

"Rapturous"

"A Love Letter To The Church"

Ezekiel 34:1-2, 11-19; Matthew 25:31-33; Revelation 1:4-20

Before we read today's Scripture lessons I want to note a couple of things. First, today is what is known as "Christ the King" Sunday, the day set aside by the church for focusing on the fact that Jesus Christ is King, King of creation, and King in a salvific sense for those who are member citizens of the kingdom of God. This is seen in some sense as having the nature of a celebration. And second, and somewhat strangely perhaps, today's OT lesson may seem to be somewhat at odds with this positive emphasis and spirit. For our Lectionary passage found in Ezekiel is at first glance something of a downer, a sad exposition of the state of things at the time. As we will see, the passage reveals a scathing indictment of the shepherds of God's flock of sheep. This scathing indictment seems to be somewhat at odds with what is an upbeat and inspiring subject - Jesus Christ, not only the King of kings but King of the present kingdom and the kingdom to come, which is one of the numerous subjects of the book of Revelation. Let us consider now our 3 lessons.

In anticipation of a request I will have at the end of my message, would you please write down or remember Numbers 6:22-27. If it's easier to remember, just remember the last verses of Numbers 6 of the OT. I'll explain why later.

Last week I essentially promised to present a shorter sermon today in that I am asking one and all to take some time, on their own, to consider, carefully, prayerfully, and not hurriedly, the first chapter of Revelation on their own. Revelation was given to us by God for the use and benefit of the Christian church at large as well as the individual members of the kingdom of God. I hope no one gets the idea that their work of discipleship, in terms of Bible knowledge, understanding, and application, is mostly guided and thereby accomplished in response to what any pastor, preacher, or theologian distills and presents as true knowledge and applicable action. This is as much your work and responsibility as it is mine. Let me suggest that pastors should be more encouraged, joyful, and yes perhaps even "rapturous" when individual disciples of Jesus discover things on their own rather than what the pastor brings to light. A post-worship word of encouragement such as "That was a fine sermon, pastor", is nice and affirming but it pales in comparison to someone saying, "Pastor, do you know what I discovered in the Word?" Your discovery is as important as anything pastors, teachers, or preachers could ever do.

I just used the word "rapturous" for a couple of reasons. First, it is the subject of our sermon title. Second, it is something of a descriptor of the book of Revelation, at least in terms of the intent of the book. Revelation was meant to be a book of great inspiration and encouragement to the church of Jesus Christ in an era and time of great persecution. Never forget, brothers and sisters, that Jesus Christ is Lord of the church and King of the kingdom. This never can change. This theme is touched on and revealed in a thousand different ways throughout Revelation. And this is not simply good news but fantastic news. "Do not lose heart, dear friends, but be encouraged."

We will forego a detailed look at Ezekiel 34 but simply note a couple of things. First, the shepherds who had been put in charge of the flock had been not only inadequate in the discharge of their duties; they had been woefully negligent in their calling. But the indictment doesn't end with the shepherds but extends to the flock itself. Thus, and second, the sheep are not let off the hook for their failure. The sheep are fully responsible for their failure as are the shepherds. One unknown day in the future, Ezekiel prophesied, the Lord Jesus, whom we know to be the King of heaven and earth, will "judge between one sheep and another, and between rams and goats." And yet, until that time the Great Shepherd will go after his sheep and bring them back to the sheepfold. Revelation is a book that is precisely about doing that: God is gathering the sheep who have been wandering and bringing them back to the Great Shepherd in anticipation of the final judgment. One reason we an ironic joy in this is because we have the promise that Jesus is the one and only intercessor for us and that, as King of the kingdom of which we are resident members, he will remind us to rejoice and be filled with hope and optimism, now as in eternity. Judgment will come but we have Jesus as intercessor. Our Gospel lesson features, essentially, a single message: the Son of Man, whom we know to be Jesus, is the one prophesied about in Ezekiel. I would assume that most of you know this as one of the most basic lessons and central doctrines of the Christian faith. Therefore, there seems little reason to belabor the point but move on to a few comments on our Epistle lesson from Revelation.

As I hinted at last week, Revelation has an over all theme and perspective; it has a carefully planned purpose. Revelation intends to do 2 things simultaneously (but for a single over arching purpose). **Revelation is meant to make worship and faithfulness to God so wonderfully appealing while making apostasy and idolatry so utterly vile, repugnant, and frightening that the Christian will remain faithful to the very end, whenever that end time comes and no matter what the cost may be.** Whenever we consider Revelation, whether the book as a whole or a single verse of Scripture, remember these 2 essential parts. Revelation is specifically designed to make worship and faithfulness to God so appealing while making apostasy and idolatry so repugnant and frightening that the Christian will not be put off by the strange events and terrible predictions presented in Revelation. Thus the Christian will be judged appropriately and found to be a member of the flock of sheep, not the goats. Again, "**Revelation is meant to make worship and faithfulness to God so wonderfully appealing while making apostasy and idolatry so utterly vile, repugnant, and frightening that the Christian will remain faithful to the very end, whenever that end time comes and no matter what the cost may be.**"

In that I have already asked that you take or make time later today (as one option) to consider for yourself the first chapter of Revelation, consider how what you read is guided, informed, and enlightened by this understanding of the nature and purpose of Revelation.

Our sermon title "Rapturous" is of course a derivative of "rapture", which may be defined as "the state of being transported by a lofty emotion or ecstasy.

"Rapturous" of course means being filled with great joy or rapture. Of course this definition has its limitations for it points primarily to the emotional state of the human creature. Something greater than this was at work in the case of John.

