

Rappahannock Christian Church – 10/10/10

Dr. Kenneth Wilbur

Communion Meditation

Yesterday Kathy and I had the pleasure of traveling to Lynchburg to Randolph College. The reason we went was because Lauren was in a play. It was a Greek play, and it was really....Greek! Honestly, it was about revenge and killing and stuff like that. All of the actors wore masks and it was quite weird, but (in a weird way) it was also good.

That play was a story.

What we are doing here is also a story. It is a silent one with the Bread and the Cup as its Elements. When we take the Bread and the Cup we are reminded of the story of God's love for us. We remember that God has saved us, that He has saved even *me* (individually!!!) because He sent Christ to die for *my* sin. Let me read for you what the Apostle Matthew has to say about this Story:

Matthew 26:26-29 – While they were eating, Jesus took bread, gave thanks and broke it, and gave it to his disciples, saying, "Take and eat; this is my body."

Then he took the cup, gave thanks and offered it to them, saying, "Drink from it, all of you. This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins. I tell you, I will not drink of this fruit of the vine from now on until that day when I drink it anew with you in my Father's kingdom."

The Seven Seals

This week's Scripture is the whole 6th chapter of Revelation. I really am not interested in getting involved in the minutia of Revelation in this study (nor do we have the time to do so) but, as you will know about me, I am loath to just snatch verses here and there for us to talk about. When I say that much of what the book of Revelation foreshadows is creepy, horrible and chilling, reading this chapter should give you a taste of it.

Revelation 6:1-17 – I watched as the Lamb opened the first of the seven seals. Then I heard one of the four living creatures say in a voice like thunder, "Come!" I looked, and there before me was a white horse! Its rider held a bow, and he was given a crown, and he rode out as a conqueror bent on conquest.

When the Lamb opened the second seal, I heard the second living creature say, "Come!" Then another horse came out, a fiery red one. Its rider was given power to take peace from the earth and to make men slay each other. To him was given a large sword.

When the Lamb opened the third seal, I heard the third living creature say, "Come!" I looked, and there before me was a black horse! Its rider was holding a pair of scales in his hand. Then I heard what sounded like a voice among the four living creatures, saying, "A quart of wheat for a day's wages, and three quarts of barley for a day's wages, and do not damage the oil and the wine!"

When the Lamb opened the fourth seal, I heard the voice of the fourth living creature say, "Come!" I looked, and there before me was a pale horse! Its rider

was named Death, and Hades was following close behind him. They were given power over a fourth of the earth to kill by sword, famine and plague, and by the wild beasts of the earth.

When he opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slain because of the word of God and the testimony they had maintained. They called out in a loud voice, "How long, Sovereign Lord, holy and true, until you judge the inhabitants of the earth and avenge our blood?" Then each of them was given a white robe, and they were told to wait a little longer, until the number of their fellow servants and brothers who were to be killed as they had been was completed.

I watched as he opened the sixth seal. There was a great earthquake. The sun turned black like sackcloth made of goat hair, the whole moon turned blood red, and the stars in the sky fell to earth, as late figs drop from a fig tree when shaken by a strong wind. ¹⁴The sky receded like a scroll, rolling up, and every mountain and island was removed from its place.

Then the kings of the earth, the princes, the generals, the rich, the mighty, and every slave and every free man hid in caves and among the rocks of the mountains. They called to the mountains and the rocks, "Fall on us and hide us from the face of him who sits on the throne and from the wrath of the Lamb! For the great day of their wrath has come, and who can stand?"

The Seven Seals!

Are these the Good Housekeeping Seals? Are they creatures that live and swim in the ocean – that kind of “seals”? No! These are seals made of wax that were used to close – lock up – an ancient document. These seven seals are being broken and each time one is broken something happens.

Just so you know, these seven seals are followed in the subsequent chapters by seven trumpets, seven bowls and also seven plagues. (I think the seven bowls and the seven plagues are the same thing, by the way, but that’s not the subject of this morning’s sermon.) These sevens go on and on the entire way through chapter 18. It takes John that much time to explain all of the terrible things he sees.

Now, you need to understand that one of the things that are part of ancient (especially Hebrew) literature is what is called “numerology”. That is, certain numbers are repeated again and again, and take on special symbolic meaning. The number seven seems to symbolize wholeness as in completeness or fullness. Thus, the seven seals, trumpets and bowls may actually symbolize "the full measure" of God’s coming wrath and judgment rather than that we should necessarily be looking for exactly seven events of a particular kind.

