday of the Christian calendar,  
and every year on this day we are doing two things together:  
giving thanks for the blessings of our lives,  
since it is always the Sunday before Thanksgiving;  
and celebrating the Reign of Christ the King,  
who is ascended to rule over all,  
and is coming again to judge the living and the dead.

It is appropriate that this celebration of the Reign of Christ  
should happen as the very last liturgical event of the year,  
since we've been telling the story of Christ throughout the year,  
and our common conviction is that at the end of time,  
the risen Christ will reign.

The God made known in Jesus Christ, the only true God,  
will have the last and eternal Word.

And it is appropriate that this proclamation  
should lead us into a week of Thanksgiving,  
culminating with a great day of feasting on Thursday.

Then after the feast, we pause, digest,  
perhaps take a nap and sleep off the tryptophan,  
then awaken to find that we have once again turned,  
and emerged into the starlight,  
into the very birth of light,  
into the twinkle of the very first spark of hope  
that appears in the darkness,  
as the coming of the Christ child is foretold  
by the prophets – the Season of Advent begins.

But on this last Sunday, we glorify the exalted Christ,  
who is risen to rule over all,  
and who is coming again to judge the living and the dead.

\* \* \* \* \*

I have been enjoying our study of Revelation these past weeks,  
and I must admit, enjoying it much more than I thought I would.  
Today we are presented with one of the most powerful images  
on the stage of John's apocalypse:  
his Vision of the Risen and Reigning Christ in Heaven.

Now, I want us to consider together what this vision means for us today,  
but to do that we must begin with what it meant for John,  
and for the first recipients of his apocalypse.

The mistake made by too many modern readers of Revelation  
is that they try to read it as if John were writing it directly to us –  
as if the letter opens,  
"John, to the churches that are in America  
at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century,  
so that you can interpret the events of your time."

It doesn't say that;  
instead, the great voice that commands John to write down his vision,  
says *"Write in a book what you see and send it to the seven churches,  
to Ephesus, to Smyrna, to Pergamum, to Thyatira, to Sardis,  
to Philadelphia, and to Laodicea.*  
It was the churches of Asia Minor in the first century  
for whom this vision was originally written  
and intended to edify.

The Christians of the churches of Asia Minor  
lived in a precarious situation that called for difficult choices.  
Under the rule of the Roman Empire,  
they were expected to worship the Roman gods,  
including Caesar himself.  
Christian worship was strictly against the law.  
In fact, if you were turned into the local Roman authorities  
for being a Christian,  
you would have been given a simple option:

Either curse Christ  
and profess allegiance to the Roman emperor  
and the Roman gods,  
or be executed – perhaps crucified  
or thrown to lions to be devoured.

But, here's the catch:  
the Romans were not obsessed with killing Christians.

They operated under a sort of “don’t ask, don’t tell” policy.  
They didn’t seek out the Christians to kill them,  
    rooting them out of their homes with a thirst for blood.  
They just didn’t want the Christians to disrupt the *Pax Romana*,  
    that is, the Peace of Rome.

So, the primary way for Christians to get themselves into trouble  
    was to be *noticed* as Christians by their Roman neighbors  
    and turned in to the authorities.

In other words,  
    if they followed Christ’s command to go and make disciples,  
    if they bore witness to Christ in any sort of public way,  
        which was, of course, their calling as Christians,  
    they put their lives in jeopardy.

So when John sent his vision to the churches of Asia Minor,  
    and address a particular letter to each of the seven churches,  
    there were three situations, three behaviors he was addressing:

- 1) There were the Christians who were witnessing openly to Christ,  
    and were therefore suffering persecution,  
    being arrested, tried, and imprisoned.
- 2) There were other Christians who worshiped Christ in secret,  
    then worshiped the Roman god’s and Caesar in public,  
    to keep themselves out of trouble.
- 3) Then there were wealthy Christians,  
    who kept their Christianity hidden  
    in order to protect their wealth and status in the Empire,  
    not to mention their lives.

So while some Christians were dying for their faith,  
    others were standing quietly by and watching it happen,  
    while still enjoying their status in the Empire  
    that was killing their brothers and sisters in Christ.

Into this context,  
    John’s wild, cataclysmic images make more sense.  
John’s vision was an all-out effort to stir up an emotional response  
    strong enough to sustain the faith of Christians facing persecution,  
    and to arouse the faith of those Christians  
    who had grown complacent as they enjoyed the comfort  
    of anonymity.

John, himself, has probably been banished to the Island of Patmos,  
    because of his faithful witness to Christ.

He identifies himself as

*"your brother who share with you in Jesus the persecution  
and the kingdom and the patient endurance...  
...because of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus..."*

So, as we consider this vision of the heavenly Christ,  
we might ask ourselves,

which of those early Christians do we most identify with?  
Has your witness to Christ, or your Christian convictions, put you at risk?  
OR are their ways that you compromise your Christian faith  
by accommodating to the norms of our culture,  
bowing to and even loving the gods of power and wealth?  
OR have you opted for a "don't ask, don't tell" approach to your faith  
so as not to jeopardize your situation  
or put your comfort or security at risk?

