

# **Trinity United Methodist Church**

**October 25, 2020**

**“Revelation, Part 1”**

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## **Scripture: Revelation 1:1-8 (NIV)**

**1** The revelation from Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show his servants what must soon take place. He made it known by sending his angel to his servant John, **2** who testifies to everything he saw—that is, the word of God and the testimony of Jesus Christ. **3** Blessed is the one who reads aloud the words of this prophecy, and blessed are those who hear it and take to heart what is written in it, because the time is near.

**4** John, To the seven churches in the province of Asia:

Grace and peace to you from him who is, and who was, and who is to come, and from the seven spirits before his throne, **5** and from Jesus Christ, who is the faithful witness, the firstborn from the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth.

To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood, **6** and has made us to be a kingdom and priests to serve his God and Father—to him be glory and power for ever and ever! Amen.

**7** “Look, he is coming with the clouds,” and “every eye will see him, even those who pierced him”; and all peoples on earth “will mourn because of him.” So shall it be! Amen.

**8** “I am the Alpha and the Omega,” says the Lord God, “who is, and who was, and who is to come, the Almighty.”

## **Sermon**

Would you pray with me? Open our ears and our hearts, oh Lord. Let us hear what we need to hear and show us what we need to do to become more faithful disciples of our Lord Jesus Christ. In His name we pray, amen.

I will always remember a particular retreat in high school in our old conference assembly center in Blackstone, Virginia. God lived there, if you never had an opportunity to go there. It's where I experienced my call to ministry and spiritual encounters too

numerous to count. But at this particular retreat during my high school years, the speaker that we had gotten for that weekend, we quickly learned was definitely not Methodist. Part of what he did was, he added drama to his presentations and such, and that was really the draw for him, really engaging, really wonderful stuff. But then he broke from the *method* of our Methodist youth retreat. We usually did the altar call on Saturday night after the band played and so forth. And this guy, right after lunch, came up to us who were leading the weekend and said, “I need an easel and I need a Sharpie and I need this and that and so forth and so on.” And in the afternoon session he launched into the book of Revelation.

He pointed out, lifting all these verses how the book of Revelation says that all these natural disasters like earthquakes and famines and so forth are going to happen with more frequency when it’s the end of time, etc., and then he started quoting all these statistics that were showing how all these natural disasters were happening with more and more frequency. And I forgot mostly everything else he said, but he ended with the age-old, “The world could end in the next hour. Do you know where you would end up, in heaven or in hell?” And he had kids who were trembling and crying in fear.

Later I had a mentor pastor share that what brings us to faith keeps us in faith. If fear is what a church takes to get people into faith, then what does a church have to do to keep people in faith? Keep scaring them, right? “The world could end...it didn’t end last Sunday afternoon; it could end *this* Sunday afternoon! So do you know where you’re going?”

But if we *love* people into faith, what does a church have to continue doing to keep people in faith? Loving people, right? Doesn’t that seem more like the way of Jesus? But I digress.

So that was this guy’s take on Revelation. During that weekend, any adults who weren’t helping out with a youth small group, they had their own small group, and my parents were in that small group. Our district superintendent happened to be there to support the youth of the district that weekend, and he ripped into this guy. The guy wasn’t even in the room, but Tony lost it. Tony said, “We Methodists, we preach the *Gospels*. We don’t mess with Revelation.”

And I tell you this story because ever since that point in time, that has typically been what I’ve found to be our response to the book of Revelation, no matter what church I’m a part of or people I talk with, or whatever the case might be. They’re either so fascinated by the book of Revelation and that classic “turn-or-burn” theology, or we just stay way away from it because there is some crazy and confusing stuff in the book of Revelation.

So, on the one hand, this seems like a great time to preach from the book of Revelation. If that guy back in high school, some 20 years ago, thought that the world was coming to an end then, I would *love* to hear what that guy has to say about 2020. But then when you add all the talk of potential civil war in our country based on how the presidential election might or might not go, on top of the narrative of pandemic and the coming economic collapse, which we're seeing fractures of here and there, and racial tension and ideologies that continue to seek to divide, not just unique to our own country but throughout the world. Even we Methodists might be wondering, "Hmm, is this the end of the world?"

