

Easter II
Revelation 1:9-20
Tribulation
St. Mary the Virgin
April 24, 2022
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I John, your brother, who share with you in Jesus the tribulation and the kingdom and the patient endurance, was on the island called Patmos on account of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus. I was in the Spirit on the Lord's day, and I heard behind me a loud voice like a trumpet saying, "Write what you see in a book and send it to the seven churches, to Ephesus and to Smyrna and to Pergamum and to Thyatira and to Sardis and to Philadelphia and to Laodicea." Then I turned to see the voice that was speaking to me, and on turning I saw seven golden lampstands, and in the midst of the lampstands one like a son of man, clothed with a long robe and with a golden girdle round his breast; his head and his hair were white as white wool, white as snow; his eyes were like a flame of fire, his feet were like burnished bronze, refined as in a furnace, and his voice was like the sound of many waters; in his right hand he held seven stars, from his mouth issued a sharp two-edged sword, and his face was like the sun shining in full strength. When I saw him, I fell at his feet as though dead. But he laid his right hand upon me, saying, "Fear not, I am the first and the last, and the living one; I died, and behold I am alive for evermore, and I have the keys of Death and Hades. Now write what you see, what is and what is to take place hereafter. As for the mystery of the seven stars which you saw in my right hand, and the seven golden lampstands, the seven stars are the angels of the seven churches and the seven lampstands are the seven churches."

It has been my practice for a number of years to preach only on the Gospel. However, the Gospel for Easter II is always the Doubting Thomas story and while I don't imagine you remember clearly what I said last year when I preached on it here, I do, and I'm tired of hearing what I have to say on Doubting Thomas. I wanted to go off in a new direction. I have preached, here and elsewhere on Doubting Thomas for at least six years. Today my sermon is based on the interesting reading from Revelation. That's how radical a break I'm taking.

Episcopalians generally avoid Revelation since for many of us the only contact we've had with it revolves around Jehovah Witnesses knocking on our doors. That's unfortunate. It's a fascinating book and is the source of much art. I frequently preach somewhere on the so-called Low Sundays of Easter II and the Sunday after Christmas. I also preach almost weekly in the summer when parish clergy are on vacation. I believe that on Sundays like today the congregation is made up of the most committed Christians so I feel like I can take you seriously and perhaps take a few risks?

Today's vision in Revelation is a case in point. It's fantastic. The symbolism is hard to wrap one's mind around. That's unfortunate because if we study it in its context it's no harder to understand than either a Political Cartoon or even a Cartoon in the New Yorker. We just don't understand the context. Unfortunately explaining all of the imagery would turn this into a lecture and not a sermon. If you ask for a copy of the sermon you will find explanations in the footnotes.

What do we know and what don't we know? We have no idea who John of Patmos was. He's not John the Evangelist. We know that the book was so fantastic that those who decide such things decided that there would be no more books in the New Testament after this one made it in. We understand that time has passed and the Second Coming hasn't happened so early Christians are discouraged. They wonder if they put their faith in a false promise? John of Patmos works with this issue and speaks against the evil visited upon humanity by Rome. As Russians today dare not say the word War to describe the war in Ukraine, John of Patmos dared not say Rome so he writes of Babylon, but Babylon is long gone and Rome is oppressively present.

He writes of Tribulation. This is one of my favorite Greek words, θλίψις/thlipsis. It means both Tribulation, a word Episcopalians rarely use, and Labor Pains, an experience some of you have had. Tribulation is not day-to-day angst but is the feeling one has when our existential reality is threatened or when our hold on the world is tenuous, or at least our hope of finding meaning in the world seems to elude our grasp. The Hebrew slaves in Egypt were in Tribulation. Blacks in slavery, Jim Crow and continuing today under rampant discrimination are in Tribulation. LGBTQ+ people in many States are in Tribulation, especially those who are Trans. Tribulation is the state of the powerless. Civilians in Ukraine today are especially, but not exclusively, in Tribulation. For John of Patmos the Christians of his day lacked all power and were in Tribulation. The Book of the Revelation to John is a curiosity to those who are not in Tribulation but a comfort to those who are.

Today those who claim to be in Tribulation are flying a false flag. White Christian Nationalists are not in Tribulation. They are in power. Russia is not in Tribulation; it is in power. Straight Female athletes are not in Tribulation no matter how threatened the Governors of Florida, Texas and elsewhere see their athletic achievements to be. Those seeking power over another are not in Tribulation they are in power and they are persecuting the powerless. Tribulation cannot coexist with power. Those who have power are never in Tribulation no matter how loudly they claim it. John writes to the powerless not to those who fear the loss of power or standing.

