

07-12-09 – Who’s Really In Control?
Patchogue Church of the Nazarene
Revelation 21:1-8

Today’s text is found in the book of Revelation, the last book in the Bible. Actually, our text is in the 21st chapter, which is found about one or two pages from the end of the entire Bible. We’re going to look at the first eight verses in a few minutes.

The book of Revelation is probably the book least preached from in the entire Bible. When you think of Revelation, what comes to your mind first? Many people think of it with fear, and others disregard it because of its bizarre symbolism and heavy spiritual activity. Many think of this book in terms of the Left Behind series, and that’s the only source of understanding they have. What a shame! I have come to love this book. Over the years I have unleashed its depth of hope for the people of God – that includes us. I spent the better part of two years teaching this book to the small group I lead at Brookhaven Lab, and taught it in three separate sessions here at our church. I even have my lesson notes for the complete book up on our On-Line Bible Study link off our church Web Page. There is so much controversy and speculation around this book that it makes it hard to teach or preach a sound message from it. There are so many people out there sensationalizing the events of this book that they lose the true and simple meaning. This book brought fear to my life when I first encountered it. In fact, it was the study of this book that brought me to a fearful faith in Jesus Christ.

“If we approach Revelation trying to get a handle on dates and timelines or understanding events and identifying symbols, we stand in danger of missing altogether the basic, triumphant message of this wonderful book.” (Rev. Jeren Rowel, DS Kansas City District – Preacher’s Magazine Lent/Easter 2009). What we really need to ask is the question, **“Who’s really in control here?”** As we experience more and more turmoil and loss in our lives, we begin to ask this question if even only in our deepest core. We may be afraid to ask this of God or even of our leadership, but we think it all the same.

In order to really get a glimpse of the reality of this book, we need to get a glimpse of the reality of the church of Jesus Christ during the period of its writing. The author is John the Beloved (an apostle of Jesus Christ). He was imprisoned for his work in preaching the Gospel of Jesus to the Gentile world in his time. After having been arrested and sentenced, he was banished to a small island in the sea to serve out his time in solitude. The isle is called Patmos. While on this isle, he received this revelation of Jesus Christ.

Let’s step back and get a small picture of what the scene was like for the original audience and for us as well. Before Jesus was crucified and resurrected, He promised that He must “go away,” but that He would return to bring His own to Himself. This promise hung in the hearts of His followers. His words stayed in their minds. **John 14:1-3 - “Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God; trust also in me. In my Father’s house are many rooms; if it were not so, I would have told you. I am going there to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am.”** (NIV)

In the book of Acts, we are told that angels testified, **“Men of Galilee, why are you standing here staring at the sky? Jesus has been taken away from you into heaven. And someday, just as you saw Him go, he will return.”** - (Acts 1:11 NLT). Yes – Jesus was and is to return, in the sky, just the way He left us – now, over 2000 years ago.

The people of this time period were waiting for the One who was to take them out of their oppression, out of their persecution, out of their bondage from the Roman Empire's approach to life. He defeated death and dying in His resurrection. His parting promise to them was that He would return to bring the Kingdom of God to its full fruition. They believed it. They staked their very lives on it. They waited for Jesus to return, but He never did. Even John waited for his Jesus to come back and rescue him from the situation he was in because of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. So many thought they would be spared the suffering they wound up enduring for the cause of Christ, but He didn't rescue them as they anticipated. They thought it would happen in their lifetimes. Decades passed and many were imprisoned and even martyred, but nothing changed. Is all this really true? Is it still worth being faithful in spite of pain and persecution and death? **Who's really in control?**

Is it really any different today? Christians are expecting their life to be without trial or suffering, but that's not what Jesus promised. **Matt 10:34 - "Do not suppose that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I did not come to bring peace, but a sword."** NIV
Luke 12:51 - Do you think I came to bring peace on earth? No, I tell you, but division.

He promised that if we remain faithful, then at the end, we will receive the reward of an eternity in the presence of God. That is our goal, not a life of easy living here and now. I'm sorry to say that everyone will suffer disappointment and pain and sickness and even death (unless the Lord returns in the mean time). Those things will only be done away with in the final chapters of this book. That is where we are looking today – to remind us once again that this will all be done away with in the new kingdom.

In the mean time, there are many who are suffering many trials of life. There are some among us who have lost their jobs, and some have been cut back in hours and/or salary or both. Some have lost their retirement investments and others have lost their homes. What is going on in our country today? We can't really fathom the effects of our failing economy. I've been affected; my sons have been affected; you have been affected. We live in threat of terrorist attack on our own soil. Our leaders are drifting farther away from God. What can we learn from this horrible situation and the Word of God?

Everything seems to be spinning out of control. Tsunamis, hurricanes, earthquakes... Many times evil seems to be winning out over good - - **Who's Really in Control?**

We are taught as Christians that God is in control, but what do you do when serious illness hits home regardless of your faith like Pastor Josh Benventre. Or how do you react when your 25 year old son crashes his motorcycle and is left with brain damage and one less leg to stand on – like Sean Vaz. What do you think when your 20 year old son is coming home minding his own business and is killed by a drunk driver a couple of blocks from his house – like my son's friend, Ed Z. Where is God when disaster strikes not just in some remote location in the world but right in our own backyard? Where is God in all of this? **Is He really in control?** If so, what does that mean in everyday terms. Think about it.

These are the same type of questions the early church was asking. Not much has changed in over 2000 years – has it? Jesus came and completed His mission conquering sin and death by his crucifixion and resurrection. He lit the world on fire by promising to return and rescue His followers. The early church grew in leaps and bounds mainly because of this promise. They expected to see it happen in their lifetimes, and so do we and all generations before us. We are hanging onto the promise of Jesus to come back and finally overcome the curse of sin and suffering and death that has plagued humanity since creation.

