

The A-to-Z of the 2nd Reading (24Apr22)
Revelation 1:4-8

Like it or not, you get to hear from Revelation for six straight weeks of this Easter season.

One of my professors described how we “treat Revelation with the kind of uneasy silence that is usually reserved for the more eccentric members of one’s extended family.”* But for our typical trepidation of this last book of the Bible, I’m hoping your open mind will be surprised and pleased that it’s not all violent satanic beasts, that it’s not rapture and predictions of who is destroying the world, that instead you’ll find things hopeful and maybe even familiar, so much that you already know it by heart.

One immediate clarification: the title is Revelation, not plural Revelations. Repeat after me: Revelation. That name comes right at the start: “The revelation of Jesus Christ...to his servant John” (1:1).

Revelation in Greek is “apocalypse,” which we’ve taken from this book—or, again, mistaken—to refer to the end of the world, the destruction of everything. But apocalypse is just the Greek word for taking off a veil—just like revelation or revealing is the Latin version for pulling back a veil. Or, even more simply “uncovering.” A message from Jesus is uncovered, discovered, revealed, unveiled in this apocalypse, and we’re told it’s an angel that communicated Jesus’ message (though, again, the word angel just means messenger, so we still might not be too quick to let our imaginations run wild.)

Another helpful entry point is that this was a letter. It wasn’t a prediction of things thousands of years away, but was written for the sake of a contemporary audience. Specifically, John says he’s writing to share this revelation to encourage seven churches in what is now Turkey. It may be that they were under persecution of the Roman Empire, or it may have just been that their faith was wavering. “Lukewarm” he’ll call it.

For our part, once more, we keep hearing from the letter neither to decipher an old code nor to shed

light on history, but because the message from Jesus also somehow encourages us.

Maybe we hear this letter today and in the next weeks to illustrate what Easter means in our lives, how resurrection functions in a bigger picture that stretches in the face of oppression and destruction and anything that feels like it could overpower the promise and force us to forget the truth of where we’re headed. Or maybe we hear it because we’re apt to get complacent and we are also lukewarm, with Easter only a week ago and already in our daily lives we’re thinking it’s past and joy is doubtful and we’re less confident, less “with faith.”

For building confidence and empowering your faith, it seems a little odd essentially to have the envelope of ancient mail today. But that’s what we get. The old form was to start a letter by signing your identity—from John—and next giving the addressees—to the seven churches, with whom the Spirit abides.

Then it gets to a greeting. Rather than our etiquette of starting “Dear such-and-so,” John follows a Christian pattern adapting it to say “grace and peace be with you.” We take that now as standard church-speak. But maybe we, too, could practice offering that rather than just saying hello, since we certainly recognize our need and our world’s need not just for greetings but for grace and for peace or shalom, God’s wholeness and wellness.

Of next note is that John says he is writing on behalf of—or from—“Jesus Christ, the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of the rulers of the earth.” That alone makes this letter worth continuing to hear.

“Witness” is actually the word “martyr,” so we have here a synopsis that Jesus Christ died, was the first raised, and now is the ultimate authority. Death is neither the end, nor the final power. If we’re struggling to remain faithful, the end results are not really the end results because “the firstborn of the dead” surely won’t be the last.

And so, to overcome our lukewarm-ness and to live our beliefs seriously, we’re encouraged by Jesus Christ being ruler of the rulers—king of

* Craig Koester, “Revelation and the End of All Things,” p32

kings and lord of lords, it will say later (19:16). When this time focused in worship might seem silly or inconvenient or a Sunday sidebar to the more important goings-on of current events, that Jesus Christ is ruler of rulers means it all falls under his purview and judgment. Everything from striving against injustices to striving for our future success or wanting to get past our imperfections fits only and entirely within his frame. There's nothing that has more claim on you or our world than he does, and we might as well stop acting like other things are more important.

As one writer describes it: *This is a word about God for us today. The closing verse of our reading has Jesus famously declaring that he is the Alpha and the Omega, the A and the Z, the beginning and the end, the dawn of the world and its dusk. Revelation is thus not about providing a road map to the end of days, but is fundamentally about the character of God. Revelation is thus a radical way to shape how we relate to God and one another today [with] a posture of trust in God and God's work...seeing the work of God in the seemingly ordinary, unremarkable moments that fill our lives.***

If God in Christ is your origin and your destination, you know where you came from and where you are headed. The story of Easter is also your story. And though there's a lot of alphabet between A and Z—just today, that may include B breakfast with a B banana and B birdsongs, as well as the B bread of communion and B barrows of the wheeled variety, and the day may go on to include B blue skies as it remains B breezy, and the day may have B a ball game or B a book to read, and though the day may seem too surrounded by B bad news of lives B barren or in B bondage—though there's still much more alphabet to make it through, if God in Christ is your A and your Z, you can live in confidence, and find every D day and H hour and S second held in God's promise and presence, the God in Christ who isn't just A and Z but is necessarily B C D E F W X Y and the rest, the God who loves you and freed you and makes you to be

a kingdom. That is how to live in this frame, and live toward your ending. That's a revelation worth repeating.

**Eric Barreto at <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revise-common-lectionary/second-sunday-of-easter-3/commentary-on-revelation-14-8-3>