

Sermon #130
Rev. 1:9-20
September 3, 2017

God's Report Card

His name was John. He was a disciple, a follower of Jesus Christ. He saw a vision, a revelation of Jesus concerning events that were happening and would happen soon. He wrote it down in a letter and sent it to seven churches in the province of Asia.

He was a man of suffering. He was exiled to a bare, rocky volcanic island called Patmos, located about forty miles off the coast of Southern Asia in the Aegean Sea. He was sent there because he preached the word of God and witnessed to the resurrection of Jesus Christ. All that he stood for went contrary to the Roman government. They had their ways of dealing with radical, nonconformists who challenged their rule.

It's the Lord's Day. The Christians on that island have gathered for worship. They now worship on the first day of the week, recognizing that Jesus rose on that first day. They celebrate Eucharist, which we call communion. They pass the bread and the wine, a reminder of Jesus' body and blood given and shed for them. As in all their services, one Christian is given the task of praying for the whole church. The worship service continues with this person leading the whole body in concentrated prayer.

As John worships, something amazing happens. He remains in his earthly place, and yet at the same time is transferred to a new place – a place of heavenly dimensions. There he hears a loud voice behind him that sounds like a trumpet blast. Oh, he will hear many more of those later in the vision. But now as he worships, it is this loud voice behind him that captures his attention. Perhaps the voice comes from behind to show him how new and different this vision will be. He must act. He must turn around if he wants to learn more.

So, he does turn around. And the voice speaks loudly and clearly:

“Write down what you see, and send it to the seven churches: Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea.”

Now he can see clearly the person who is calling him. Standing there in the middle of the gold lampstands is one like a Son of Man. He wears a long robe with a gold sash across his chest. He recognizes this as the garb of a high priest. And he stands where the high priest normally stands. His head and his hair are white like wool, as white as snow. His feet are as bright as bronze refined in a furnace, and his voice thunders like mighty ocean waves.

He is also holding something in his right hand, his dominant, powerful hand. As John looks closer he sees seven stars in his right hand. Then he sees a powerful, sharp two-edged sword coming from his mouth, the image of the authoritative Word of

God that penetrates deep into the thoughts and desires of humans and exposes them for who they are (Heb. 4:12). Finally, John also notes that his face is bright as the sun in all its brilliance.

John immediately falls to the ground as though he were dead. It's not possible to see something this wonderful and this powerful and still live. Yet the man lays his right hand on him, the hand that also held the seven stars. And he says to John, "Don't be afraid." What words of comfort! John is not going to die as he thought. This vision begins with words of comfort, just as in many other visions where angelic beings appear to humans. The message is so encouraging. "Don't be afraid."

So, this higher being continues, "I am the First and the Last. I am the living one who died. Look, I am alive forever and ever" (v. 17, 18)! Now John knows for sure the identity of this man. He is Jesus Christ, the very one he knew in life and witnessed to. He is the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. He died a cruel death, rose again in bodily form, and lives forevermore. There is no doubt that this man is truly the Son of God, Jesus Christ, the King of Kings and Lord of Lords. He is the supreme high priest of all time. And he holds the keys of death and the grave. He overcame the sting of death and the power of sin, and gives victory to all who follow him (1 Cor. 15:55-57). All who follow him can also be overcomers in this world and the next.

Jesus now continues as he says, "Write down what you have seen – both the things that are now happening and the things that will happen later" (v. 19). This is the second time that John has been instructed to write these things down. So important is this message that John must surely write it all down.

Just in case there was any doubt, Jesus wants John to know the true meaning of the symbols. The seven stars in Jesus' right hand, his dominant hand, are the seven angels of the seven churches. The seven gold lampstands are the seven churches. That's the beginning of the vision of Jesus that John receives.

Now let's take a step back and see the bigger picture reality. Even this introductory part of John's vision tells us a lot about Jesus and his churches, not just the seven churches who will receive the letters, but all churches throughout all time. Every church and every individual can relate to one or more of these encouraging and challenging messages. So, what can we learn from this part of the vision?

- I. Jesus cares about his church.

