

“Faith in the Midst of Chaos: 3) When Government is the Problem”

a sermon by

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Text: “Here is a call for the endurance and faith of the saints.” (Revelation 13:10b)

One of the characteristics of Revelation is the use of what is called “apocalyptic” language, a highly symbolic type of language that uses visions, images, numbers, and beasts to convey its message. In chapter 13 we encounter one of the most famous visions in the book of Revelation. In this vision John sees a beast with seven heads and ten horns. In addition, the beast is a combination of a number of animals: a body like a leopard, feet like a bear, and a mouth like a lion.

Interpreters of the Book of Revelation are generally in agreement that the beast to which the writer of Revelation refers is a symbol for the Roman Empire. Rome had seven Caesars. One of them, Nero, had committed suicide, and he appears to be the one to whom the author refers as having a mortal wound. In the latter part of chapter 13 the author refers to the “mark of the beast,” which is the number 666. In the Greek language each letter of the alphabet was assigned a number. The name “Caesar Neron” has the numerical equivalent of 666.

Bruce Metzger, in his book *Breaking the Code*, makes the point that the book of Revelation was written in a code, much in the same fashion as codes are used in wartime to communicate messages that cannot be broken by the enemy.

In the case of the Book of Revelation, it was written at a time when the church was being persecuted by the Roman Empire. John, the writer of this book, uses this kind of symbolic language to write to the Christian community in Asia Minor. By using language and symbols that were known to his audience he is able to communicate his message without interference from the Roman Empire.

This passage speaks to us of some very important matters that affect our relationship between the church and the state in which the church lives.

I.

For one thing, this passage introduces an important principle. The church, from time to time, finds itself in opposition to the state. In Romans 13 the situation was quite different. The Apostle Paul, in addressing the church in Rome, writes, "Let every person be subject to the governing authorities; for there is no authority except from God, and those authorities that exist have been instituted by God." (Romans 13:1) This passage from Romans represents a much earlier period in the first century. In this case Paul is seeking the approval of the Roman Empire.

By the time of the writing of Revelation the situation had change dramatically. The Emperor Nero was a violent man who became disenchanted with Christianity and began to persecute the early church. Nero was followed by Domitian who also instituted systematic persecutions of the early Christian community.

One of the distinctive aspects of the Presbyterian or Reformed church has been the notion that loyalty to God sometimes requires opposition to a particular government. During the Revolutionary War in this country, most of the Presbyterian clergy sided with the revolt against Britain. During the ascendancy of the Third Reich in Europe during the 1930's, a group of Christians who called themselves the "Confessing Church" banded together in opposition to Hitler and the Third Reich. In May of 1934 members of the Confessing Church in Germany met at the town of Barmen, Germany to declare their opposition to Hitler and the Third Reich. They did so on the basis of their allegiance to Jesus Christ whom they called "the one Word that stands against every other word to which the church has to give its obedience."

Throughout the years, Christians have found themselves opposed to what they believed were unjust laws. In 1963, Martin Luther King, Jr. was arrested in Birmingham, Alabama and placed in the Birmingham jail. From that cell King wrote what has become one of the most important documents of the Civil Rights movement, "Letter From the Birmingham Jail." In that letter King argues that Christians have the moral imperative to obey just laws, but also that they have a moral imperative to disobey laws that are unjust.

II.

There is another issue that faces us today and it is the proper role of government in a democratic society. Some years ago Dean Rusk, a former secretary of State, told a story at Davidson College about growing up in the rural area of Cherokee County, Georgia. In those days there were a group of farms that were connected by a very primitive system of communication. Each farm house had a telephone and all of the farms were connected by this system. If there was one long and two short rings, Rusk noted, it meant that the call was for you. If it was two long rings and two short rings, the call was for someone else. But if there were three long rings, it meant that there was an emergency and everyone was supposed to immediately answer the phone. Rusk went on to say that in Cherokee County, Georgia, there were three things that constituted an emergency. The first was if there was a fire, which meant everyone was supposed to come and help put out the fire. The second kind of emergency was if there was a mad dog in the neighborhood. That also meant that everyone was called to protect the neighborhood from the mad dog. The third thing that constituted an emergency in Cherokee County was if an agent

of the federal government appeared on any one's property. "We didn't want them around," Rusk said, "We didn't beat our breast and say, 'What has Woodrow Wilson done for us lately?'"

