

Revelation 1:1-8

November 6, 2015 + Evening Prayer
Doxology Encore + Chiara Center, Springfield, Illinois
Pastor Tim Pauls

In the name of Jesus. Amen

For all the mysterious descriptions in the Revelation to John, it starts out with a most practical declaration: God gives this revelation to Jesus so that He might show His servants the things that must soon take place. "Servants" is a nice translation, because the word is actually "slaves" (δούλοις), which has a certain inevitability to it: when these things that must take place do take place, they're going to take place with His slaves in the thick of it.

You've no doubt read through Revelation once or twice, so you know what must take place. The descriptions are colorful and dramatic. There are plenty of plagues and lots of wars. There are beasts from land and sea, with an antichrist and a dragon and a bloodthirsty harlot of Babylon thrown into the mix. A tormented world cursed by sin writhes in rebellion against the Lord who creates and redeems; and since it cannot go after Jesus Himself, it goes after His bride instead. His slaves in that time aren't just slaves: they're martyrs who testify and often suffer for doing so.

Back in high school, my dispensationalist friends and teachers would tell me that all of this was still coming in the future. Their solution, of course, was the rapture where Christians would be rescued from the world before things got really hairy. You didn't want to be one of those left behind—you didn't want to be one of the slaves or martyrs up against the dragon, the beasts and the whore of Babylon.

But you know better: these things are happening now, and they have been since the time of the apostles. It's clearly and dramatically true as Christians are rounded up and beheaded for the faith overseas, but it's happening here too. The beasts and dragon and harlot are hard at work right where you are. You see it as courts legalize immorality and the church down the street celebrates sexual diversity, putting pressure on the "intolerant" likes of you. You see it as legislation forms to suppress the influence of the Church in society, while promoting rebellion against the Lord and His Word. You see it in the individual lives of parishioners as they are afflicted in mind and body, as kids leave the faith, or jobs are lost, or marriages fall on hard times.

That's what's going on in the book of Revelation. That's what's happening to you and yours, and so you sound the warning. The frustrating thing is that things don't look like Revelation. It looks like ordinary life, the normal problems of flesh and blood—there's nary a fiery dragon or a fearsome beast to be seen rising out of the ocean; and harlots are hardly bloodthirsty, but really quite popular these days.

Faith sees more, though. And by faith you know that "we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places" (Ephesians 6:12). This is a time of significant spiritual warfare, you're on the front lines and the devil is bigger than you are; and one of the many challenges to the fight is that he's convinced much of the world that nothing spiritual exists in the first place, so spiritual people ought to be ignored. Tricky devil.

Smart devil, too: strike the shepherd, and the sheep will scatter. *The Shepherd* is beyond the reach of the evil one, though, so Satan's going to go after His sheepdogs. So it always has been, and so it continues today: the Church continues its pilgrimage to the Promised Land under

a cross of suffering, and you can bet that Satan has an especially evil eye for pastors and leaders who labor in congregations to hold up the prophets' hands. History is littered with such who sought to live faithfully as those set free from sin to be slaves of Jesus, and who suffered martyrdom for it. The world was not worthy of them.

These things must take place, our text insists. Church work isn't that much fun these days. Even in the best of times, you're confronting the curse of sin as you deal with the sick, the dying and the distressed; and all of that takes a grinding toll on you more than you know. But this is not the best of times, and now we're into a time where our own society grows ever more hostile to faithful Christians. So the devil teams up with sinful flesh and tempts pastors and congregations with all sorts of doubts and worries. Sometimes it's the budget or attendance numbers. Sometimes it's the aftermath of church discipline. Sometimes it's just doubt about the church's mission. Sometimes it's another trudge graveside and back.

So here you are: slaves and martyrs, up against the principalities and powers of darkness in a dying, hostile world.

And what does Jesus call you? He calls you blessed.

Blessed! As in, "Blessed is the one who reads aloud the words of this prophecy, and blessed are those who hear, and who keep what is written in it, for the time is near." Blessed is the one who reads aloud and the one who is listening—in the context of Revelation, that's the pastor and the hearer. Blessed are those who keep what they hear—not "keep" as in "keep the rules," but "keep" as in "treasure" and "hold onto." Really, as in "believe;" and now hear some of what the Lord gives you to treasure.

Blessed are you! For before He called you out of bondage to sin to be His slaves, He became a slave Himself. Philippians 2 declares that He took "the form of a slave [δούλου], being born in the likeness of men" (Philippians 2:7). And whom did He come to serve? You. "Being found in human form, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross" (Philippians 2:7). It was all for you, and He continues serving now. The One who did the slave-work of washing the disciples' feet is the One who has "enslaved" you by the washing of water and the Word—enslaved you to eternal life, freedom from death. His yoke is easy, and His burden is light.

Blessed are you, for He is the faithful witness, says our text: He is the faithful martyr. He witnesses, testifies of the truth of God for your salvation, for He is the Truth of God for your salvation. He has suffered at the hands of sinful man for your redemption; and where it is given to you to suffer in His name, it is not because God is mad at you, but because sinful man so clearly identifies you as one redeemed by His blood.

Blessed are you, for He is the firstborn of the dead. He has died (for you), but He is risen (for you!); and He is now the ruler of kings of the earth. You're no match for sin and death and devil, but He has conquered them all. They might be bigger than you, but they're no match for Him. The victory is already won. The Lamb who was slain is enthroned forever. For now, He remains patient and merciful with rebellious peoples, sending forth His Word and calling more sinners to repentance, that they might have grace and life in Him.

Blessed are you, because for now, He sends forth that Word through your mouths. Whether it's from the pulpit or in casual conversation, in this world full of noise the Lord honors you with lips that drip grace and life and salvation for those in dire need of His blessings.

Courage, friends. This age and this world will not last forever. "Behold, [Christ] is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see Him, even those who pierced Him, and all the tribes of the earth will wail on account of Him." No wailing for you though. You are blessed by the One who was pierced, and He is faithful forever.

Indeed, "To Him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by His blood and made us a kingdom, priests to His God and Father, to Him be glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen"