

Sitting in the Gap Study Guide – November 25, 2018

Revelation 1:4b-8

(Click on scripture above to link directly to each passage in the *NRSV* on biblegateway.com.)

Suggested Study / Prep

1. Read the passage(s) in several different translations and/or paraphrases (e.g. *NRSV* and *The Message*)
2. Read the provided commentary(s) below
3. Visit and explore some of the additional resources links (and/or explore your own commentaries, resources, etc)
4. Reflect on the provided questions
5. Generate your own questions and “wonderings”

Commentary on Revelation 1:4b-8

(From *Homiletics*; “The Unchanging Christ”, November 22 2009)

As the liturgical year draws to an end in November, Christ the King/Reign of Christ Sunday occurs in the middle of three successive Sundays wherein all except one of the New Testament readings point our attention to the second coming. On the 33rd Sunday in Ordinary Time (November 15), the passage from Hebrews closes by referring to the Day of the Lord, and the gospel is Mark’s “Little Apocalypse.” The First Sunday of Advent (November 29), which traditionally focuses on the advent of Jesus’ future return, features Luke’s “Little Apocalypse,” along with a lesson from 1 Thessalonians that concludes by anticipating “the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints.” On Christ the King/Reign of Christ Sunday, the lection from John is the account of Jesus’ trial before Pilate. But Revelation 1:4b-8 firmly directs us to a full-bore consideration of the Apocalypse.

Too often, readers approach Revelation with preconceived notions that distract them from understanding the book on its own terms. The preacher will most likely want to address this to some degree. Conclusively correcting the situation in one sermon is probably not the best homiletical move. But some cautions and clarifications are in order about Revelation in particular and about Christian apocalyptic literature in general.

First, remember and repeat like a mantra the following advice from Raymond E. Brown: “The author of Revelation did not know how or when the world will end, and neither does anyone else” (*An Introduction to the New Testament*, 810). Second, symbolism throughout Revelation, especially describing agents of evil, specifically applies to troubles and upheaval particular to the time when the book was written, namely, in the middle to late first century A.D., not any century since. Third, in common with Christian apocalyptic literature as a genre, Revelation attests to the reality that while a tragic cluelessness kept humankind from fully recognizing Jesus’ authority and might the first time around, there will be no mistaking his authority and might the second time around. Finally, people who already recognize Jesus’ authority and might are called and strengthened by the Spirit of the risen Christ to persevere in continuing his work until he returns in glory.

As part of the introduction to Revelation, 1:4b-8 sets the tone for the rest of the book by lifting up the identity and activity of Jesus Christ. It does this through a series of triplets, which provide a rhythm that underscores the meaning of the message and the conviction with which it is conveyed. The first two triplets in verses 4b-5a describe Christ as the one who is (1), was (2) and is to come (3). Christ is also the faithful witness (1), firstborn of the dead (2) and ruler of the kings of the earth (3).

A third set of triplets in verses 5b-6a delineates what Christ has done for and with the faithful. He loves them (1), frees them from their sins (2) and makes them a kingdom of priests serving God (3). In contrast to this, a fourth set of triplets in verse 7 depicts those who fear the impending judgment that accompanies Christ's return — when he comes with the clouds (1), everyone will see him, including his enemies (2) and all earthly tribes will wail (3). The final triplet in verse 8 concludes the passage with a forceful acknowledgement of the eternal presence and power of the fullness of God — Alpha and Omega (1), who is/was/is to come (2) Almighty (3) — all of which further authenticate the identity and activity of Christ described in the preceding verses of the passage.

The preacher may want to attend to several other exegetical considerations, starting with reflecting on how “who is and who was and who is to come” compares with “I AM WHO I AM” (Exodus 3:14). Then in verse 5, “firstborn of the dead” echoes 1 Corinthians 15:20 and Colossians 1:18. In verse 6, being made into a kingdom of priests echoes Exodus 19:6 as well as 1 Peter 1:2, 19; and 2:9. There is also a textual variant in verse 5 where “freed us from our sins” could also read “washed us from our sins.” Perhaps most compelling is imagery in verse 7 that corresponds to “one like a human being coming with the clouds of heaven” in Daniel 7:13, which is reinforced by the Alpha and Omega symbolism in verse 8 (also see Revelation 1:17; 21:6; 22:13).

It's hard for many people to get past the terrifying dimensions of Revelation. Ultimately, however, Revelation bears witness to profound hope, even in — perhaps especially in — life's most disruptive and disturbing experiences. This hope is rooted in Christ's presence throughout all history, the redemptive authority and might of which has already been proven to be trustworthy. It will be fully revealed in the future with a power more trustworthy still. Such hope isn't pie in the future sky. It's the source of that strength that forms and transforms our lives, giving us the spiritual wherewithal to persevere with “patient endurance” (v. 9) right now, no matter what.

Additional Resources

- [The Text this Week](#) – a huge archive of commentaries, blogs, sermons, etc. Note – this site collects resources related to ALL of the lectionary texts for a given week...not all will relate to the passage(s) being studied, but many will. You will have to sift!
- Check out other commentaries available for these texts (and others!) at [WorkingPreacher.org](#).

Reflection Questions on Revelation 1:4b-8:

- 1.** What is your story / history with the book of Revelation in general? With eschatology / a theology of the second coming / the end of history)? How does your own experience and/or back story with the book and/or the genre (or lack thereof) influence your reading of texts such as this one? Do you hear it as good news of great joy and hope? The stuff of Hollywood B movies? The terrifying and unsettling promise of coming destruction?
- 2.** How does the “high” Christology of Revelation, as evidenced in this passage, resonate with you? Do you find the cosmic Christ portrayed here to be – awesome? inspiring? intimidating? unrealistic? metaphorical? How do you understand the portrayal of Christ in Revelation in relation to that of the gospels?
- 3.** On this Sunday – the last of the liturgical year – this text lifts up the Christ who is the “Alpha and the Omega,” the one “who is and who was and who is to come.” How can we make sense of the upcoming Christmas story of incarnation with this view of the timeless and transcendent Christ? How does we hold this in concert with the scandal of particularity (the coming of Christ in a particular body at a particular time in a particular place)?

What questions do you have?

What do you “wonder” about when reading these passages?