So the answer to that question is the title of this sermon series. (Plays excerpt from R.E.M., *It's The End of the World As We Know It*). And the tagline is, "*and I feel fine.*" You know what? Yeah. I honestly do believe it's the end of the world as we know it. Do I think it's the end of the world? No. But the world moving on from 2020 is going to be different all the way around. This is this generation's 911 or JFK assassination, or whatever the case might be. Our world is fundamentally changing even faster than it has been changing before. It's a scary thing. But, it's the end of the world as we know it, and I, for one, *do* feel fine.

The reason for that is because my faith is in Jesus Christ alone. Not in whoever might or might not occupy the White House. Not in whoever might or might not control Congress, might or might not be on the Supreme Court. But my faith is in Jesus Christ, in Him alone.

So that's it. That's the point of Revelation. No....

That's why I love the book of Revelation. I've taught through it. Some of y'all have been in Bible Study with me through it. And pay attention to T-Mail as it comes out this week and over the coming weeks. I'm going to be sharing more reading material, links and so forth. Because there's no way I can teach this in a sermon like a Bible study to go in deep, with "this is what this means and that means," and so forth. There's not enough time, so I'm going to try to sum up.

So the first lesson for the book of Revelation might be the most important. *There is no "s" on the end of the title of this book.* **There is no "s" on the end of the title of this book.** I don't know why, but that drives me *nuts!* And one of the reasons I think this bothers me so much is because it points to how people misinterpret the book of Revelation so freely.

Back in 2008, during this time period of the Presidential election of 2008, there was a church member in the church I was serving who continued to send out e-mail forwards to our church e-mail list about how "the book of *Revelation* **s** says that the Antichrist is going to be a black male in his mid-40s who hails from Chicago." *NO!* And I

find that so many people who insist on calling it *Revelation* **s** also accompany that with some pretty whack theology. It is ***the revelation***. Read it carefully in verse 1. ***The revelation*** from Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show his servants what must soon take place.

Yes, what must soon take place. But the book of Revelation is *not* just about the end of the world. True Biblical prophecy interprets the present time, in light of God's ways, far more than actually foretelling what is going to happen in the future. Classic Old Testament prophets, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Micah, Hosea, all of those—they all have the same basic message. They look at what's going on in Israel, around them, and they say, "Hey y'all, you're not doing things according to God's way. You're not living according to how God calls us to live. And if you continue down this path, it will not end up good for you."

And then when the people ignore that, things like the Babylonian exile happened, when everybody got shipped off to Babylon, and then the prophets changed their tune a little bit, like Jeremiah, Isaiah also. And they basically say, "See? We told you so! But, God still loves you and God still wants you to return to His ways."

And so true Biblical prophecy—in a way, reading Revelation in a way that tells the future, but to help us live more fruitfully in the present. I'm sure you might have heard the interpretations of Revelation that with all these mythical beasts that we read about and imagery and so forth, that this represents Russia and this represents Iran and this represents Osama bin Laden and this represents Obama and this represents Reagan, and whatever the case might be. Well, maybe. But the bottom line is that Revelation's message is that, no matter who the players are in all this world drama, in the end it's God who wins. And if you're on God's side through Jesus, you're going to win, too. Bottom line. No matter who is at play.

So it's a way of foretelling the future so that we can live more fruitfully in the present to make sure that, whether the world ends this afternoon before we can get home for lunch, or whether the world ends thousands of years from now—whenever it does, we're on God's side, today. And we can live more fruitfully in the present.

And another misconception of Revelation follows on that. Many people interpret Revelation as a warning to the rest of the world. The sense is that we in the church have got the right interpretation, whatever that interpretation might be. And "all you people around better get with the program. Get on the boat before the boat leaves. Turn-or-burn. Check yourself before you wreck yourself." But the thing of it is, that "check yourself before you wreck yourself?" It's not to the rest of the world. Read chapter 1 more closely. John writes to the seven churches in the province of Asia. That would be Asia Minor, which is modern-day Turkey. Who is he writing to? The church.

