

The Key to the Book of Revelation

Revelation 21:1-6

A Sermon for the Fifth Sunday of Easter

A Lutheran pastor tells about attending a special Sunday night event at the Pentecostal Church in his town to hear a visiting preacher. The place was packed. The noted preacher said he had seen the New Jerusalem coming out of the clouds as described in our text for today, Revelation 21. He said it was a cube, 1500 miles on each side. He had seen it coming through a telescope, and it would arrive very soon, just the way it is described here in Revelation 21.

Most people think that when we die, we go to heaven which is somewhere else. But it says here in the text that the new heaven and the new earth are coming here.

What's more striking is the kind of enthusiasm that drew so many people to go out on a Sunday evening to hear this man.

The late great Hal Lindsey, author of *The Late Great Planet Earth*, said that a sure sign of the end was the establishment of the state of Israel (1947). He said that the end would come within one generation of that happening, but it didn't happen, and so the end times had to be recalculated.

In August 1987 there was a different but similar phenomenon, what was called the Harmonic Convergence, noting the alignment of the sun and the moon and six planets. This alignment, based on the Aztec calendar, was said to trigger a shift in the earth's energy, causing the world to turn from war to peace. But that didn't happen.

That reminds us of 1844, the year of The Great Disappointment. The Baptist preacher, William Miller predicted that Jesus would return to earth by 1844. Thousands gathered on hilltops, dressed in white, waiting to be caught up in the clouds. When Jesus did not appear, Miller and his followers were disappointed and concluded that God had changed his mind. But these events and Miller's teachings led to the formation of the Seventh Day Adventist Church.

What do we say to all this?

First of all, we have something to say about the use of Scripture. As we look at this material called apocalyptic material, it eventually comes very boring. The easy way to understand the Book of Revelation, and other places such as the Book of Daniel, is to go to the Book of Jubilees. That is not in the Apocrypha. You read it and say: "That sounds like the Book of Revelation." But, of course, it's the other way around. The Book of Revelation sounds like the Book of Jubilees.

Lutherans take Scripture very seriously, warts and all. As you know, in both Mark 13:30 and Matthew 24:34 it says: "All these things will take place before this generation comes to an end."

We have to ask ourselves: “That was at that time. Why at this time is it still not happening?” Significantly in Mark 13:32 it says: “But of that day or that hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father.” No one knows the time of the end. That’s in Scripture too. You can’t just ignore it. So how do you put it all together?

What’s involved as well is the whole desire for proof. Prediction is really a way of saying: “I’ve got some kind of proof for something.” People misunderstand prophecy as prediction and proof.

If you look at the Old Testament, you see this is not the kind of thinking they had. In Jeremiah when the Hebrews were sent into Exile, he said: “In 70 years you will return.”

If you take the date of the return, which is agreed upon as 539, and whether you say the Exile was 597 or 587, it doesn’t add up to 70 years. It adds up to 48 or 58. They were not doing that kind of predicting that is popularly associated with “prophecy.”

As you know, in Isaiah 7:14 it says: “A young woman will conceive and bear a Son and his name will be Immanuel.” People have said that’s a prediction of Jesus’ birth. But if you ask Jewish scholars, they laugh and say: “Do you know your Hebrew? What it means is just obvious, and you can’t make something else out of it.”

When we look at what is called prophecy, it’s important for us to realize that in the Hebrew Bible those books we call 1st and 2nd Samuel and 1st and 2nd Kings, are to us historical books, but in the Hebrew Bible they (along with Joshua and Judges) are called “Former Prophets.” And the others (Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and the Twelve minor prophets) are called “Latter Prophets” because they understand those texts to be prophecy, and prophecy is really preaching, forth-telling.

The basic point that they make is that there was something called the Exodus. The big event was that out of nothing, the Lord chose these people and made them a great nation. If the Lord could create them out of nothing, then they looked back to the beginning and said: “He also created everything out of nothing.” And they looked to the future and said: “As he has acted before, he will act again.” There was the first Eden; there will be the new Eden. There was the first Jerusalem; there will be the New Jerusalem. There was the temple; there will be the new temple. There was David; there will be another David. There was a covenant; there will be a new covenant. God is consistent.

It wasn’t a matter of trying to do or make what we call predictions.

What is really at stake here is that people are looking for some kind of proof, and that brings us to the whole matter of miracles. People want miracles because then they can say: “Then I know it’s true.” What are they saying?

It's fascinating to see what the New Testament says about miracles. In the four Gospels they talk about those around the cross, the soldiers and others who mock Jesus and say: "Give us a sign. If you're truly the one that you say come down from the cross. Show us." In Mark 8:11-12 the Jews come to Jesus and say: "Give us a sign." Of course, "sign" and "miracle" are the same word in Greek. What they are really saying is: "Give us a miracle." And Jesus says: "No miracle will be given to this generation."

If you look at the parable in Luke 16 about the rich man and Lazarus, and the rich man is in Hades in torment and he says: "Couldn't you please send somebody back to tell them what this is like and what it's about?" And the answer comes: "If they will not listen to Moses and the prophets, they will not listen to someone who comes back from the dead."

Basically, in the Gospels and in Paul there is a criticism of what we call miracle faith. Not only is there this passage in Mark 8:11-12 where Jesus says: "No sign, no miracle will be given this generation," but also in Matthew 16:1-4 and Luke 11:29, it says: "An evil and adulterous generation seeks a sign, but no sign will be given to it except the sign of Jonah."

This is in parallel to what happens in the Gospel of John 2:18. The Jews came to Jesus and they said: "Give us a sign, give us a miracle." And then comes the reply: "Destroy this temple and in three days I'll build it up again." That's just the same as: "No sign, except the sign of Jonah," who, after all, was three days in the belly of the whale and then came out again. In other words, there is no sign except the cross.

Miracle faith is not faith in Jesus Christ but faith in my reason, my conviction, my thinking, my feeling.

Over against that, the New Testament talks about Christ-centered faith, which is quite different. With that we come back to this kind of literature, this kind of thinking we find in the Book of Revelation, which is called apocalyptic, which is the Greek word for revelation. Although apocalyptic literature gets quickly boring when you study it, it has a couple of big points that are important for us.

The big point about all apocalyptic literature is that Jesus is Lord. He created time so he's Lord of time. That means he is Lord of history, and even though he becomes involved in history, he also brings it to an end. That is judgment. Judgment comes to each one of us individually as well as to the whole cosmos. He is Lord; we are not. He is in charge of the processes of history.

With that the whole key to the book of Revelation is found in the 8th chapter of Romans.

There Paul writes: "In all these things I am persuaded that neither death nor life, nor will be able to separate us from the Love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord." He is Lord and so that is the word of comfort and authority, and with that comes the cross. In this same section of Romans 8 it

says: “He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all, will he not also give us all things with him?” (Romans 8:32)

That is in parallel to the famous section in 2 Corinthians 12. You remember Paul has a thorn in the flesh. In 2 Corinthians 12:12 Paul writes about miracles and says: “Hey, all you super apostles, I’ve done more miracles than any of you, but I asked the Lord to take away the thorn in my flesh and the Lord said, ‘No,’ because he said: “My power is made perfect in weakness. Therefore, I will rejoice in my weakness. When I am weak, then I am strong.”

The Gospel is this: In that which looks like defeat and weakness in the cross is the message of how God works and of how God then certifies this through the resurrection. This is the message which is the key to his Lordship and to all of history and to our lives.

Amen