

## Rappahannock Christian Church – 10/24/10

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### Communion Meditation

This study of the book of Revelation is rough stuff. I hope by now I've made it clear that this book contains a lot that I simply don't understand. What I am trying to do is to pull out a few things here that I think I do understand and also to make sense of why this book was given to us. What are we supposed to get from it? All this makes me wonder if one day, in some future generation, perhaps all of it will become crystal clear. Imagine how different that would be from the situation we find ourselves in today!

This reminds me of how very thankful we can be that we live on this side of the cross. The Messiah has come for us; but imagine what it must have been like for those folks back in Old Testament times. Imagine basing your faith on the shadowy idea they must have had of a Messiah. The most they had were indistinct shadows and vague writings at best. It must have been very, very hard.

I am so glad that today we can come to this Table in *memory* of the Lord Jesus' love for us. Here we can *remember* that He lived and gave His life. We even have a record of many of the things that He said and did and how He died for us. So, as we take this Bread and Cup we can remember that Christ *has* come and that He gave His life on the cross. Thank God! Thank God! Let me read the account of this Table as the Apostle Matthew records it:

**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."

That day has not yet come, but we look forward to it and we celebrate what He has done as we come around this Table. We invite all followers of Christ to participate with us.

### His Number Is 666

This morning's Scripture is coming back to the book of Revelation and we will read just about the whole of chapter number 13. Our Scripture starts in verse 1b:

**Revelation 13:1b-18** – And I saw a beast coming out of the sea. He had ten horns and seven heads, with ten crowns on his horns, and on each head a blasphemous name. The beast I saw resembled a leopard, but had feet like those of a bear and a mouth like that of a lion. The dragon gave the beast his power and his throne and great authority. One of the heads of the beast seemed to have had a fatal wound, but the fatal wound had been healed. The whole world was astonished and followed the beast. Men worshiped the dragon because he had given authority to the beast, and they also worshiped the beast and asked, "Who is like the beast? Who can make war against him?"

The beast was given a mouth to utter proud words and blasphemies and to exercise his authority for forty-two months. He opened his mouth to blaspheme God, and to slander his name and his dwelling place and those who live in heaven. He was given power to make war against the saints and to conquer them. And he was given authority over every tribe, people, language and nation. All inhabitants of the earth will worship the beast—all

whose names have not been written in the book of life belonging to the Lamb that was slain from the creation of the world.

He who has an ear, let him hear. If anyone is to go into captivity, into captivity he will go. If anyone is to be killed with the sword, with the sword he will be killed. This calls for patient endurance and faithfulness on the part of the saints.

Then I saw another beast, coming out of the earth. He had two horns like a lamb, but he spoke like a dragon. He exercised all the authority of the first beast on his behalf, and made the earth and its inhabitants worship the first beast, whose fatal wound had been healed. And he performed great and miraculous signs, even causing fire to come down from heaven to earth in full view of men. Because of the signs he was given power to do on behalf of the first beast, he deceived the inhabitants of the earth. He ordered them to set up an image in honor of the beast who was wounded by the sword and yet lived. He was given power to give breath to the image of the first beast, so that it could speak and cause all who refused to worship the image to be killed. He also forced everyone, small and great, rich and poor, free and slave, to receive a mark on his right hand or on his forehead, so that no one could buy or sell unless he had the mark, which is the name of the beast or the number of his name.

This calls for wisdom. If anyone has insight, let him calculate the number of the beast, for it is man's number. His number is 666.

Okay! So there you go. I'm telling you, this is NOT easy, is it?!

Have you ever seen the movie, *The Omen*? Gregory Peck starred as the dad, I think. His son is the Antichrist. In the movie the dad actually discovers that his son has the number of the beast, 666, on his body. It is a birthmark, but no one can see it because it is covered by his hair. Very scary, creepy movie!

This was Hollywood's attempt to depict the idea of this "666" mark. I suspect there are other movies that have tried.

What does the number 666 signify? Some of you may know that the ancient Jews liked to play with numbers. They even assigned a number to each of the letters of their alphabet so that the "number" of a person's name could be determined. It may be that the number 666 spells a man's name. I'll have a little bit more to say about this in a minute. First, let's look briefly at Revelation 13.

Apparently, as the end approaches John sees war being waged against the saints.

Now, I have to stop here for just a moment to tell you that word "saints" is the Greek word *hagioi*. It literally means "holy ones". We generally understand the word saint as it is used within the traditions of the Catholic Church. According to church tradition only certain extraordinary people were designated "saints". A person might be eligible to become a "saint" if they had performed a miracle or had done some other great, heroic deeds. But this is not what the word originally meant when John wrote it in the text. Throughout the entire New Testament, when this word is used, it refers simply to the people of God. ALL believers. The Apostle Paul writes to the believers in Rome, for example, "To all in Rome who are loved by God and called to be saints: Grace and peace to you from God our Father and from the Lord Jesus Christ." And in Ephesians 3 he says, "I pray that you may have power, together with all the saints, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ..."

