

First Presbyterian Church
Bozeman, Montana
Jody McDevitt, co-pastor

April 18, 2010
Third Sunday of Easter
Revelation 5:11-14

Full Disclosure

If you were taking a test on the Bible and came upon this statement, how do you think you'd respond, true or false?

"Everything in the Revelation can be found in the previous 65 books of the Bible."

Well, my first inclination is "False." Revelation has so many unusual images and so much mysterious language that it is unique among all the books of the Bible. (If you agree, raise your right hand.)

On the other hand, I long ago reached the conclusion that Revelation has just one basic message. And it's this, in 5 easy words: **In the end, God wins.** That's all it's trying to tell us. So maybe this statement is true. Maybe there is nothing new in Revelation.

On the other hand. . .

The statement is an opinion, of course, but it's an educated opinion. And since it was offered by none other than Eugene Peterson, the biblical scholar and translator of *The Message*, I for one have to take it seriously. Everything in Revelation can be found elsewhere in the Bible, he says. Revelation is rooted in Old Testament images and it proclaims the New Testament story. It's like a graphic novel, a comic book, an illustrated edition of the good news of Jesus Christ, telling us what the rest of the New Testament tells us in earthly prose. And in the end, God wins.

Revelation is an apocalypse. In current lingo, "apocalypse" often means disaster. But originally the word meant "unveiling" or "disclosure." Revelation is the pulling back of the curtain, the full disclosure of the truth about Jesus Christ, the one who was and is and is to be. Revelation shows us that he is the one who transcends time and place and the world as we know it. In the interest of "full disclosure," we are given the Revelation to help us see who Christ is for the world yesterday, today and tomorrow.

So when the curtain is drawn back in the fourth chapter, we see the heavenly throne room, splendid in majesty, where God sits on the throne in the center surrounded by 24 elders on 24 thrones. Lightning is flashing, thunder booming, seven torches are flaming, and a sea of glass is between us and the thrones. Creatures fly overhead and around the One seated on the throne, singing "Holy, holy, holy, you are worthy, Lord." The prophet Isaiah saw something like this, and so did Ezekiel. How else to describe the glory of God? This rich imagery does it as well as anything.

But there is a drama taking place in the heavenly throne room, a ceremony which further discloses the truth of the ages. The one on the throne, God, that is, holds a scroll, sealed with a perfect seven seals, and an angel asks "Who is worthy to open the scroll and break the seals?" And though it seems that no one could possibly be worthy, one steps forward. At first he is described as a Lion, but then he is called a Lamb. This Lamb has seven horns and seven eyes, but most astoundingly, has been slaughtered, killed. Yet the heavenly creatures sing to the Lamb, "You are worthy!" and so he steps forward to receive the scroll.

And this is where in our scripture reading we have entered the theater, turned on the tv, opened up the DVD—to the scene in which the Lamb who bears the marks of the slaughtered is being praised by myriads of heavenly beings, thousands upon thousands who sing his glory and announce him “worthy.” And they are joined by every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea, all creation singing, “Blessing and honor and glory and might, forever and ever! Oh, yes!”

In the end, God wins. Never forget that. In the end, God wins through the person of Jesus Christ, the Lamb who was sacrificed, who suffered and died and was buried. In the interest of full disclosure, the Revelation shows us that triumph is achieved through sacrifice, that worthiness is bought by suffering, that eternal life is realized through death. God wins by way of sacrificial love, not by warfare or accumulated wealth, or worldly glory. But in the end, God wins.

