

Sermon: A & Ω

New North Church, Hingham

Rev. Steven Aucella

28 April 2019

Based on **Acts 5:27-32; Revelation 1:4-8**

We are still in the Easter season, and the lectionary wants us to hear readings from Acts and Revelation throughout. Each week, the three-year lectionary cycle offers selected readings from the Old Testament, the Psalms, the epistles, and the Gospels. We can choose some or all of the readings for that day, and there are readings for each weekday too. But Acts and Revelation don't quite fit into that format, so the powers that be decided Easter would be the perfect time to hear about the apocalypse.

Tradition and literary analysis both hold that Luke wrote the Book of the Acts of the Apostles as a sequel to his Gospel. For this reason, it is sometimes called the Fifth Gospel. It could also be called the Book of the Acts of the Holy Spirit, owing to how the Spirit empowers and guides the church in its formative years. In fact, Acts is the only book in the Bible that describes life in the early church.

An apocalypse is a 'revelatory vision' about the future or about heaven, or both. They are stories usually told in the first-person; they use a lot of symbolism; and they tend to make a distinction between the evil in this world and the expected good times of the future. The Greek word transliterated as *Apocalypse* simply means *Revelation*.

Revelation, or, more precisely, The Revelation of Jesus Christ, is a letter written by a man named John which he shared with seven specific churches to be read aloud from start to finish. These seven churches happen to be in Asia, in that part of the world we now call Turkey. And while we say it was written by John, John himself says that it came from God through Jesus who made it known by sending his angel to his servant John. So, let's give credit where credit is due.

Having said all that, what are these two readings about? Basically, they are about the persecution of early Christians. That's a big discussion, and we tend to understand it as a time when Christians were being actively hunted down, thrown in jail, beaten, tortured, or worse. And while some of that did happen, it tended to be localized here and

there, for there was no widespread, state-sponsored persecution of Christians by Rome at the end of the first century.

A governor named Pliny, wrote a letter to Emperor Trajan, right around the time John delivered his letter, looking for advice. He asked, should these people be punished simply for calling themselves Christians, even if they have committed no other crime? Pliny admitted executing a few Christians, but only after giving them three tries to renounce their ‘superstition,’ but he didn’t kill them for being Christians; he killed them for their ‘obstinacy and stubbornness,’ which could be dangerous to the state.

Trajan’s response was very short: Christians should not be sought out. They should be punished only if they are accused and handed over, and only if they do not deny being Christians. He wrote that ‘anonymous accusations may not be considered in any trial.’

So, even though the state took a lenient view, one’s neighbors often did not, and it was that sporadic, local sort of persecution that John felt these seven churches might expect to experience, now or in the near future.

Everyone – Romans, Greeks, Egyptians – found themselves living in interesting times. The Parthians had defeated Rome on the far eastern edge of the empire in 62; then Rome also had to deal with unrest in Gaul, then Germania, and finally Judea. Add into the mix the political instability caused by having three emperors in two years at one point, a famine, and even earthquakes and volcanoes. This added up to about forty years of disaster and uncertainty. People wanted to know, what the heck is going on?

When Rome destroyed the Temple in 70, that caused many Jewish and Jewish-Christian people to migrate north into Asia. At the time, Christ followers were still a new thing, both the Jewish and Gentile kind. They had no history, no established place of worship, most of them were lower class, they might have been cannibals, and they followed a convicted criminal who had been executed as an enemy of the state.

They were considered irreligious atheists because they had no ‘gods,’ and they made easy scapegoats when things went wrong, as when Rome burned during Nero’s reign. Christians were subject to social and economic discrimination everywhere, and sometimes became victims of mob violence. They were the ultimate outsiders. To survive all that and thrive, you needed a strong sense of identity, and a strong faith.

These days, it's almost impossible for us to understand the stresses endured by our Christian ancestors. But in every age since, people of faith have been tested, tempted, scorned, and attacked simply for being people of faith.

In many countries, people manage to get through their days without beating someone up, or setting a car on fire, or having anything more unusual than a delayed commute happen to them. If you stay on your side of the road and I stay on mine, we will pass each other without incident or a spike in blood pressure. Most of the time, we're just people being people, running around, getting our errands done. We cross paths in every direction, going hither and yon – sometimes, we even talk to each other – and it all seems to work just fine.

So, when something inexplicably evil happens, without any motivation other than hatred, we're caught by surprise; we're shocked, saddened, and angered.

In the past six months, people have been killed at a *synagogue* in Pittsburgh; at a *mosque* in Christchurch, NZ; at multiple *churches* in Sri Lanka on Easter Sunday; and yesterday, on the last day of Passover, at the Chabad of Poway Synagogue in Poway, California. In the same period, we have seen or heard about three churches burned in Opelousas, LA. In France, multiple Catholic churches have been defaced or burned, not to mention the fire at Notre Dame Cathedral, which may or may not have been arson.

Slowly but surely, Christianity is being driven out of the Middle East, from Egypt, Iraq, and Syria. On the whole, things are pretty good for people of faith in this country, but around the world, it's the first century all over again.

We are far from being a religious society these days, and many of us question what it means to be a Christian (or a person in any faith tradition) in a secular world. Around here, what does it mean to belong to a church, to this one in particular or to any church, to any place of worship? What does it mean to say, 'my life belongs to God' when there are people out there who want to end it for that very reason?

Would we be as courageous as Peter and the apostles, when they answered the council by saying, "We must obey God rather than any human authority?" This was after they had been arrested and told to stop their teaching and healing in the Temple. They kept it up because that's what you do when you live according to God's ways.

If we back up to the beginning of chapter five in Acts, we see that the apostles, after doing their work in the Temple, suffered for Jesus by getting arrested and thrown in jail. But after a miraculous jail break engineered by an angel of the Lord, they went right back out there to continue proclaiming Jesus. There is no further mention of the angel or the mysterious escape. Maybe Luke is saying that miracles are part of every-day life. Maybe good things happen when we are steadfast in the face of persecution.

Sometimes, obeying God rather than human authority can put people at needless risk, for example, missionaries evangelizing in a place where religious activity has been declared illegal. It may be that standing in solidarity with those who ‘suffer dishonor for the sake of the name (Acts 5:41)’ is a better way to obey God rather than human authority. Maybe it’s better to choose a cause and fight for it in ways that cause no harm to those for whom you fight.

In this Easter season, we proclaim Christ has risen, and that Jesus is out among us. In Revelation, John tells us that Jesus loves us and has freed us from our sins and made us to be a kingdom of priests serving God. Come what may, John is confident that all will be well.

Knowing all that, how do we embody Easter? How will we, as a church, reflect God’s presence in our lives and in the community? How will we go about our Father’s business, as one church organist once put it? Whatever it is, we are called to do it boldly, guided by the Holy Spirit.

Blessed are those who hear the words of the prophecy and who keep what is written in it; for the time is *now*.

Amen.