I find it a bit disturbing as I find it a bit humorous that some people, scholars, theologians, and skeptics alike, have wondered if the ecstasy experienced by John was something akin to a drug-induced hypnotic state. But the joyful truth of the matter is that there was not a mere human-level, and thus human-limited, state of ecstasy such as would be induced by a drug of some kind. He was overcome by the Holy Spirit. Fully in his right mind, it was on the Lord's Day that John was "in the Spirit", that is, the Holy Spirit came upon John in such a manner that God himself, Jesus, gave John a whole series of visions which are presented to us throughout Revelation. Therefore, here are some questions to guide you in terms of your personal reading of any passage of Revelation.

First, begin with prayer, asking earnestly and fervently that the Holy Spirit would lead and guide you in your reading and pondering. Ask yourself the following questions earnestly and fervently, but also include the questions you have as they come to mind. Ask yourself:

What are the particular words or themes that stand out to me at this reading?

What does it appear is happening? And why do you suppose it is happening?

To whom is it addressed? To whom is it not addressed?

Does it seem to be a "downer"? If so, why? Remember that every passage and point is meant to be an encouragement for the Christian?

Does it seem to be an "upper"? How and why is it so?

What is the relevance, or meaning, of a particular metaphor or number? For example, why is the scroll to be sent to the "seven" churches as opposed to any other number? Is there a significance to the specific number given?

Be sure and consider all the questions that come to mind. Let your mind be curious.

Our second sermon title is "A Love Letter To The Church" because Revelation is a love letter from God to the church, as surprising as that may sound.

Here is a story that I hope is fitting. Many years ago, as a middle age adult, I remember Mom telling me that when she and Dad were dating he had taken the time to write her some love letters. I was quite surprised at that admission. Perhaps stunned would be more accurate. "My Dad? Wrote Mom love letters?" Never in my life did Dad come across particularly as the romantic type, especially in terms of love letters. Not only was I amazed at what Mom had shared, I was amazed that she had kept them all. Sometimes romantic things occur in the most unlikely of places and times. I know Mom and Dad loved each other but I also knew they had their issues as all couples do. It's kind of fun to find expressions of love where you don't expect to find them.

I would like us to consider now the concept of Revelation as a "love letter" although in a different context.

Back during world wars I and II, folks at home found themselves having to send off their service member to an unknown future in a foreign and war-ravaged land, but they often did so with both words of encouragement and words of warning just prior to departure. After that, letters were sent to their family member (whether male or female) with words of practical advice as well as with words of moral advice. Sometimes a dad's prior service in the previous war was readily apparent in his practical words of advice such as, "Remember, keep your head down!" Or, keep your rifle clean so it won't jam!" Sometimes advice took on a dual practical and moral tone. "Beware of the women you will surely meet. Don't succumb to the various temptations that you will run into. Wine, women, and song are a dangerous combination! Remember the Good Book, remember what we've taught you, and remember how you were raised. Remember that you have been a good example of our family and what we stand for, and we are proud of you." Thus, love letters such as these were a mixture of encouragement and warning, although almost always containing some barely concealed sense of deep worry and anxiety over the safety, health, and well-being of their service member. It is well known and documented that both male and female service members received such letters of encouragement and advice.

The point of this is that Revelation contains words of practical advice as well as words of moral advice. But actually, what Revelation puts forth goes far beyond the mere sense of "advice." What is given is a set of parameters which are expected of true members of the eternal kingdom, not merely suggested as appropriate as in the sense of parental advice.

One application of this is that when you read words of warning in Revelation the point is not to first become fearful but to discern what is being warned against, and why. It is for the spiritual and practical health and well-being of the person that such warning is given. Thus one is induced to think, "How can I avoid that? If God loves me as much as is claimed, why would doing that, or why would not doing that, be to my good and spiritual well-being, and how would either one reveal that I am faithful or unfaithful to God?"

I suspect that one of the reasons many people are put off by the more harsh parts of Revelation is because they do not see Revelation as a love letter, but, rather, they see it as a harsh list of punishments ready to be meted out indiscriminately over the slightest infraction. This is to totally misread and misappropriate Revelation. We should be induced to ask, rather, "How do those harsh words of indictment function to be an encouragement rather than be a cause for anxiety, fear, and trepidation? Is this difficult particular passage or that particular point an encouragement to continue to do what is right? Or, is this particular passage or point meant to encourage me to reverse course while there is time?" Revelation, as God's love letter, provides both encouragement and warning, which together serve a single purpose: equipping the saints to remain faithful in spite of 2 things: first, we are encouraged to remain faithful in spite of all the temptations that are there to tempt us; and second, we are encouraged to return to faithfulness in spite of all we have been to the present time. The past can't be changed but the next chapter is waiting to be written. God can help me change and be found, in fact, to be a sheep rather than a goat. One of the great

things about Revelation is that it reveals that, until the end finally comes, time is a gift from God by which we are encouraged to take seriously all that God is telling us in this Bible love letter.

My prayer is that in your personal reading and study of Revelation as we go through the series to come you will see every word, verse, passage, and point as a positive love message from the Lord Jesus, personally, to you.

In anticipation of worship next week and the weeks to follow, I commend to you again Numbers 6:22-27. It is known as the "priestly benediction." When today's final hymn is sung we will not formally end worship. I won't offer a closing benediction because, as I suggested earlier, I'm asking that you take some time on your own to read again and ponder the first chapter of Revelation. It is so important for you to let the Holy Spirit talk to you directly as the Spirit did John. After you have done that, please go to the concluding part of Numbers, chapter 6, and receive the closing benediction.

Let us now sing our final hymn. "Count Your Blessing" [name them one by one]