Darrell Johnson, who is a professor at Regent College in Vancouver, BC, has written a book about Revelation called *Discipleship on the Edge*. You may be wondering, what does Revelation have to do with discipleship? Discipleship is about how to live our lives in this world as followers of Jesus. His main thesis is that Revelation is not a book about the future, but rather about the present. When it was written, it was about the present, and nineteen centuries later, it is still about the present time. It predicts the future only in the sense that the future is already here. The kingdom of God is near, said Jesus. The kingdom of God is now. Revelation shows us what the rest of the Bible tells us—the reign of Jesus Christ began when he was raised to new life. In the end, God wins. But we already know that because Jesus Christ was raised from the dead! Two weeks ago we shouted “Alleluia! Christ is risen!” and pronounced sin and death to be cosmic losers. The message of Revelation is nothing more than the Easter message told in colorful imagery. The purpose of Revelation is not to be “a crystal ball, but a discipleship document.” As Johnson says, “It is given to us to enable us as Jesus’ disciples to keep the faith, to keep doing what he does under the crushing pressure to compromise.” (2004, *Regent College Publishing, Vancouver, B.C., p. 396*)

Full disclosure: even if we believe in the resurrection, it’s hard to live it. The world keeps breaking up the party. When John wrote the Revelation, it was the Roman emperor and his soldiers who threatened to crush the spirits of Jesus’ disciples, persecuting them into venerating the Emperor as Lord or face the consequences. Some chose to quit the church, some chose to go along and not make waves, some chose to adapt their beliefs to the prevailing culture. But even without the threat of persecution, the world mocks the Easter story. Headlines tell us that wars are still being perpetrated because nations and their leaders are greedy or power-hungry. Children die needlessly because we can’t seem to figure out how to make food and clean water and health care available to all. Teenagers in Montana continue to lead the nation in per capita death by suicide, and we’re way up there in the wrong column of the statistics on drug and alcohol abuse. Families hide their problems behind a wall of shame. The world we live in makes it hard to live believing that Jesus is Lord. Because almost everywhere you look, it seems like evil and sin and death are winning.

This is a world, and we are a people, who need the vision of Revelation to keep us going. Thank God for the vision of the Lamb who was slaughtered, but who now is in the heavenly throne room with God. Not eventually, or sometime in the future, but now. For

this vision shows us that our Easter proclamation is true. As the song says, goodness is stronger than evil, love is stronger than hate, light is stronger than darkness, and life is stronger than death. That song was sung by South African Christians through the darkest waning days of apartheid. I am sure they still sing it today, to remind themselves in today's struggles that they have seen resurrection, and lived it. In the same way, we sing songs of Easter gladness even when we know the world is full of evil, even when we are living through personal hells of our own. We sing not because we are ostriches with our heads in the sand or pie in the sky Christians who have our heads in the clouds but because we have seen the power of Christ's dying love triumphing over its enemies and we trust that in the end, God wins.

Time collapses in Revelation, and in the heavenly world it reveals. So I believe that in that "end," when we meet Christ face to face, we will find that we've met before. Scripture says "now we see in a glass dimly; then we shall see face to face." We meet Christ in the face of those who are suffering, for he suffered. We meet Christ in the face of those who are poor, for he became poor for our sake. We meet Christ in the face of those who triumph over the forces which try to drag us all down and make us give up our faith, those who live resurrection lives despite crosses and burdens. We meet Christ in the face of those who love, and those whom we love. We meet Christ, and become Christ to one another, here and now. That's how God wins. When love trumps hate.

We need the vision of the heavenly throne room because it shows us how to worship the One who rules over all. And now we're back to thinking about Revelation as a discipleship manual. Disciples of Jesus Christ make it their habit to worship God alone, at least weekly, in the company of other disciples. So we sing "Holy, holy, holy!" just as the heavenly company sings. We sing "Worthy is the Lamb," and (choir) not just when we sing Handel's *Messiah*. Every time we praise Jesus, and thank him for his giving his life for our life, we are proclaiming our confidence in the resurrection. And by doing it together, we are encouraging one another to keep the faith, to live in hope, to trust that God's promise is sure. Half-hearted singing, and half-hearted living, reveal half-hearted faith. If that's where you are, look at the heavenly chorus, and hear their whole-hearted song. I hope you, like me, long to join that chorus now.

Because we are invited, now. The whole Bible gives witness that God is calling for our faith and life now. All 66 books proclaim one message. Do you remember what it is?

In the end, God wins. Christ is risen! He is risen indeed.

Now to the One who by the power at work in us is able to do far more abundantly than all we ask or think, to God be the glory in the church universal and in Christ Jesus, now and forever. Amen!