

## “Early Edition”

“Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away.”

*What would you do if tomorrow’s paper came to your door today?*

This was the premise behind *Early Edition*, a television program that ran for five seasons in the 1990s. Gary Hobson is an average stockbroker who one day is visited by an orange cat coming to his door with a copy of the *Chicago Sun-Times* – from tomorrow! Gary finds that there can be certain advantages to having tomorrow’s news today; it gives him insight into winning lottery numbers, the victor in the big game, and who will win the upcoming election. But he also discovers that there are some disadvantages to having a glimpse into the future: should he warn victims of upcoming crimes, or caution motorists who will be involved in accidents not to leave home, or prevent a serious disaster before it happens? How will he convince others that he knows about the future without coming across as a maniac? How can he make good choices with this peculiar information that arrives on his doorstep one day in advance?

Such early editions, of course, do not exist (even though I remember reading the Night Owl Edition of the *New York Daily News* when I worked the night shift during my student days, a paper that advertised itself as offering “Tomorrow’s News Tonight”), but many people fantasize about what they would do if they had insight into the future. People consult horoscopes, clairvoyants, fortune tellers, and other sources that claim to hold the key to seeing into the future. People who wager on sporting events consult so-called experts who claim to be able to accurately predict the outcome of upcoming games, and investors consult sources that offer advice on stock market trends in order to make purchases the hope will reap future dividends. The lure of an *Early Edition* is very appealing, even if having access to such information may turn out to be a double-edged sword.

For some people, the Bible is approached as a source of gaining insight into the future. Many people look to persons claiming to have special prophetic insight into the Bible’s predictions about the future, interpreting certain passages as proof of their claims about future events. History is filled with predictions of the end of days and the Second Coming of Jesus Christ; as recently as May 2012, billboards and bumper stickers boldly predicted that this event was a certainty, because “the Bible guarantees it.” Of course, this guarantee proved false, and once again Jesus’ warning to his disciples in the Acts of the Apostles went unheeded: “*It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority.*” (Acts 1:7).

When people approach the Bible as an “early edition” to help them predict the future, the first place to which they usually turn is the last book of the Bible, the book of Revelation. It remains one of the most popular and least-understood books of Scripture; even its name is often misunderstood, because it is a “Revelation,” *not* “Revelations.” It is a work that is fantastic, baffling, confusing, frightening, and radically different from most other books of the Bible (the Old Testament book of Daniel is similar in style and vocabulary). It is the source of many popular phrases and works of fiction: the University of Notre Dame once nicknamed their defensive line “The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse,” while Clint Eastwood based his character in “Pale Rider” on a verse in this Biblical book:

- “I looked, and there was a pale green horse! Its rider’s name was Death, and Hades followed with him; they were given authority over a fourth of the earth, to kill with sword, famine, and pestilence, and by the wild animals of the earth.” – Revelation 6:8.

The popular “Left Behind” series of books is based on what many believe is Revelation’s teaching on the Rapture, including a voice from heaven that shouts “*Look! He is coming with the clouds; every eye will see him,*

*even those who pierced him; and on his account all the tribes of the earth will wail.*" (Revelation 1:7). While it is a popular book for many people, other Christians have been skeptical about its place in the Biblical canon; Martin Luther believed that the book was "*neither apostolic nor prophetic*," and believed that Revelation should be relegated to a subordinate place within the New Testament canon, preferring "*books which give me Christ clearly and purely.*" (*Preface to the New Testament*).