Now, Revelation is full of all kinds of numbers and symbols and so on and so forth. It's going to be way more than we can delve into, again, in a sermon. But, seven is a pretty important Biblical number. And those of you who have been in Bible study with me, what does seven mean? *Perfect. Completion.* Right? How long did creation take to be completed? Seven days. That's where we get that from. Perfect completion in seven days.

Seven churches. So yes, he names the seven churches. But we can also read this as addressed to churches all throughout that time period. Not just that time period, but if it's the complete church, it's the church through all time and space. It's the church even today. It's *us, church.*

And so we have this letter from Jesus through his servant, John, to us, the church. Imagine that. Imagine if we were to go out here to the office door entrance and check our church mailbox and we found there an actual letter from Jesus. How awesome would that be? Right? Imagine if you went home and checked your mailbox or you checked your e-mail, and, "You've got mail...from Jesus!" Right? How awesome would that be to hear directly from Jesus? But what would Jesus say to you? What would Jesus say to us?

Let's see what he says to these churches. There are a number of themes that we can lift out, because going through seven of these, again, let me sum up. The first is that every one of these seven letters begins with the description of Jesus as all-powerful, the first and the last, the Almighty, the one who holds the seven stars among the seven lampstands and so forth. These fantastic, cosmic word pictures of Jesus as all-powerful. And yet, he's concerned about what's going on in his people's lives.

And that's the first theme that we see there, is that every letter says, "I know." "I, Jesus, know what's going on in your lives." And to the persecuted church, to whom this was originally written, Christians in the first century, before it became the official religion of the Roman Empire and so forth and so on—when you're undergoing persecution, this is a good thing, that Jesus knows what you're going through. Imagine if somebody was holding a gun to your head—or let me take it a step further—a gun to your child's head, and said, "Renounce your faith in Jesus, or your child dies." Friends, I'm not exaggerating. We have brothers and sisters in Christ who are going through that in this world even still today. Certainly it would be a comfort to know that Jesus knows, that Jesus has your child in his hands, like the song says.

So to the persecuted church, that's a good thing that Jesus knows what's going on. When we're just going through a rough patch, right, it's comforting to know Jesus knows what's going on. If we're so deep in a hole emotionally or spiritually and we can't

figure out how to get out, to know that Jesus knows what's going on with us? That's comforting.

But what about when we get comfortable? When we get complacent in our lives of faith or as a church? We might, "Oh, I can do that this week. I can just repent and ask forgiveness when I go to church on Sunday," or whatever the case might be. To know that Jesus knows what's going on in *our* lives right now? Ooh. Maybe we might choose to do some things differently. Think about your own life, the life of our church. The fact that Jesus knows what's going on. Is that a comforting thing, or is that a challenging thing?

Jesus knows their hard work, their faithfulness, their purity in the face of persecution, the slander that they're enduring. And here I want to point out the difference between real persecution and what we *think* is persecution today. I've preached about this before. I cannot say it enough. Until we have somebody who is holding a gun to our head or threatening us otherwise with loss of life or property or whatever the case might be because of our faith in Jesus Christ—we're not facing persecution, friends. We all still have the freedom this morning to choose whether to get ourselves up out of bed and come to church and to worship this morning in any church we wanted to. We Christians in America still have got it made now.

Have we Christians in America lost our position of *privilege* in America? Yes. Yes, we have. In communities where they say we can't put up "Merry Christmas" in the courthouse or public places any more because we actually acknowledge that there are Americans, just as American-blooded as you and I are, that are people of other faiths in those public civic spaces. That is a loss of *privilege* for us as Christians in America. That is *not* persecution when they tell us that we can't put "Merry Christmas" on a wall. I cannot say that enough.

