

The End of the World or the Beginning of Life?

Revelation 4: 1-11

I returned home last night from Crossroads' Church camp in the Rocky Mountains. Eighty people attended, all members friends of Crossroads Church. The days were spent on hikes and other activities such as enjoying the beauty of the incredible mountain scenery. Evenings were spent in times of worship, sharing our stories, listening receptively to each other, and experiencing the love and presence of God in community.

Storytelling and story listening served as unofficial themes for the week. In small groups, we worked on a particular kind of listening skill. We were prompted just to listen as the speaker shared, then receive their story with a simple "thank you." With that experience in mind, I invite you to hear this sermon as part of my story in conjunction with today's scripture and also the two "Ask Jack" questions. At end of this sermon, I ask that you receive what I'm sharing without judgment or affirmation—just as my story. It won't be necessary to say "thank you," but I hope you will seek to see/find yourself in some part of what I say.

I was fifteen years old when I read *The Late, Great Planet Earth* by author Hal Lindsey. His was an interpretation of apocalyptic literature in the Bible, especially the book of Revelation. The perspective he offered was that this literature predicted literal and physical events that were to take place in the distant future. From the perspective of the first century, that distant future may be today or today's near future.

I was hooked by the book. I found it exciting and energizing. It made religion seem relevant and kind of mystical and prompted in me a renewed interest in my faith journey. That interest prompted a series of conversations with my father and also years of reading and studying apocalyptic literature. Now, I've come to very different perspective on interpreting Revelation, but I have retained sense of excitement and energy in faith journey.

I mentioned that there are two "Ask Jack" questions prompting this sermon. The first is this: "Is apocalyptic literature more about the future or the past?" This question prompted two related questions. "In what ways might it be about the future?" "In what ways might it be about the past?" In reflection, I wonder if most of our future orientation isn't based on reclaiming, reacting to, or healing our past.

In the second "Ask Jack" question, the questioner asked, "If you don't believe that the events in the book of Revelation are symbolic representations of actual events that will happen (or are happening) in the history of mankind, then do you believe that the 'second coming of Christ' will be an actual event?"

The last book of the New Testament is traditionally called Revelation. This is based on the opening verse, "The Revelation of Jesus Christ which God gave him to show his servants-- things which must shortly take place." The early Church fully expected Jesus to come back into their physical existence very soon in order to complete the process of resurrection. This process would have included bringing an end to time, setting up a final judgment along with requisite reward and punishment. And this second coming would naturally have involved a cosmic battle between good and evil.

In Revelation, after the first three chapters of introduction and letters to the seven churches, a veil pulled back, or perhaps a door was opened, so that John could see into the throne room of heaven – its wonder and mystery. This was the content of today's reading. There is lots of stuff in Revelation and it's practically all very dramatic and very cosmic. There are two keys to interpreting it.

- Remember that it was given to first-century Christians and was about their immediate future.
- It used the language of Jewish apocalyptic, a language that would have been very familiar to the recipients of Revelation and very foreign to the authorities.

Revelation 4 utilized some very provocative and familiar images from Israel's past. ⁴“Around the throne are twenty-four thrones, and seated on the thrones are twenty-four elders, dressed in white robes, with golden crowns on their heads.” These 24 elders probably represented the twelve tribes of Israel and the twelve apostles of Jesus, symbolizing both the Abrahamic covenant and the new covenant in Jesus

The flashes of lightening and peals of thunder indicated the power and majesty of God. And then there were the four creatures.

“Around the throne, and on each side of the throne, are four living creatures, full of eyes in front and behind: ⁷the first living creature like a lion, the second living creature like an ox, the third living creature with a face like a human face, and the fourth living creature like a flying eagle.”

These four creatures remind us of four similar creatures from apocalyptic writing of ancient Ezekiel or the four evangelists, but these creatures are quite different. They may well represent all the non-human as well as human life on earth. There are four of them just as there are four primary elements and four corners of the earth. When they sing, all of life is praising God. As the creatures and the twenty-four elders joins together in a doxology of praise to God, the elders cast their golden crowns onto the glass sea before the throne and sang:

“You are worthy, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power, for you created all things, and by your will they existed and were created.”

The second “Ask Jack” question relates to the second coming of Jesus. “If you don't believe that the events in the book of Revelation are symbolic representations of actual events that will happen (or are happening) in the history of mankind, then do you believe that the 'second coming of Christ' will be an actual event?” The writer of this question reflects an astute insight into my perspective on apocalyptic writing in general and Revelation in particular. In response, I offer these general statements.

- The apocalyptic literature of the New Testament, most notably the book of Revelation, seem to describe events to take place in a far distant future, but its own mission statement (Rev. 1:1) indicates these events will take place *shortly*.
- If those events were descriptive of what would literally take place in history, they evidently didn't happen! The world is still here with all its good and its evil
- The purpose of apocalyptic literature, according to most reputable scholars, was to shine light on the conflict between good and evil at a cosmic and divine level and to provide hope and a measure of comfort for those at the time of their writing who were suffering persecution!

In response to our first “Ask Jack” question, then, the same way that our concepts about who God is often have more to do with our own experience than with God, so these cosmic future predictions may well reflect our experience and our background more than future events. In the

midst of terror of persecution, John's revelation encouraged the people to trust in their firm foundation—that the God of ages past would also be their hope for years, and centuries, to come.

