

# WORSHIP

Sermon | 11.27.2018



## Loyalty

By the Reverend Pen Peery

Revelation 1:4b-8

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

To him who loves us and freed us from our sins by his blood, and made us to be a kingdom, priests serving his God and Father, to him be glory and dominion for ever and ever. Amen.

Look! He is coming with the clouds;

every eye will see him,

even those who pierced him;

and on his account all the tribes of the earth will wail.

So it is to be. Amen.

'I am the Alpha and the Omega', says the Lord God, who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty.

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Our second Scripture on this Sunday we call Christ the King Sunday comes to us from the book of Revelation – a book said to be authored by a disciple of Jesus named John who wrote from the island of Patmos where he had been exiled because of his faith.

Of all the books of the Bible, Revelation is perhaps the most strange.

It is full of vivid and violent images and bizarre predictions that almost seem disjointed from the rest of the books of the Bible (save, perhaps, from the book of Daniel, that Becky read from a minute ago. Revelation borrows heavily from Daniel). And then there are the ways we have seen and heard Revelation used: to scare people into faith; to divide up the world between us and them; to paint the picture of a vindictive and angry son of God. All of these are reasons why you don't often hear sermons from Revelation from this pulpit.



But what we might miss if we ignore this last book of the Bible – in all of its strangeness and in all the ways we have seen it misused – is that, just like the other 65 books of the Bible – it contains a truth that points to good news. What is important when we read Revelation is that we understand in what format the good news comes. Brian Blount, President of Union Presbyterian Seminary and noted New Testament scholar on Revelation, reminds us that what we find in this last book of the Bible is not history, or prophesy, but poetry. The reason it sounds so different from most other books of the Bible is because it is different – it is a totally different genre, called Apocalyptic literature.

Apocalyptic literature is written to *reveal* something. Brian Blount says that Revelation “intends to reveal the truth about the future, a truth that enables its hearers and readers to see the present in a new light. But that truth is so powerful, so overwhelming, that John’s words cannot properly convey it. He therefore appeals to symbols and codes that must bear the weight his language cannot.”

This morning, as we consider the question of who is, ultimately, in charge of our future –our lives and our world, God’s word comes to us from the very beginning of this last book of the Bible where John addresses the church. As we prepare to listen, let us pray...

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One of the people I read who challenges my thinking is a man named Jonathan Haidt. Dr. Haidt is a professor of social psychology at the Stern School of Business at New York University. He is the best-selling author of several books, and is TedTalk sensation. What particularly interests me is how he understands the reasons – and the science – behind how politically polarized our country has become.

Haidt’s focus is on understanding how each of us determines whether an action is right, or moral. Based on neuroscience, Haidt finds that when we make those decisions, our brains weigh a number of factors. His analogy is that our brains are like a tongue with six taste receptors: care, fairness, loyalty, liberty, authority, and purity. As we consider whether an action is moral, we filter that action through our mind. And the reason we arrive at different conclusions because each of us has slightly different preferences for what “tastes right.”

What Haidt has discovered is that, generally speaking, those of us who are conservative tend to be more well-rounded in how we make decisions about what is moral. Conservatives tend to value all of those six factors in deciding whether something is moral, or right: care, fairness, loyalty, liberty, authority, and purity. Those of us who are liberal generally rely on only two of those factors in how we make decisions: we often only ask whether the action is caring and whether it is fair.

It's a bit of an oversimplification, but I find that it rings true. In determining if something is right, it matters to almost everyone whether it is the caring thing to do, or the fair thing to do.



But to some, the questions of loyalty, liberty, authority, and purity matter more than to others. As I think about how that plays out in our world, that doesn't resolve the disagreements I often see us having, but it does help explain them.

The central question in the book of Revelation is that of loyalty.

That's the reason that John was on the island of Patmos in prison when he wrote this last book of the Bible. He was unwilling to bend in his confession that Jesus was Lord.

If Dr. Haidt is correct, this appeal to loyalty may resonate with some of us more than others, so for those of us who aren't as motivated by questions of loyalty, it is important to understand the backdrop.

In the Jewish community in which Jesus lived and preached – and from which the Christian church grew – the question of loyalty was complicated. Israel was a part of the Roman Empire – and in the Roman Empire, Caesar was Lord, no matter what you thought before you were a part of the Roman Empire.

And yet, in the time of Jesus, the Jewish community had worked out an accommodation with the Romans: they pledged to be loyal to Rome's authority, and to assure loyalty in their community. In exchange for this Rome agreed to not make the Jews bow to Roman Gods or to pray to the Emperor. Instead they would only have to pray for the Emperor – which helped to get around the whole “You shall not have other Gods before me” commandment.

It worked for a while – while the Roman Empire was strong.

But then, about thirty years after Jesus was crucified, Rome suffered a defeat at the hand of the Parthians.

And then there were rebellions in Germania and Gaul.

And in Jerusalem, where in 66 AD, the Jews revolted against the Roman Empire. So Rome hit back – and destroyed the Jewish Temple. When that happened, many Jews (and Christians) who had lived under the protection of the Roman Empire, fled to what is now modern day Turkey. There, they lived – not under the protection of Rome – but the watchful eye of a frightened Emperor –

...an Emperor afraid of losing his power – unwilling to look the other way – or the bend the rules – if his subjects would not be vocal about their loyalty.