But when we go through that loss of privilege, when we go through that real persecution, Jesus knows about it. And he says, "Hold on. Hold on. Hold fast. Endure." The last sermon in the series will be, "*But What About the Rapture?*" Because, friends-- I'll give you a preview of that sermon—there is nothing in the book of Revelation about, "*I'll fly away, oh glory.*" That's a great little tune. I love it, grew up singing it, still love it. But there's nothing about flying away in Revelation.

The theme throughout is, whatever happens, hold on to Jesus. Hold fast to Jesus. When you don't know what else to do, just cling to Jesus. Jesus knows what's going on. He knows what's in our lives. He encourages us to hang on.

And then in almost every letter there is a *but...* A *yet...* He says there are some in some of your churches who are holding on to false teaching, leading to the worship of

idols. I wonder what idols we might be found worshiping. Is it money? Is it pride? Privilege?

Especially in election cycles, one of the things that troubles me the most, and it comes from my love of the book of Revelation, is the way in which we drape the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ with the American flag. Yes, we can love our country. We can honor those who die for our country and put their lives on the line for us. We can be the most ardent patriots possible. But if we're followers of Jesus, the scripture is clear: We are citizens of heaven first and foremost. And this country also, as great as it may be still, will one day pass away, until all the kingdoms of this earth are the Kingdom of our Lord Jesus Christ. If we bathe the cross in the colors of red, white and blue, we're on dangerous ground of worshiping our country over our Lord. What idols might we be found worshiping?

To the church in Ephesus, he says: "You have forsaken the love you had at first. Repent and do the first things." He says, "You've got great doctrine. You even weed out people who worship these idols and so forth. But in your quest for purity, you've forgotten the main thing—to make disciples." And as I said at the beginning of the sermon, how might we best make disciples? Do we do it out of fear or out of love? Church, we forget how to love in our quest for whatever our other little agendas might be.

Making disciples begins with attending to our *own* discipleship. How are we doing at keeping the main thing, the main thing? Or do we let false gods like partisan politics and personal agendas and our preferences get in the way of our first love, Jesus?

(I told you I'd probably make everybody mad, at least by the end of the sermon series.)

To the church in Sardis, Jesus says, "You've got the reputation of being alive, but you're dead." Ooh! Jesus, come on! That's not the Jesus with the lamb draped over his shoulders and painted in pastel colors. That's not the Jesus with the children all gathered around him. *That's* the picture of Jesus we like. What's this confrontational Jesus? "You've got the reputation of being alive, but you're dead. Wake up! Strengthen what remains and is about to die." That can be hard to hear, but the question to ask ourselves is, where might we be fooling ourselves? Where might we have fallen asleep spiritually? Where do we need to wake up?

And finally in the last letter, to the church in Laodicea, boy, they *get it*, as in, they *get it* from Jesus. Jesus says, "You're neither cold nor hot. And how I wish you were one or the other! But because you are lukewarm, I am about to spit you out of my mouth." Come on, Jesus! That doesn't sound very loving, Jesus. He says, "You think you're rich, but really you're poor, blind, pitiful, and naked. You've gotten too concerned with the

worldly things.” He says, “Buy gold from Me, the treasure that will never rust, where moths will not destroy or thieves won’t break in and steal.” He says, “Those whom I love I rebuke and discipline, so repent.”

And here’s where we tie it all in together. This is one of the verses that is taken most out of context, I think, from the book of Revelation, at least in these chapters. Where Jesus says, “Behold, here I am. I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with that person, and they with me.” I can’t tell you how many times I’ve heard that in an evangelistic sermon, preached to convince those who don’t yet believe to come to faith in Jesus. “Jesus stands at the door and knocks, and all you have to do is open the door of your heart and let Him in as we sing, *Just As I Am*. The buses will wait.” Right?

But friends, who is this written to? The church. The *church* have been the ones to lock Jesus out. It’s easier to do than we might think.