In these passages Paul clearly has all believers in mind, not just one or two. Why are Christians called “holy ones?” Because they have been cleansed, forgiven, made whole by Jesus, the Redeemer. Having no holiness of their own, they have been clothed with the righteousness of Christ himself. That makes them holy. It is what makes all believers holy! In any case, what John is saying is that it is against believers in the Lord that the beast will wage war in the end times.

There are two beasts mentioned here – Beast number one is given authority over every tribe and people and language and nation, and everyone will worship the beast, everyone except those whose names are written in the Lamb’s Book of Life. (I’m going to skip over this part for right now. We’ll talk about how you get your name written in the Lamb’s Book of Life later in this sermon series.)

Beast number 2 is even more interesting. He makes an image of the first beast and makes everyone bow down and worship it. He makes the image speak, and causes all who refuse to worship the image to be killed. He also makes everyone receive a mark on their right hand or on their forehead -- the number 666.

Let me say a quick word about this number. You remember that we discussed earlier that in the Bible the number seven is symbolic for the perfection of God and His holiness. Well, I think that this number, 666, is someone who is acting god-like. He is pretending to be God, but he is not. He is a fake and a deceiver, and that’s why he gets sixes instead of God’s perfect number 7.

So...Beasts! ... Miracles! .... Idol worship! It all sounds fantastic, unbelievable! How could any of this actually happen today or tomorrow?! But don’t dismiss it as ridiculous too fast.

First, let’s remember that a lot of this is symbolic. When John sees a “beast” rising to power, he is not talking about King Kong! He is talking about a real person who is given power and authority. Notice also that the beast does not have extraordinary powers of his own, like an angel or a demon might be expected to have. Whatever powers he is able to wield are given to him by the dragon, Satan. So this is just an ordinary person, a human being.

*Could* such a person arise today who could gain the trust and devotion of the whole world?

Well, think about it. With the internet and cable news networks there is hardly a village in even the remotest places on earth who are completely out of touch with the rest of civilization! It is starting to be possible to imagine the “whole world” agreeing to some course of action or another.

Think about some of the things John has been telling us will happen in that future day! Terrible things like natural disasters, war, diseases, famines. If these things happen, and if they are really, really bad, wouldn’t people rally around someone who seemed to have the answers and who seemed capable of getting things done? I don’t think this is so very far-fetched. Maybe this person would be handsome, charismatic, a good communicator. Someone who could make decisions under pressure, perhaps -- and all of his decisions lead to victory or success! I can see people devotedly following someone like that, can’t you?

The point John is making, though, is that *giving such a person this kind of devotion and loyalty comes with a price*. The successes this person has will NOT mean that God is with him. That’s what everyone will want to believe, and that’s what the beast himself will want people to assume.

But he is a deceiver! He is not godly. He's not good. His object is to turn people away from God!

Believers in Christ, of course, are not supposed to fall for his deceptions. John is saying, "If you are a believer living in that generation, don't give in! To worship this person will be wrong. Do not accept his mark. Beware! You must refuse it, for to accept it would be to turn against God!"

What a terrible vision! These will be difficult times. What John is calling for Christians to do in that day will be hard. Perhaps Christians will be a minority. Maybe their worship will be outlawed. Maybe their lives will be threatened. These events will require every ounce of faith. Not only so, but believers will need to see faith and faithfulness in the lives of their fellow Christians. They can give one another hope and courage.

I hope these days of hardship are far off. I hope I do not see them. I hope my children and grandchildren do not see them. God will decide. In the meantime, my job is to watch, to be prepared, and to pass on the truths of the Gospel and of the Word of God to another generation of Christians, so that they can be prepared to do the same.

I want to end with this reading. Jesus' disciples asked Him about the very thing that we are wondering, "When will all this be." Here's what He said. You will see that it is very much like what John has been saying here in Revelation.

**Mark 13:32-35** - "No one knows about that day or hour, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. Be on guard! Be alert! You do not know when that time will come. It's like a man going away: He leaves his house and puts his servants in charge, each with his assigned task, and tells the one at the door to keep watch.

"Therefore keep watch because you do not know when the owner of the house will come back—whether in the evening, or at midnight, or when the rooster crows, or at dawn. If he comes suddenly, do not let him find you sleeping."

### **Benediction**

Now to him who is able to keep you from falling and to present you without blemish before the presence of his glory with rejoicing, to the only God, our Savior through Jesus Christ our Lord, be glory, majesty, dominion, and authority, before all time and now and for ever. Amen – Jude 1:24-26