So it was that Christians like John who would not pray to the Emperor

who would not say, *kurios kaisaros* — Caesar is Lord, —

but said instead, *kurios cristos* — Christ is Lord, —

were considered

suspect

unpatriotic



disloyal  
infiltrators  
insurrectionists  
terrorists.

John wrote from a prison on the island of Patmos because he would not confess that the Emperor Domitian was Lord. As a friend and colleague of mine said, John's message to his sisters and brothers in the faith was simple: Don't cave.

That is what John is saying in today's passage.

"Don't cave! Stay loyal!"

For there is grace and peace —  
enough for the whole of you — the seven churches — (seven being the number that represents the complete).

"Don't cave! Stay loyal!"

For this grace and peace is from God, —  
the One who is, who was, who is to come.

We have heard that before: —

I AM who I AM — I WILL BE who I WILL BE —

That is the name of God revealed in the Exodus.

This grace and peace is from the Liberating God, -  
the God who lets no Pharaoh stand in the way  
of delivering slaves into freedom.

And this grace and peace is from Jesus the Christ, —  
the faithful witness, literally the trustworthy martyr, —  
the first born of the dead, the ruler of all rulers.

And it is precisely because this Jesus rules over every other ruler, —  
because this Jesus has dominion, that is has ultimate power  
that this grace and peace, this unmerited favor and wholeness  
is sure.

"Therefore, don't cave," John pleads.

For this ruler over all rulers

is also the One who loves us, —

who freed us from sin by his blood, his very life.

And that means he judges us to be absolutely acceptable,  
adequate,—

perfect, worthy.



John knew that if people were afraid, their loyalty could shift.

That is the danger when fear overwhelms, isn't it?

The danger is to give up on the Ruler who rules over all other powers.

The danger is to assume those other powers now have all power.

So when the planes smack into our towers, -

Or when people with guns enter schools or nightclubs or synagogues, -

it is easy to cave, —

to give up on the way of Christ, —

to stop listening to the word, —

“you have heard that it was said, —

‘love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’

but I say to you, — Love your enemies

and pray for those who persecute you . . . .”

It is easy to cave and to strike out in hatred and revenge.

And when the devastating illness strikes

it is easy to cave, —

to give up on the promise of the Apostle Paul

based on the power of Christ: —

“I can face all things through him who strengthens me”

It is easy to cave and begin to deny the illness is real

and life threatening and thus stop living authentically

with ourselves and others.

Or when the job gets jerked out from under us

it is easy to cave, —

to give up on Christ's assurance that we are worthy.

It is easy to cave and begin to assume we are worthless, —

And have no value.

So to people besieged

and overwhelmed with fear

John writes urging them, Don't cave!

For John — the central question is that of loyalty.

To whom will we give it?

To the one who is faithful and who saves?

Or to someone or something else — who might promise, but can never deliver?

Most of us, I would imagine, don't wake up every morning asking where we are going to place our loyalty.



We just go about our day – our work, our school, our lives.

But as American icon Bob Dylan said, “you gotta serve somebody.”

And every day when we roll out of bed, there are plenty of somebodies who compete for our loyalty.

Questions of loyalty come up around what we consume, what businesses we frequent, what cars we drive, where we go to school, where we go to church, how much time we invest in our families.

Some of those voices that compete for our loyalty are more innocuous than others – they’re easier to manage – we understand that they are not asking too much – not asking to take the place of everything else.

But there is another arena where I have heard a lot talk about loyalty – so much so that it makes me nervous. It is the arena of politics. In our political theater that thrives on division and distinction and fear – those who know how to manipulate these things up the stakes. Loyalty becomes a tool of control. In many cases, it seems what is more important than whether something is right, is whether we are being loyal – to the party, or the politician, or the platform.

That kind of loyalty is not benign.

Because it asks too much of us –

sometimes it even asks us to compromise on things we otherwise know are wrong.

It may seem strange to read this ancient, odd book of the Bible in the context of all that swirls around us today.

But what I see in it is good news.

Because here, John offers us an invitation to live – despite fear, and confusion, and those many, many things that compete for our attention – John offers us an invitation to live in the eternal presence.

It is an invitation to remember that the God to whom we give our loyalty is different – because God is at the beginning and the end of life – God is the Alpha and Omega – the almighty – the One ultimately in charge.

One of the most holy places I have ever experienced is an island off the eastern coast of England where my family and I would go on holiday when I lived overseas as a child. The island is called Lindisfarne. It’s right where England meets Scotland on the Northumberland coast. You can only see the road out to it at low-tide. When the tide shifts, the island is cut off from the mainland. It is rather barren – there are few bed and breakfasts, a lot of windswept coastline, and amazing amount of history.



In 793 AD, Lindisfarne was the point of entry for the Viking invasion of England. 159 years earlier, in 634 AD a monk named Saint Aiden brought the gospel to the island. Lindisfarne became the base of Christian mission and evangelism to Northern England. They built a monastery – which later became a church – upon which they built another and another.

The stones are still there.

You can stand on them – you can touch them.

Those stones are what make that island feel holy.

It's not that the stones are special – but to know that for almost 1,400 years they have heard the prayers of a people who trusted in the same promise onto which you and I stake our lives – is a powerful reminder that we worship a God

who is

and was

and is to come.