When John turns back to see the loud voice speaking to him, he sees the one like a Son of Man, Jesus, standing among the lampstands. The lampstands are the churches. Jesus stands among his churches – not over them or under them, but among them. Jesus wants to live with his church, his people. That also shows how much he cares. The intent of the original creation in Genesis 1 and 2 was to create a people who would be with him and know him. Then in the end of this vision in chapter 21, John sees the new heavens, the new earth, and the New Jerusalem coming down out of

heaven. And once again a loud voice says, “Look, the home of God is now among his people” (21:3)! Once again God is with his people. “He will live with them, and they will be his people. God himself will be with them.” And he will be with them forevermore. Jesus stands among the lampstands to show how much he cares for us and loves us. He wants to be with us.

I recently had time to see my father, including both my parents and brothers and other family members. How good it was to be with them again. My father has had some tough battles with health issues in the past few years, so it was especially good to be with him. That reminds me how good it is to be with our God. Jesus, is already standing among the lampstands, his church, and he calls us to be with him. He wants us to be with him. That’s good news. That’s his special loving care. That’s grace.

II. Jesus wants to use his church.

The lampstands image has a purpose. That purpose is to give light. Each church in this vision has a lampstand, a light – a golden one. The idea is that each one is to shine their light for Christ. After all it is his light. He came to give light. And his churches are his instrument of light and peace in a dark world.

Two Sundays ago, I had the privilege of visiting for the first time, Hopewell United Methodist Church. I also visited Adams UMC in Adams, Nebraska, my Dad’s home church. Both churches are on the same circuit now. Dad filled in for the pastor on sick leave and he gave a great message of being faithful. I couldn’t help but think how appropriate the message was, because both churches have been used by God for a little more than 150 years. My grandfather Henry Harrison Coleman, and his father, my great grandfather, Gerhard Harrison Coleman, both attended Hopewell UMC and were predominant lay leaders. Many preachers and some missionaries also went out from that church, a church that was faithful to the message of Jesus Christ and is still a viable witness to their community.

Now each of the churches in Revelation were also to be faithfully used by God. That’s why each one of them receives a message. Some of the messages contain encouragement to keep doing what they are doing. Some of the messages contain much conviction to change their ways, for they have almost lost their light. They have almost succumbed to the fallen world of Babylon – the image of darkness and sin in Revelation. And some churches receive a mixed message of encouragement and conviction. But no matter how far the church strayed, it is still God’ vehicle of light and redemption in a fallen world. The key for the church is to come out of fallen Babylon that has already been defeated, and not live like her anymore in any way. Each church belongs to Jesus and must be ready to be used by him. And the same is true for individual Christians. God wants to use us, his church. But in order to use us, he must also revive us time and again.

III. Jesus revives his church.

The vision of the letters to the churches follow in chapters 2 and 3. Each message reads somewhat like a report card. Did you enjoy getting report cards when you were in school? Maybe, maybe not. The consensus in our Bible study on Wednesday night is that report cards were not something we really wanted to talk about. They were bad news. For some of the churches, that is true, but for others, God's report cards were good and full of encouragement. But the purpose of these messages (aka report cards) were for revival, strength, and encouragement. Jesus wants to use his churches. And he can only do so when they are truly in step with his spirit. Even the whole vision of Revelation is given so that all who read it would obey Jesus' words and all that was written in the vision (1:3).

Over the next three Sundays we will take a closer look at these report cards, so to say. We will highlight the messages in three categories, as Dr. Robert Mulholland puts it in his commentary on Revelation. One category includes the "good churches" who were living faithful to Jesus' words, such as Smyrna and Philadelphia. These churches receive a grade of A+. We will check to see how they were faithful and what we can learn from them. Another category portrays the "bad" churches. Let's say they receive a grade of a D or an F. They were the ones who had almost totally succumbed to the fallen world of Babylon. Those churches were Sardis and Laodicea. Then finally we will review the "ugly churches" who were somewhere in between with a mixed report card of some As, Bs, and a few Fs. But all still have potential. All still have a lampstand for use. And all can use a brighter light or a refilled light of revival. (Hold up a candle and light it.) We must listen to the message and obey it in all our churches and all as individuals.

Conclusion

John received a great vision of Jesus. He heard a great message and passed it on – a message of hope, a message of truth and conviction, and a message of love and revival. For Jesus cares about his church, he wants to use it, and he wants to revive it. Oh, Word of God speak today, help us to see your majesty and be your people. Amen!