A DS friend once told me of a church conference they were conducting. This church was small in number. They had a graveyard that was out by the road. They realized that a lot of the gravestones, many of them white marble, had gotten really dingy. So they told the DS at the charge conference when asked about their accomplishments for that year, “Oh, we had a work day. We went out and we washed the gravestones. Aren’t they pretty?” The DS said, “That’s great. What else have you done this year?” “Oh, well, we had this work day and we got so many people that came out together and fellowshiped together, and we cleaned up those gravestones. Don’t they look nice?” And the DS said, “How did you reach people for Jesus this year? How did you reach into your community?” “Well, you see, the community now is going to drive by our church and they’re going to see these pretty gravestones out there and they might want to come and be a part of our church because we cleaned up the gravestones.” The church too easily locks Jesus out.

In one of my favorite paintings—there’s so much great art that comes from the book of Revelation—it’s Jesus knocking at the door. But if you look closely in that painting, there’s something that’s missing on that door: the door handle from the outside. Jesus can’t open it. All he does is knock. We’re the ones who have to let him back in.

This year of 2020 has been a year of insane anxiety and fear and division. And hold on, buckle your seat belts, because it’s got the potential to absolutely explode week after next. So how are we to respond, as those who profess faith in Jesus Christ? We’ve got to open the door. We’ve got to let Him in. Because Jesus is the only antidote to all of these things that trouble us.

We're always caught in that Mary-and-Martha struggle, where Jesus visits with them and Martha is running all about the house, all about doing all the things that need to be done in preparation for dinner and otherwise, and Mary is just simply sitting at Jesus' feet. And Martha cries out, "Jesus, tell her to get up off her lazy bum and help me out here!" And Jesus commends Mary. He says, "there's only one thing you need, and Mary has chosen it: to be with me."

There's all kinds of scary stuff that's in the coming pages of Revelation. Confusing stuff. Stuff that might, indeed, actually happen in our lifetime in this world. Destruction the likes of which we have not seen ever, maybe. What's the answer to it all? To be with Jesus. As the psalmist says, "To be still and know that I am God."

There's one last point and common theme in these seven letters. They all end with this phrase: "Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches."

Friends, the Spirit is alive. Today the Spirit still speaks. We know that there is no perfect church, and as I've so often heard and said, if you find one, don't join it, because then it won't be perfect any more. But there's a little bit of all these things in every church, isn't there? There's a little bit of all these things in all of our lives, to one degree or another. So what is the Spirit saying to us, the church? What is the Spirit saying to you, to your family?

John was in the Spirit on the Lord's day; that's how he received this revelation. So to make sure that we are in the Spirit, we want to make sure that we are in prayer.

In a video I shared a couple of weeks ago through T-Mail and online, in our strategic planning process, we've been through activities where people put Post-It notes up on the wall and so forth and all these fantastic ideas. And a couple of us were dismayed that prayer was only mentioned specifically twice out of 100+ responses. And Chris Bennett, who is our facilitator through this, said, "Well, yeah. It's probably that the implication is that everyone *assumes*, 'Yeah, prayer, we do that. Prayer is important, of course. Right? We're Christians, we're church people. That's what we do.'" But friends, I can tell you for sure, for me, that every time I adopt that kind of attitude about prayer, what's the first thing that I forget to do? Pray.

We've got to be intentional about it. It dawned on me that our church mailing address is 201 Cedar Street. So I invite you to join me in setting an alarm on your device: On your phone, on your tablet, on your watch, whatever the case might be. Set an alarm on your old-school alarm clock if need be. Set a reminder to remind you at 2:01 p.m. every day (and of course, if you forgot and it's 2:30, pray then!)—and set aside that time to pray. Even just for a minute to start out. Pray for Trinity Church. Pray for those of us who call Trinity Church home. Pray for the Spirit to continue to speak to us

as we continue to discern what is next for us as a church, especially in these times in which we live.

And we've got to stay in the context of scripture reading, of journaling, of fasting; of these spiritual disciplines. Together, in these crazy, crazy times in which we live. Let's make sure that we're sticking close to Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith. That He who began a good work in us will be sure to complete it. And may we keep strong the faith that we have in Him until that day when every knee shall bow and every tongue confess that Jesus is Lord.

Thanks be to God. Amen.