On a personal note, let me tell you that when I read about these "woes" that are coming I am troubled. Not so much because I'm afraid of what might happen to me, but because they show me a picture of God that is not very much like the picture I am comfortable

with. Someone gave me a USA Today article this week about how we Americans think about God. The researchers said that there are four basic perceptions of God - Authoritative, Critical, Distant, and Benevolent. I tend to think of God as Benevolent. God loves you and cares about you, and God wants us to love and care about others; (NOT demonstrate at a slain soldier's funeral, like that church out in Kansas did, insisting that God hates America, and NOT burning other peoples' sacred books, like that guy in Florida.) In any case, though, I have to admit that sometimes God is not gentle and forgiving, but angry and condemning, in Scripture. Revelation is one of those places. Seeing God this way is troubling to me, and maybe it is to you as well. But it's just the way it is.

When we read all this in Revelation we tend to ask two questions (1) When will these things happen and (2) how long will they endure? Sadly, neither of these questions is fully resolved within the book of Revelation!

But, let's turn to that first question anyway. When will these things happen? During his earthly ministry Jesus was asked this question point blank. He told his disciples that a time of great distress was coming. He said that when it comes, "You (speaking to His disciples) will be arrested, flogged, tried, killed. You will stand before governors and kings as witnesses. The temple will be destroyed."

Now, most of these things happened even before the close of the New Testament and are recorded for us recorded for us in the book of Acts. So when will the time of great distress begin? According to Jesus, it begins with his ascension into heaven and when the Age of the Church begins. We're already in it! And yet, Daniel, Jesus and John tell us that the Great Tribulation will be a time of "unparalleled" distress. It will not be that is something easy to miss. I think everyone will know beyond a shadow of a doubt. I think that when it happens people will say "Oh no! This is it. The End has come!" It has NOT already come and gone and nobody realized it. So I don't think it would be right for us to suppose that the first generation or two of Christians lived through the time of great distress; that it's all over, and there's nothing from the book of Revelation that hasn't yet come to pass.

But when WILL it all come to pass? Well, the truth is we just don't know. In fact, whenever the writers of Scripture speak about the End Times they emphasize again and again and again that we DO NOT KNOW when they will happen! (The writer of Daniel is sometimes an exception to this.) It will come upon us when we least expect it! It will come "like a thief in the night!" Apparently this is the way God wants it to be. God doesn't want us to know!

Okay moving on → so WHENEVER it starts, how long will the period of unparalleled distress last?

Way back in the Old Testament, Daniel gives a prophecy that takes in all of the time from his time until the end. He says there will be 70 weeks of years. That would be 490 years. Part of what he describes is all of the years between his time and Christ. But I believe he

reserves one week – seven years - which will be the duration of the time of Great Distress at the End of the Age.

The caveat is the stuff about seven being a symbolic number. Did he mean that the Tribulations will last seven literal years or a "fullness" of time? We don't know that for sure. I am inclined to assume that he meant seven literal years. Hey, enduring all of these terrors for seven DAYS would be bad enough! Seven years seems to me to be plenty of time for humankind to "get the point" and turn from sin, if they are ever going to repent!

So what is the point??? Really! If there so much vagueness; so many unknowns, why did John even bother to speak of what he had seen? Why did he bother to commit it to writing? Was it simply because he saw them, and the things he saw terrified him so much that he felt the need to write them down and get them off his chest? I don't think it's as simple as that.

We get a hint at his intent when he pauses in the midst of his recording of visions and speaks directly to the Christians who will read his book. He does this at numerous points throughout the book. He warns and encourages them! He cares about them. He knows what they are suffering, and he knows that more troubles are coming down the road. If his courier takes the book safely to his beloved churches, he wants them to know what he has seen so they can be informed and so that they will be strong. When the events begin to unfold he wants their faith to be solid. He wants them to know that God is Master and for their faith to endure.

How do you think you will react? Are you ready?

How do you react now when hard circumstances come upon you? Is your faith obvious to the people around you because of your patient endurance in times of trial? Or do we Christians shake our fists angrily at heaven and complain just as loudly as everyone else?

No, we haven't experienced these last things yet, but as we look around we might very well think that the time is not far off. The earth is warming. There are droughts and famines and floods and other disasters. The battles our country and the rest of the free world are fighting sound awfully like "holy wars" these days. At the same time, how many people are in church this morning? How many make their service to Christ THE absolute priority of their lives?

Is the end near? We really don't know. But God wants our devotion and obedience NOW. God wants us to live lives of exemplary conduct, in passionate imitation of the Lord Jesus Christ NOW.

THAT'S the point of all these visions in the book of Revelation.

Benediction

The peace of God, which passes all understanding, will keep your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. – Philippians 4:7