The people then really were not much different than we are today. They started to wane in their faith and endurance because of so much suffering and persecution. We are getting a little tired in our faithfulness to God in living a holy life in the face of such opposition from the world around us. Is it all really true? Is God really still accomplishing his work in our world (His world)? Is it worth it to remain faithful in spite of the pain, in spite of the suffering, in spite of persecution, sickness, and even death?

Who's really in control?

It is into this setting that the Revelation of Jesus Christ comes to John at the darkest point in his life. The main message of this book and our text today is: God IS still at work to accomplish what He started in the Garden of Eden after Adam and Eve blew it big time causing the curse of sin and death to be passed along to all of us. God has been active throughout history preparing and working through his chosen people and prophets. Everything came to a head in the perfect work of Jesus Christ and continues even to this day. It will continue until all is completed at the end of history as we know it.

Revelation chapter 21 is a beautiful summary of that work. Let's finally get to our text for today – Rev. 21:1-7 NLT... Read v. 8 on your own to see the consequences of not trusting in God!

1 Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the old heaven and the old earth had disappeared. And the sea was also gone.

The sea, at this time, was an ominous thing. It represented chaos and the dark unknown. They didn't have the equipment we have today. Their wooden boats would hit an unseen reef or rock and sink or capsize or break into pieces. Paul was shipwrecked three times in his missionary journeys. The sea was a bad thing – evil and scary. It was a vast separation of land masses. Now in our text – it's gone – no more chaos, no more fear, the evil has been done away with by Almighty God.

2 And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down from God out of heaven like a beautiful bride prepared for her husband. 3 I heard a loud shout from the throne, saying, "Look, the home of God is now among his people! He will live with them, and they will be his people. God himself will be with them.

These verses bare the essence of the message to God's people. No more questions, no more doubts, no more fear, no more injustice, no more sin. God Himself will dwell with His people and nothing can possibly go wrong again. We are His and He is for us. The long awaited promise is fulfilled. We will dwell in the presence of Almighty God forever. This is Heaven in reality. All through history we desire to be with God and have God be with us continually. This is what was promised and is now fulfilled – It is going to happen some day. Every other promise of God has come to pass; why not this final promise too?

4 He will remove all of their sorrows, and there will be no more death or sorrow or crying or pain. For the old world and its evils are gone forever." 5 And the one sitting on the throne said, "Look, I am making all things new!" And then he said to me, "Write this down, for what I tell you is trustworthy and true." 6 And he also said, "It is finished! I am the Alpha and the Omega--the Beginning and the End. To all who are thirsty I will give the springs of the water of life without charge! 7 All who are victorious will inherit all these blessings, and I will be their God, and they will be my children.

All who are victorious (NLT) – All who overcome (NIV) – those who overcome the temptation to fall away because doubts creep in – the temptation to stop believing because it just doesn't seem to be working out – the temptation to give up because I just can't understand what God is doing. Those who overcome these things will inherit all the blessings mentioned – and be with God forever and ever. I can't make you believe all this; I can't prove it to you like a math equation. Some things just require faith. All I can say is that this inspired Book proclaims a truth that needs to be repeated today: **God is in control!** He is still working. He is bringing to completion the work of Jesus. One day, you can count on it, the questions will be answered, the doubts will be erased and the faithful will live in the presence of God. I choose to believe it - - **God is really in control!**

We will continue to falter in our faith regarding this great truth. One reason is that we have a different sense of what it is to be in control. To us being in control means that we will know every detail about every situation we will face. God's idea of control is much broader - concerning the history of the universe in comparison. There are often large gaps of time that pass by in our bible records. What is happening between the end of Genesis and the beginning of Exodus, or from the end of the O.T. prophets to the beginning of the N.T. and Christ's incarnation? Where is God during these black-out times? What's going on in the minds and hearts and situations of the people during these gaps? Don't you think they are thinking or even saying – **Is God really in control?** Why isn't He doing something about this or that situation or circumstance? But God is always looking at the big picture and working out His perfect plan in His perfect time.

Does this mean that God doesn't care about the details of our lives because He is only looking at the big picture? Not at all! Look at the wording in our text. God will *“wipe away every tear from our eyes,”* etc. That sounds pretty personal to me. God cares about us personally and is concerned about what we are going through all the time. However, His cure is much more complete and more long-term than we can comprehend. He is *the Alpha and the Omega – the beginning and the end*, and He knows what is down-the-road for each of us before it happens.

So what should our response be? Many people hang onto the Revelation as a way to escape the suffering of the world and even escape death, but I don't think that is what God has in mind. It's NOT – God is in control so just hang in there and wait for the trumpet to sound so you can get beamed up and escape. It should be that God is in control so tell everyone you can that God is in control, and He has a plan for each one of us and humanity as a whole. We should be faithfully serving Him all the time. God is in control, so love one another. God is in control, so comfort one another in the midst of your pain, doubts, questions, and disappointments. Don't hesitate to share your frustrations, anger and struggles with God.

It all comes down to trust. We must trust that God is really in control. He is in control of your situation, circumstances, sufferings, and your future. Will you trust Him today with those areas of your life where you are struggling to really trust Him? He can't comfort and assure you if you don't let Him. When are you most tempted to believe that God is really NOT in control? Can you bring that struggle, that doubt, those questions before Him today? Could you ask Him to touch you in your circumstances and minister His grace and peace to you today? He knows exactly what you are feeling and where you are right now. Allow Him to speak words of assurance to you today.

God is really in Control! *“Those who overcome shall inherit these things, and I will be their God and they will be My people.”* He has not abandoned you – **He is still in control.**