

Sunday, October 14, 2012
Rev. Diane Monti-Catania

For today's New Testament reading we are going to turn to the very end of the bible – The Revelation To John.

This complicated book is often ignored and perhaps more often, misinterpreted.

The author, John, is separate and distinct from the writer of both the Book of John and the Letters of John.

Current scholarship believes that members of the Johannine community – followers of the disciple John, son of Zebedee, likely wrote all three books.

The book is thought to have been written over a long span of time and completed toward the end of the first century.

Revelation is usually assigned to the ancient literary genre called “apocalypse.”

An apocalypse is a first person narrative in which the author relates one or more revelatory visions about the future or the heavenly world or both.

There is most often a battle between God and Satan – or good and evil – followed by God's intervention to reward God's people along with punishment or elimination of their earthly oppressors.

These stories are rich in metaphor and symbolism and were fairly common in first century Asia.

You can find the reading from the end of The Revelation To John: 21: 1-7.

Sermon – “All Things New”

I chose to preach on Revelation today for two reasons.

The first is that our book group has been reading Elaine Pagel's book “Revelations” which explores the historical context of the visions, prophecy and politics included in this final book of the canon and we have discovered many interesting insights that I wanted to share with you.

The second reason is that this is one of those books of the bible that has been almost completely left out of the lectionary – just a few verses reserved for New Year's Day and All Saints Day.

As we continue our exploration into those parts of the bible that are less familiar to us, I thought this was a good choice for study.

I also invited the Men's Bible Study to consider this book this Fall.

Some find Revelation a strange book with weird creatures, bizarre numbers and strange sequences of visions-too fanciful and crazy to make any sense;

Some find Revelation to be an offensive book full of visions of destructions.

God appears angry and vengeful.

It has unkind things to say about Jews.

It presents women in negative ways.

It can sound smug and self-righteous, dangerous in its declarations of favor for Jesus-believers and destructive for non-believers.

Some see it as a book that predicts the immanent end of the world.

Elaine Pagel points out that John of Patmos, the author of Revelation was writing to a people who are now two or three generations removed from the disciples who knew Jesus.

They have been nurturing a belief that Jesus would return at any moment.

Some have grown discouraged.

Some are wavering from their disciplined lives – wondering what it is they are sacrificing for.

In addition, John is concerned with the followers who have embraced Paul's teachings and strayed from the strict Jewish laws.

John was one of many – Jews, Christians and pagans – speaking in prophecy and writing books of revelations during the first and second century.

It is unclear how and why this particular book of Revelation was selected to be included in the canon.

Revelations, as it is most commonly called, is a book perhaps best known for two common misinterpretations:

The Rapture made popular in the Left Behind series and earlier novels is not even included.

Early Christian writers borrowed that idea from Paul's letter to the Thessalonians (4:17) and attributed it to The Revelation of John.

There is also no mention of the Antichrist. This interpretation was imported from 1 and 2nd John where it was used to describe those members of the Johannine community who had departed from the traditional beliefs about Jesus.

Having had the chance these past few months to study this book and the various interpretations, I have come to embrace the idea that Revelation provides a profoundly optimistic and hopeful message.

It creatively draws on the language of the Hebrew Bible, as well as first century culture, to express the hopes of a people dominated by a culture that is oppressive and violent.

It is written as a prophecy, not a prediction.

The early prophets, as we know, analyzed present situations calling on the people to pay attention to God's will and God's covenant.

Prophetic language speaks of the future in response to the present circumstances.

The writer of Revelation is addressing small communities of Christians living in seven cities in the area that we know today as Turkey.

These early Christians are struggling with their level of involvement in the civic communities dominated by Roman rule.

Some believed in active participation – others wanted distance and separation from the world.

Rome's empire seemed eternal, but John's Revelation ends with a message of hope that the fulfillment of the world's destiny lies in God's hands, not with Rome.

God will complete God's good and gracious purposes for human history.

Revelation uses language that engages the imagination and isn't that what religion is for?

Don't we choose to believe in things that we cannot see or prove because knowing that there is a God – a God more powerful than us, is comforting?

The early chapters of Revelation describe every kind of horror and destruction: disturbing fantasies of violence, children being killed, one-third of the earth, trees, sea, rivers, sun, moon and humanity are destroyed.

But, and this is important, this is the seed of our faith – the atrocities, the horror, the deceit are all ended when the new city of Jerusalem is sent down from God to the Earth.

Warren Carter characterizes the message of Revelations this way:

“God renews the world so that it is marked only by God's good purposes. This renewed world has no place for tears, death, mourning, crying and pain.

The essence of God's presence is experienced in life.

There is a river and a tree of life.

God's presence is also experienced in faithful covenant relationship.

There is no place for sin... The people walk in the light, the presence and salvation of God who guides them.

They bring their honor or splendor to God.

The nations are healed. God's patient restraint, God's powerful mercy, has won the day.”

As human beings, this message of hope sustains us in times of trial. This is the power of our covenant with God.

This is our tradition.

Amos' words written in the seventh century before Christ promise that if we "Hate evil and love good, and establish justice...the Lord God of Hosts will be gracious."

Two hundred years later, still over 600 years before John's Revelation, the prophet Isaiah wrote these words:

For I am about to create new heavens and a new earth;

the former things shall not be remembered or come to mind.

But be glad and rejoice for ever in what I am creating;

for I am about to create Jerusalem as a joy, and its people as a delight.

I will rejoice in Jerusalem, and delight in my people;

no more shall the sound of weeping be heard in it, or the cry of distress.

No more shall there be in it an infant that lives but a few days, or an old person who does not live out a lifetime;

for one who dies at a hundred years will be considered a youth, and one who falls short of a hundred will be considered accursed.

They shall build houses and inhabit them;

they shall plant vineyards and eat their fruit.

They shall not build and another inhabit;

they shall not plant and another eat;

for like the days of a tree shall the days of my people be, and my chosen shall long enjoy the work of their hands.

They shall not labor in vain, or bear children for calamity;

for they shall be offspring blessed by the Lord—and their descendants as well.

Before they call I will answer, while they are yet speaking I will hear.

The wolf and the lamb shall feed together, the lion shall eat straw like the ox; but the serpent—its food shall be dust!

They shall not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain, says the Lord. (65:17-25)

Scripture has always provided hope.

We turn to the inspired word of God when we need reassurance that things will get better.

We know, that in the pages of the Bible, there are words that have provided comfort for thousands of years.

We read the Bible to help us make sense of our lives.

We turn to scripture for guidance on how to deal with the challenges life brings our way.

Throughout history, people have suffered the same calamities we endure, lived with the same fears we harbor, wondered about the same issues that cause us anxiety.

Inevitably, each generation, throughout time, has turned to God.

In the Revelation of John we once again hear the story –no matter how tragic our lives seem to be at any one moment – there is hope.

There is a promise.

God sent his son Jesus Christ to save us once and he will send him again.

We don't know when, we don't know how – but we do know that we can trust in the promise that God has made: "I will be their God and they will be my children.

"O God our help in ages past, our hope for years to come, our shelter from the stormy blast, and our eternal home."

Let us go from this place knowing that God's ever-present love will guide and protect us this day and forevermore.

Let us imagine a future rooted in this love when all things will be made new.