\* \* \* \* \*

John's first experience in the vision is one of *hearing*.

Christ is identified as a Great Voice,  
just like the other John, the Gospel-writer,  
identified Jesus as the Word.

The voice, or great voice, as regal and powerful as a trumpet.

The kind of voice I wish I had:

take Jonathan's strong preaching voice,  
add a little Pavarotti, a little Bono, a little Martin Luther King, Jr.,  
then add the volume and resonance of our choir's performance  
at the Concert a few weeks ago...  
all in a single voice.

Yet the quality of this voice

has as much to do with the truth it speaks,  
as with the physical sound of it.

Such razor sharp truth comes from the mouth that speaks with this voice,  
John likens it to a sharp, two-edged sword.

Now, here's where we have to appreciate John's use of metaphor

(or, technically, of simile, with the repeat use of "like" and "as").

He is clearly trying to describe a vision

that is beyond the ability of human language to describe.

He is doing the best he can with mere human words;

but (as we have been stressing with our youth in LOGOS)

**our words about God are not God,**

they are just the best we can do in articulating the ineffable.

The words that this One like a Son of Man speaks,  
are so true, so powerful, so exacting,  
they are like a sharp, two-edged sword.  
A sword that cuts both ways, and shows no partiality.  
The truth of the Sovereign Christ is ***the truth***, regardless who hears it.  
It slices neatly through  
the phony authority of human kings,  
and the flimsy excuses of apathetic Christians.  
It will bring judgment upon  
the wickedness of those who persecute the Christians  
as well as the complacency of those Christians who seek  
to protect their own interests  
and preserve their own comfort.

And this voice that challenges and overcomes the powerful of the earth  
is not unfamiliar – we have heard it before;  
we have heard it today, in fact, as the voice spoke calmly to Pilate:  
*My kingdom is not from this world.  
If my kingdom were from this world,  
my followers would be fighting to keep me from being handed over...  
for this I came into the world,  
to testify to the truth.  
Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to...[what?]  
....my voice.*

Pilate asks him, *What is truth?*

Here in John's vision we find out not just *what* truth is,  
but *who* truth is.  
It is Jesus Christ the Sovereign Ruler of Heaven and Earth,  
who suffered under Pontius Pilate,  
was crucified, dead, and buried,  
and who is now risen to the throne of heaven.

Now his eyes are blazing like a flame of fire,  
eyes that see all and reveal all.  
In those days, the eyes were considered the lamp of the body.  
By looking into a person's eyes  
you could see what was inside: light or darkness.  
And inside the eyes of this brilliant One,  
is a blazing fire of truth,  
and with his eyes he sees everything, and knows everything,  
he casts a searchlight into the soul of every human being.

Nothing is hidden – so we might as well all be honest.  
There is no more pretense, no more double-speak,  
no more “don’t ask, don’t tell” religion  
when we are seen by the eyes of the King.  
Then we shall know fully, even as we are fully known.

It is not easy for us even to look another human in the eyes for very long.  
It is only with those with whom we are the most intimate  
that we can sustain eye contact without being uncomfortable,  
and even that has its limits.  
But these eyes hold us in their power,  
and search deeply into our souls – and we cannot look away.  
Be prepared, Christian people, for that much intimacy:  
we may not have to look now, but we will have to look on that day,  
at everything about us, everything we have done, or not done,  
or said, or not said, or thought, or not thought;  
The Exalted Christ will sustain his clear and intense gaze on us  
until everything in us will be seen.

If this doesn’t make you want to fall down like a dead man,  
you’re not paying close enough attention.  
And that is exactly what John does when he sees the Exalted Christ:  
*When I saw him, I fell at his feet as though dead.*  
And this is John who has been so faithful in his witness  
that he has been banished to the Island of Patmos.

And this is where the hand comes in.

The Great Voice and the Fiery Eyes have left us with no hope of pretense;  
we are humbled, groveling on the ground before such  
truth, and beauty, and power.  
We might expect the hand of this Powerful One on the Throne,  
the hand that holds the seven stars,  
to strike the final blow, to come crashing down on our lives  
bringing a righteous justice to us for all the ways we have failed  
the Holy Sovereign of All Worlds.  
But this hand does not fall upon John in judgment.  
*He placed his right hand on me, John recalls,  
and said, “Do not be afraid.”*  
The hand that falls, falls lightly, with comfort.  
And the Great Voice speaks with the greatest reassurance:  
*Do not be afraid;  
I am the first and the last, and the living one.  
I was dead, and behold, I am alive forever and ever.*

It is the Jesus of love, who loved us so dearly as to give his life for us.  
This is the Christ who reigns Supreme: the same Jesus who loves absolutely.

And in the touch of our Sovereign's hand  
we realize that the perfect purpose of the One who speaks truth,  
and the deep desire of the One who knows us completely,  
is that by the truth we might be healed and set free.

And the touch of the right hand of the Exalted One  
empowers John to rise and to respond in faith,  
as a faithful witness to the Reign of Christ.

When the Exalted Christ looks at your life, what do you see?  
When the Great Voice speaks your name, what do you hear?  
When the Right Hand of God touches your head,  
what healing does God bring?