In response to the second “Ask Jack” question, Revelation ends with a promise (Rev. 22)—Jesus says, “Surely I am coming soon.”” The author responds, “Amen. Come, Lord Jesus!” The early Christian Church clearly expected Jesus to return to earth within their lifetime in physical form, signaling the end of the age and the inauguration of the Kingdom of God in its fullness. This would have been the completion of his resurrection. After a while, the first-century Christians began to rethink their expectation. The apostles and other leaders began to die off and a new generation of leadership emerged. They began to prepare for the long haul of being church.

Matthew's Gospel seemed to reflect a view that Jesus' 2nd coming took place on a hilltop in Galilee when he gave the disciples what we call The Great Commission—“Go into all the world and make disciples of every nation.” Others in the New Testament continued to hope for a 2nd coming even while preparing for being the Church in this world.

Still others believed that Revelation depicted a spiritual truth largely played out within the lives of each of us—that Christ's second coming reflected an acceptance of his lordship by people through faith. I tend to share this view, especially in view of the concept I have of God not as a separate being who exists apart from this world—and that Christ could indeed return here from someplace else. I have come to believe that we “live and move and have our being in God.” The natural and logical conclusion to that view of God is that Christ—the Christ presence—is already in us and with us.

In recent times, an approach to this issue has taken a different view: seeing the events described in John's vision as predictions of actual historical events that would come to pass sometime in their far distant future – maybe even the 20th or 21st century in the Christian era? Hal Lindsey's writings in the 1970's (such as *The Late, Great, Planet Earth*) and the *Left Behind* series recently have brought great popularity to this view. There are benefits of this approach, as in my experience. It tends to be exciting and attractive to people who, as a result, begin to take their faith journey seriously. It brings a sense of mystical presence to faith – causing us to live expectantly that God will act in this world in a powerful way, even in face of death. Finally, it brings about a sense that it really matters for us to take our faith journey seriously

There are some real dangers to this interpretation as well. With all the focus on the destruction of this world and the exodus of believers to a new heavenly world, we can tend to downplay this world by focusing on next world. Many Christians do not value working for justice, peace, and equity now--transforming this world into the vision of God's dream of Shalom. Another danger is the promoting of divinely sanctioned violence as a way to destroy evil. History seems to teach us that violence merely promotes more violence and Jesus seems to have taught the overwhelming power of non-violence. Finally, there is a danger of dividing humanity into those who are saved by God and those who are damned by God. Such a view lives in tension with other biblical passages that indicate a more universal salvation and often has led to oppressive, manipulative, and even abusive behavior on the part of the Christian Church.

There are many ways to understand Revelation, whether it points us to the future or to the past, and whether or not its proclamation of a second coming by Jesus reflects a coming historical event. People of genuine faith hold very different views. Most important is that we approach

faith as a whole with passion and relevance--that our interpretations of apocalyptic literature and our reactions to the interpretations and beliefs of others do not divide us from each other and do not prevent us from doing what Jesus taught: "Love one another." There is a clear biblical priority to work for justice, peace, and compassion among all people. All Christians need to live courageously and with passion as we seek to follow Jesus. It is crucial that we always remember how the Apostle Paul reminded us:

"That neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, ³⁹nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus." (Romans 8)

As a fifteen year old, I was drawn to an exciting view of Revelation, one that made my faith seem real, relevant, and important. I no longer believe that particular view reflects good biblical scholarship, but I still find faith to be real, relevant, exiting, and important. This past week, at Church camp, I experienced that reality, relevance, and importance through the majesty of hiking through mountains and woods, the poignancy of sharing life and life stories with others, and the mystical presence of taking time away from usual routine to hear the still, small voice of the Spirit. I was reminded that the presence of God is around us always and the life of God through the Spirit of Christ is in each of us. I believe God waits eagerly for each of us to step up to full partnership with God's own Spirit in realizing God's own dream of *Shalom*. This dream seeks not to destroy evil, but to transform evil into what is good and holy through the power of love. Life doesn't get more tangible, exciting, and real than that!

Revelation 4: 1-11

4After this I looked, and there in heaven a door stood open! And the first voice, which I had heard speaking to me like a trumpet, said, "Come up here, and I will show you what must take place after this." ²At once I was in the spirit, and there in heaven stood a throne, with one seated on the throne! ³And the one seated there looks like jasper and carnelian, and around the throne is a rainbow that looks like an emerald. ⁴Around the throne are twenty-four thrones, and seated on the thrones are twenty-four elders, dressed in white robes, with golden crowns on their heads. ⁵Coming from the throne are flashes of lightning, and rumblings and peals of thunder, and in front of the throne burn seven flaming torches, which are the seven spirits of God; ⁶and in front of the throne there is something like a sea of glass, like crystal. Around the throne, and on each side of the throne, are four living creatures, full of eyes in front and behind: ⁷the first living creature like a lion, the second living creature like an ox, the third living creature with a face like a human face, and the fourth living creature like a flying eagle. ⁸And the four living creatures, each of them with six wings, are full of eyes all around and inside. Day and night without ceasing they sing, "Holy, holy, holy, the Lord God the Almighty, who was and is and is to come." ⁹And whenever the living creatures give glory and honor and thanks to the one who is seated on the throne, who lives forever and ever, ¹⁰the twenty-four elders fall before the one who is seated on the throne and worship the one who lives forever and ever; they cast their crowns before the throne, singing, ¹¹"You are worthy, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power, for you created all things, and by your will they existed and were created."