Where have all the citizens gone? He asked. Where are those who start by thinking of ourselves as members of a great republic, whose own interest – whether it be business or banking or law or education – cannot succeed unless we all succeed together?

One of the principles that the founding fathers of this nation emphasized was the importance of the "common good." The founders of this nation wanted to create a nation where individuals had the freedom to pursue their own interests. But, always, this freedom had to be balanced by what was for the good of the republic.

Today, we are called to balance the need for government regulation with the freedom of individual and businesses to conduct their affairs without needless government intervention.

III.

There is, of course, a corollary to this. If we are to have the freedom to conduct our affairs, we must do so in a way that does not create the kind of economic corruption that we have witnessed in the past year.

When the novelist Walker Percy was asked what concerned him the most about the future of America, he answered:

"Probably the fears of seeing America, with all its great strength and beauty and freedom gradually subside into decay through default and be defeated not by the communist movement ... but from within by weariness, boredom, cynicism, greed, and in the end helplessness before its great problems."

And here are the words of the prophetic Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, in his 1978 Harvard commencement address in which he warned of the West's "spiritual exhaustion."

"In the United States the difficulties are not a Minotaur or a dragon – not imprisonment, hard labor, death, government harassment and censorship – but cupidity, boredom, sloppiness, indifference. Not the acts of a mighty all pervading government, but the failure of a listless public to make use of the freedom that is its birthright."

Central to this is the recovery of a civic and moral outrage that sends the clear message that we will not tolerate moral decline and decay.

Several years ago the Police Commissioner of New York City, Raymond Kelly, described a phenomenon that was happening within the city. "A number of years ago," Kelly noted, "there began to appear in the windows of automobiles parked on the streets of American cities signs which read 'No Radio.'" Rather than express outrage, or even annoyance at the possibility of a car break-in, people tried to communicate with the potential thief in conciliatory terms. The translation of 'No Radio' is: "Please break into someone else's car, there is nothing in mine." These "No Radio" signs, Kelly points out, are signs of urban surrender. They are

handwritten capitulations. Instead of signs that say, “No Radio,” we need signs that say, “No Surrender.”

IV.

The message that underlines the Book of Revelation is captured in the text for this morning: “Here is a call for the endurance and faith of the saints.” (Revelation 13:10b) This is the theme of faith in the midst of chaos. It is finding the courage and strength to endure in the midst of great challenges.

The critical issue that the early Christians faced during the time of the writing of Revelation was the cult of the emperor. All Roman citizens were required to declare “Caesar kurios” (Caesar is Lord). But the Christian affirmation that “Jesu kurios” (Jesus is Lord).

In many ways that creed, which is found in the New Testament, is the basis of all our creeds. It states our fundamental loyalty to Jesus that exceeds all other loyalties.

Martin Niemoeller, a Lutheran minister in Germany who was imprisoned by the Nazis in World War II for speaking out against the Third Reich, wrote a letter from prison to the members of his parish: “Let us thank God that He upholds me as He does and allows no spirit of despair to enter into Cell 448. Let the parish office know that in our ignorance of what is coming I am confident, and that I hope to be ready when I led along paths which I never would have sought for myself.”

Today, I believe that the Spirit of God is calling to us for the renewal of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). For over forty-five years our church has suffered from a massive erosion of members and loss of influence. First Presbyterian Church has not suffered that kind of decline. To the contrary, we have grown steadily over the past twenty years. Our congregation is a witness to the Reformed faith and its power to shape not only the lives of members of a congregation but the life of a city as well.

Several years ago I visited Oxford, England. There at the center of the city is a small plaque dedicated to the memory of Hugh Latimer, who was one of the great reformers of the church in the 16th century. Latimer was instructed to renounce his faith or be burned at the stake. Before his death he turned to his companion in martyrdom and said to him, “Be of good comfort, Master Ridley, and play the man; we shall this day light such a candle by God’s grace in England as, I trust, shall never be put out.”

The great legacy of John of Patmos is found for us in this Book of Revelation. For by his witness, this man imprisoned in a cave on a small island in the Aegean Sea lit a candle that was not extinguished by the Roman government and whose light continues to burn brightly today.

Surely, God expects no less from us today.

Amen!