

“Faith in the Midst of Chaos: 1) The Alpha and the Omega”

a sermon by

Dr. William P. Wood

First Presbyterian Church
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**Text: “I am the Alpha and the Omega,’ say the Lord God, who is and who was
and who is to come, the Almighty.” (Revelation 1:8)**

Bruce Metzger once observed that the entire Bible is like a library containing many types of books and each of these types of book appeals to different parts of our senses. For example, the Book of Psalms appears to our emotions: “Bless the Lord, O my soul, and all that is within me, bless his holy name.” (Psalm 103:1) There are other books of the Bible that contain the commandments of God (“Thou shall not kill; Thou shall not steal”). These books appeal to our will. Still other books, such as the book of Romans, appeal to our intellect. They help us to understand who God is and how God relates to our lives.

The book of Revelation is a book of the Bible that appeals to our imagination. Over the four Sundays of June, I am asking that you join me in looking again at a very important part of our Bible.

I.

There are several things that need to be said at the beginning of a series of sermons on the book of Revelation. The first is that this is not easy reading. The book of Revelation has occupied a rocky spot in the history of the church. It has not always been received in a friendly way. The Reformer Martin Luther despised this book and sought to have it removed from the Canon of the New Testament. John Calvin had serious reservations about this book. Calvin wrote a commentary on every book of the New Testament except the book of Revelation.

A second thing that needs to be said at the beginning is that the time frame for this series is brief. There are twenty-two chapters in this book and we will obviously not be able to cover all of them in a short period of time. Harry Emerson Fosdick once said to a group of preachers that

“sometimes it is better to wave at a mountain than try to excavate a mole hill,” so I hope you will give me the benefit of the doubt.

A third opening statement centers on the peculiar nature of the book of Revelation. It is generally referred to as “Apocalyptic Literature.” By that we mean a type of literature that is highly symbolic and that puts a great deal of emphasis on visions, dreams, numbers, animals, and other things that appeal to the imagination.

It is not the only time this type of literature appears in the Bible. It is found in Daniel, Ezekiel, and Zachariah as well as the Book of Acts and the Gospels of the New Testament.

In more recent times, the Book of Revelation has appeared in popular literature. Some years ago, Hal Lindsay wrote a book entitled *The Late Great Planet Earth*, in which he made the case that the book of Revelation predicts the ending of the world.

But the Book of Revelation has had an enormous impact on the culture of Western Civilization. From the woodcuts of Albrecht Durer to the Sistine Chapel of Michelangelo, from Dante’s *Inferno* to John Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, from Handel’s “Messiah” to Matthew Bridges’ hymn, “Crown Him With Many Crowns,” the Book of Revelation has had an enormous impact on the way the faith of the church has been depicted in the arts.

The question of the authorship of the Book of Revelation has never been conclusively resolved. On four occasions the author of this book identifies himself as John (Revelation 1:1, 4, 9; 22:8), a common name in the first century. Tradition has it that this John is the Apostle who is also the writer of the Gospel of John and that it was written from the Island of Patmos, not far from the city of Ephesus.

The Book of Revelation was composed and sent to seven churches located in the Roman province of Asia (Asia Minor). These seven churches were located in seven cities: Pergamum, Thyatira, Smyrna, Sardis, Philadelphia, Ephesus, and Laodicea.

Moreover, there is another important clue to understanding this often misunderstood book of the Bible. The Book of Revelation was written to a group of Christians that were beginning to experience the pangs of persecution by the Roman Empire. Although some scholars believe that the persecution that underlies this book was originated by the Emperor Nero (A.D. 54-68), it is more likely reflective of the reign of Domitian (A.D. 81-96), which places the writing of the Book of Revelation late in the first century.

II.

The passage from Scripture that I just read forms the beginning of this important book. The author gives his name as John and notes that what he is writing is an “Apocalypse” or a Revelation. He also makes a somewhat unusual request in that he asks his readers to read this book aloud. Moreover, he offers a “blessing” to all who do so.

John then addresses the seven churches in Asia Minor that are the recipients of this book. He greets them in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit and reminds that that the work of Christ has bestowed on all of us the “priesthood of all believers.”

There are two themes that recur in the Book of Revelation and we will return to them on a number of occasions. But I offer them to you as a way of understanding the driving force behind this important book in the Bible.

III.

The first is a word about God. The author of Revelation refers to God as the “Alpha” and the “Omega.” These are the first and last letters of the Greek alphabet. They are used as a way to underline that God is the one who not only created the world. God is the one who stands at the end of human history to redeem that history. God is the beginning and the end.

This week a friend of mine shared with me a quote from a B.B. Warfield, who taught theology at Princeton Seminary in the late 19th and early 20th century. When asked to sum up the essence of the Presbyterian or Reformed faith, Warfield pointed out three aspects of our faith that have been crucial to our identity. The first is our understanding of the majesty and power of God with the accompanying realization of our own sinfulness. But this understanding of God as holy and majestic is joined to a second profound aspect of our faith, that this God whom we worship and adore is also a God who receives sinners to himself and offers to them forgiveness. The third pillar of our faith is a profound sense that our lives are not accidental, but they are lived under the guidance and direction of a God who loves us, creates us, and sustains us in all that we do.

That is certainly what the writer of Revelation says to those churches in the midst of persecution. He reminds them that this God who is the “Alpha” and “Omega” is a God who will overcome all evil and who works in human history to bring good out of evil.

IV.

The second theme that appears all through the Book of Revelation is a call to be faithful in times of turmoil. For the churches of Asia Minor, beginning to experience the heavy hand of the Roman Empire, the writer of Revelation encourages them not to lose faith but to persevere, even in the midst of persecution.

Today, we find ourselves in the midst of a great deal of chaos: economic recession and uncertainty; jobs being lost; people uncertain of the future. The call to us is the same call to those churches of Asia Minor: to keep the faith and commit ourselves to a faithful witness to Jesus Christ.

One of the great servants of God in the early church was a man by the name of Polycarp, who served as the Bishop of Smyrna, one of these seven churches to whom this letter is addressed. Polycarp was likely a disciple of John, the author of this book. When Polycarp was 86 years old, he was martyred, burned at the stake. At the last moment before the bonfire that would end his life was lit, Polycarp was given the opportunity to curse Christ and to be saved from

death. He replied with the following words: “For eighty six years,” he said, “I have served him and he never did me any wrong. How can I blaspheme my King who saved me?”

Now, it is highly unlikely that any of us will be asked to make that kind of sacrifice. But we will be asked to make some sacrifices and when we are asked to give up something for Christ, we too should remember that we are called into service to the one who has never done us anything but good.

How can we not glorify him and enjoy him all the days of our lives?

Amen!