Much of the confusion surround the book of Revelation is due to a lack of understanding of its context and style of writing. The book was composed and sent to seven churches in the Roman province of Asia (modern-day Turkey) at some point between A.D. 69 and 96 "*in order to encourage them with the assurance that, despite all the forces marshalled against them, victory was theirs if they remained loyal to Christ.*" (Bruce Metzger, *Breaking the Code*). It is written by an author who identifies himself as "John," although this is probably not the same person that wrote the Gospel of John. He writes from the Greek island of Patmos, where he received what he describes as "*the revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show his servants what must soon take place; he made it known by sending his angel to his servant John, who testified to the word of God and to the testimony of Jesus Christ, even to all that he saw.*" (Revelation 1:1-2). It is called "Revelation," not "revelations," because it is a single revelation that John receives and reports to the seven churches. The book is written in a literary genre called "apocalyptic," which means an "unveiling" or "disclosure." It is a style of biblical literature that is also found in the book of Daniel, Isaiah 24-27, Ezekiel 38-39, and Zechariah 9-14. It usually appears during periods of persecution, when those who seek to share the word of God must write in a form of code so that the message can get through enemy lines without being intercepted by the oppressors.

- "In the case of Revelation, some of the symbols may represent code language already in use in the community, while others may represent material used in the community's worship. Still other symbolic imagery may represent older apocalyptic material circulating in the author's community which the author now uses in the service of his own message. Such symbols evidently had meaning for the author's original audience and therefore indicate the communal nature of this writing. We learn more about the symbols by learning more about the audience and its liturgical and literary traditions."  
– Richard Jeske, *Revelation for Today: Images of Hope*.

In approaching the book of Revelation, we need to take great care in learning what these symbols meant to the book's original audience so that we too can hear the message of hope today that God first spoke to these churches through the visionary who was faithful to the Lord's command to "*write this, for these words are trustworthy and true.*" (21:5).

These words from today's second lesson offer us a glimpse at one of the visions John of Patmos shares with the seven churches, a vision in which "*I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more.*" (21:1). The theme of "newness" is at the heart of the prophet Isaiah's message to the exiles in Babylon ("*See, the former things have come to pass, and new things I now declare; before they spring forth, I tell you of them.*" – Isaiah 42:9); it is hinted at in the promises to the angels of the seven churches ("*I will write on you the name of my God, and the name of the city of my God, the new Jerusalem that comes down from my God out of heaven, and my own new name.*" – 3:12) as well as in the song that greets the Lamb ("*... and they sing a new song before the throne and before the four living creatures and before the elders.*" – 14:3). This newness is now fulfilled; what was past, the "first," the provisional rather than the fundamental, is no more. The "sea," which was a threatening place, the object of judgment ("*A third of the sea became blood, a third of the living creatures in the sea died, and a third of the ships were destroyed.*" – 8:9), is also no longer a danger.

In place of this threat comes a blessing which descends from heaven: "*the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband.*" (21:2). As Jerusalem was the

holy city in which God dwelled in the midst of God's people ("Zion hears and is glad, and the towns of Judah rejoice, because of your judgments, O God. For you, O LORD, are most high over all the earth; you are exalted far above all gods." – Psalm 97:8-9) the new holy city is one that originates in heaven and is beautiful beyond all comparison. The new Jerusalem "stands in contrast to its old counterparts and adversaries and therefore offers a living alternative to John's readers ... in the new city instead of the destructive sea, there is 'a river of the water of life ... flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb.'" (Jeske). Unlike the teachings of the Rapture in which people ascend into God's presence, in this image people do not go up to heaven but rather God comes down to earth to dwell with mortals; in Revelation Jerusalem "signifies the election of a new people and the sealing of a new covenant ... a new creation, one in which God Himself will have his hand upon and it will be a home like no other." (Israel Kamadzandu).

As the holy city descends from heaven, John hears a loud voice from the throne proclaiming that "*the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them as their God; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them*" (21:3). God will "dwell" (tabernacle) with God's people in the same way in which the Word that became flesh dwelled with people at the beginning of the Fourth Gospel ("And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth." – John 1:14). God's dwelling with people characterizes the life of the holy nation ("And I will walk among you, and will be your God, and you shall be my people." – Leviticus 26:12) and is at the heart of the prophet Ezekiel's vision of the new Jerusalem ("My dwelling place will be with them; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people." – Ezekiel 37:27). Three times in this verse God is said to be "with them," fulfilling the prophecy spoken by Isaiah and repeated by Matthew at the birth of Jesus: "... and they shall name him Immanuel, which means, 'God is with us.'" (Isaiah 7:14; Matthew 1:23).