John assumes we recognize the images he uses. He does not mean to be obscure. Follow along in your bulletin and I'll mention a few of the references. The Long Robe is from Exod 28:4, 7¹. The Golden Girdle is the Mark of the King from 1 Macc 10:89². The Dazzling White Hair: Dan 7:9³. The Feet and the Voice: Dan 10:6⁴. They were drawn from texts John of Patmos could assume his audience knew.

^{1 4} These are the articles of clothing that they should make: a chest pendant, a vest, a robe, a woven tunic, a turban, and a sash. When they make this holy clothing for your brother Aaron and his sons to serve me as priests, ⁵ they should use gold, blue, purple, and deep red yarns and fine linen.

² He sent to him a gold buckle, such as is the custom to give to the king's kindred. He also gave him Ekron and all its surroundings as his possession.

³ As I was watching, thrones were raised up. The ancient one took his seat. His clothes were white like snow; his hair was like a lamb's wool. His throne was made of flame; its wheels were blazing fire.

^{4 6} and his body was like topaz. His face was like a flash of lightning, and his eyes were like burning torches. His arms and feet looked like polished bronze. When he spoke, it sounded like the roar of a crowd.

John also challenges popular religion. Astrology was as popular then as today. The holding of the stars by the one like the Son of Man, signifies that the stars are powerless. They determine nothing in our lives or in the world. Astrology is denied.

I read Calvin & Hobbes daily. They're all reruns. This week Calvin was convinced that his horoscope was determinative of his reality. He was crushed to find it was meaningless.

Power belongs to God. The only weapon is the Two-Edged Sword proceeding from the mouth of the Human One, aka the one like the Son of Man⁵. It's an image also from the OT, Isa 11:4⁶ and Isa 49:27.

Trust me that everything else in this text represented images known to the recipients of Revelation.

The assertion is that God's power exists because God is the Creator. Caesar is not a god. The gods of the Romans, Greeks and even Parthians are not gods. Only God as revealed in Christ Jesus is God.

The Lampstands signify the churches. John is sending out a message of hope.

Do we need that message of hope? Are we in Tribulation? I've spoken of some instances of it at the beginning of this sermon. Do they matter? Do we believe that faith has an answer to any of these issues?

If we believe that faith is for the individual alone and Christ died for my sins and not for our sins then perhaps Revelation has nothing to say to us. If we believe that we have made our own way in the world as productive and diligent individuals, then perhaps Revelation has nothing to say to us. If we believe that we should do unto others before they do unto us, then perhaps Revelation has nothing to say to us.

However, if we're genuinely worried about the world we're leaving for the next generation. I have 8 grandchildren. I am worried. If we know that the persecution of people of color, of varying sexual orientation or of minority political opinions is real we are in Tribulation. If we realize that the people of Ukraine are victims who live in a real culture and country, then we see a response to Tribulation. If we know that when we leave this church, we step into a world full of Tribulation then, because we're Easter people, it is our joyful message to say that we have a solution.

We have to live that solution and show that we love everyone regardless of color, financial failure or success, sexual identification and in the case of Ukraine, the very real physical threat they are under. But showing this love doesn't mean we simply say that we agree, life is tough and unfair. Intellectual agreement is insufficient. Thoughts and prayers are insufficient. Taking action so that we live in a way that changes the world in order so that, for instance, the Governor of Florida realizes that he is on the wrong side of faith is a start; or that, we live in a way for instance that forces white supremacists to realize that whatever god they think they're worshiping it's not the Prince of Peace who rose from the dead, is a start; or we stand behind efforts to ensure that Mr. Putin and the Patriarch of the Russian Orthodox Church realize that they cling to and preach a

⁵ I increasingly believe that the title Son of Man has been made too much of. It was simply a picturesque way to say Human Being.

⁶ He will judge the needy with righteousness, and decide with equity for those who suffer in the land. He will strike the violent with the rod of his mouth; by the breath of his lips he will kill the wicked.

⁷ He made my mouth like a sharp sword, and hid me in the shadow of God's own hand. He made me a sharpened arrow, and concealed me in God's quiver,

dead gospel, is a start. It means that our faith is corporate not individual. It means Christ rose for all, not just for me.

Ultimately, it means that we realize that we have a role in wielding the two-edged sword that comes out of the mouth of the One Like the Son of Man. We have tongues, hands, feet, and minds and we can use them to stand with and help relieve the very real Tribulation so many live in.

Happy Easter.