

**Sermon Notes – December 31, 2017**  
**“Revelation and Resolution”**  
**Brian Walton**

“They shall hunger no more, neither thirst anymore. The sun shall not strike them nor any scorching heat for the Lamb in the midst of the throne shall be their shepherd and will lead them to springs of living water and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.” I cannot read the 21<sup>st</sup> chapter of the Book of Revelations without an intermingling of grief and consolation arising within me. It is now forty years since my ordination and I can no longer count the number of times I have stood at an open grave repeating these words before committing to the ground the final remains of someone’s loved one. There is truth and hope in these words. Truth in that the earthly remains shall no longer hunger or thirst or be touched by the rays of the sun. Hope, that the spirit of the departed will be guided by the eternal shepherd to springs of living water and that their tears shall be no more.

It is strange that while I can repeat from memory these words from Revelations I have, in the past forty years, preached on this much-misunderstood book only twice. The Revelation of John presents a strange conclusion to the holy book we call the Bible. Scholars believe it was written by a little known Christian prophet about 60 years after Jesus death. It is thought that this John might have been a prisoner on the Greek Island of Patmos and that his book points toward the brutality of the Romans and predicts their ultimate demise. The Book of Revelations uses strong language to describe Rome alternating between “the beast” and “the whore of Babylon.”

Although modern scholars understand that John’s prophecies of doom are directed at Rome; some fundamentalist preachers have attempted to ascribe them to current situations including communism, the rise of Islam, the affirmation

of the LGBTQ2 community or other marginalized groups within society. A quick Google search turned up a sample of such wild interpretations under the category of apocalyptic prophecies from the book of Revelation: “World conditions ... indicate that the last days began in 1914 ... At that time God’s kingdom began ruling in heaven (and restricted Satan’s activity to the earth as seen in war, famine, earthquakes, epidemics, crime, family breakdown and so on. It is a clear sign that the end of the world is approaching).

In order to better understand the Book of Revelation I once took a course devoted entirely to this text. The instructor provided a helpful understanding of the word “apocalypse” defining it as “the end of an era”. Although many have preferred to interpret apocalypse as the end of time, it is much more helpful to understand it as the end of an era. For the writer of the Book of Revelations the apocalypse he envisioned was the end of Roman rule and the beginning of a life shaped by God. My instructor suggested that when we understand apocalypse as the end of an era we see many apocalyptic ages. The end of the Holy Roman Empire, the end of the age of Colonialism and the British Empire and, some would suggest in light of China’s fast-growing economy, the end of American dominance. Our personal lives also have apocalyptic moments. My 65<sup>th</sup> birthday next November may mark the end of an era of my paid employment that began as a grocery clerk at the age of 16. We have many apocalyptic moments in our lives – the end of childhood, the end of formal education, the end of the single life, the end of married life, the end of reliable health, the end of independent living. Apocalyptic events can be tumultuous and create a sense of instability. The end of colonialism in India resulted in bloody protests, political instability, a rejection of empire and the establishment of the nation of Pakistan. Disruption and upset can also arise from apocalyptic events in our personal lives. For

example, the loss of a job or the loss of a life partner can create financial hardship, altered relationships and grief.

The Book of Revelations; however; is not only about apocalypse and disruption. In today's reading from chapter 21 hope is predicted after the apocalypse. In the verses we read this morning, John envisions a new heaven and a new earth. The scholars are quick to point out that this new heaven and earth are not somewhere else (not a new Garden of Eden; not a new planet) but rather right here, right now. What makes them new is that God is in their midst. Revelations does not espouse an escapist theology where all will be well by and by in some fanciful world; rather John is telling us that when we allow the God-power to inform us - our world will be different, we will be different. It is interesting to note that the famous Canadian Methodist J. S. Woodsworth understood this passage to imply that God was inviting us to create the New Jerusalem in our midst. He moved from a comfortable pulpit to All People's Church in downtown Winnipeg working with immigrant slum dwellers and expounding the "social gospel." He eventually was elected to parliament where he worked tirelessly for labour legislation, the League of Nations, revision of patriarchal divorce laws and criticized the government's compliant support of the banking industry. In 1926, he bargained his vote to secure the enactment of the Old Age Pension plan for Canadians. Woodsworth believed that the New Jerusalem arose as we allowed the God-power to flow through us into the world.

When I consider all of these influences it helps me understand why those who set the readings for each Sunday chose this passage from Revelations for New Year's Day. In some ways, the changing of the calendar is an arbitrary demarcation – time might better be measured by our birthday, or the end of winter, or the beginning of a new job or a move to a new location. Still, custom suggests that Dec. 31<sup>st</sup> is an apocalyptic moment, the end of an era, the closing

of 2017. I am told that when my mother-in-law was teaching Sunday School she would, each year, present her class with clean sheets of paper upon which to write their hopes and dreams, their resolutions and commitments for the New Year. What are your hopes and dreams, your resolutions and commitments? What would you write upon this paper? Do you hope for the New Jerusalem among us? How will you commit to release the God-power in your life, your family, your community? The good news from the author of the Book of Revelations is that God chooses to dwell among us as the power of love (like a shepherd), as a source for our lives (like living water), with eternal compassion (ready to wipe every tear from our eyes).

An era is ending, a new one is beginning. Events good and bad will beset us and our world. We are challenged to choose our attitude to these events. We are challenged to recognize the God-power in our midst. We are called to love this God, to love our neighbour and to value ourselves. We are embarking on a new era, the God-power envisions a new heaven and a new earth for us. Let us take the paper, embrace the Love, and live our lives with hope. Amen.