The manner in which God dwells in the midst of God's people in the new Jerusalem is strikingly different from the presence of God in the Holy City in previous times. God's presence in the Temple was highly restricted; only the High priest could enter the Holy of Holies, and only on the day of atonement. Now, God's presence is so intimate that the Lord is described as one who will "*wipe every tear from their eyes.*" (21:4). This is the third time in the Bible that God is described as one who relates to God's people in such an intimate fashion:

- "Then the Lord God will wipe away the tears from all faces, and the disgrace of his people he will take away from all the earth; for the LORD has spoken." – Isaiah 25:8.
- "... for the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of the water of life, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes." – Revelation 7:17.

As God is now intimately present with God's people, all that once threatened to separate these people from their God will no longer exist: "*Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away.*" It is the fulfillment Jesus' promise that as the Good Shepherd nothing can snatch them away from his loving, protecting embrace:

- "My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish. No one will snatch them out of my hand. What my Father has given me is greater than all else, and no one can snatch them out of the Father's hand. The Father and I are one." – John 10:27-30.

In this midst of this powerful, hope-filled vision, God speaks for only the second time in the book, declaring from the throne "*see, I am making all things new*" (21:5), and commanding John to "*write this, for these words are trustworthy and true.*" Once again, the words of the prophets are fulfilled in this glimpse of the fulfillment of God's promises spoken "*in many and various ways by the prophets*" (Hebrews 1:1), the promise that "*my word that goes out of my mouth shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and succeed in this thing for which I sent it.*" (Isaiah 55:11). So certain is the fulfillment of these divine promises

that the one who is “*the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end*” declares boldly that “*it is done!*” (21:6); “*the consummation of all that had been predicted and promised is so certain that in a sense it may be said to have been reached before it is actually accomplished.*” (Metzger). God’s abundance will spring forth “*as a gift from the spring of the water of life,*” the promise Jesus makes to the Samaritan woman at the well that “*those who drink of the water that I give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life.*” (John 4:14).

- “John sees and experiences the new heaven and the new earth and summons all believers to see that God allows him to perceive. Like the book of Genesis, readers are informed that God is the origin of all things and in Revelation, interpreters are given an envelope message, namely: God is the origin and end of all things. It is this envelope that God’s people are called to always live into, to remember, to be shaped and informed both spiritually and theologically.” – Kamadzandu.

We gather this morning at a time when many of our sisters and brothers in our congregation have found themselves walking through the valley of the shadow of death. We have gathered here in our sanctuary, in our chapel, and at graveside to remember the lives of those we have loved and who are now gone from our sight and to commend them into God’s loving care. It is a time to mourn, a time when we gather to comfort each other with the strength we can offer one another; but it is also a time in which all of us are comforted with “*the comfort of a holy and certain hope.*” As we gather in God’s presence in this time of mutual sorrow, we are offered an “early edition” of what God has in store for all of God’s children when all of God’s promises are fulfilled. It is the promise that even as walk through this valley of the shadow of death, “*I fear no evil, for you are with me*” (Psalm 23:4). It is our sure and certain hope that “*neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.*” (Romans 8:38-39). It is that offering of “tomorrow’s news tonight” in which our Lord Jesus promises us that “*if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also.*” (John 14:3). It is our sure and certain hope that as God has been our help in ages past, God will surely be our hope for years to come; for “*the steadfast love of the LORD never ceases, his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning, great is your faithfulness.*” (Lamentations 3:22-23).

There is no “early edition” that will help us will the lottery, or score big in the stock market, or predict who will win next year’s Super Bowl. But God’s Word is our true “early edition” a glimpse into our future which is filled with hope because it is God’s future for God’s children, our confidence that “*neither life nor death shall ever from the Lord his children sever ... his the loving purpose solely to preserve them pure and holy.*” Amen.