

**"A Hope Filled People"**

**Scripture Passages:** 1) **Psalm 78:1-8**  
2) **Revelation 1:1-3**

**Introductions:** For the last several years Hanna has been asking me to preach through the Book of Revelation. Since the Presbyterian Women are presently studying Revelation I thought this might be a good book for us to spend some time in. I don't know that we will go all the way through the book, but we will see.

The first eight verses of Psalm 78 are a beautiful introduction to the Book of Revelation. "Give ear, O my people, to my teaching; incline your ears to the words of my mouth. I will open my mouth in a parable; I will utter dark sayings from of old, things that we have heard and known, that our ancestors have told us. We will not hide them from their children; we will tell to the coming generation the glorious deeds of the Lord, and his might and the wonders that he has done."

Psalm 78 expresses the belief that our hope is in God. The Psalmist sought to assure that this hope would be passed on from generation to generation. Like the Psalmist we need to be praying, praying that we can give our ear to God's word, that we can reclaim the faith stories of our ancestors, and then share them with our children, so that hope in God endures. We need to be praying that we too can get in touch with the glorious deeds of God, the might of God, and the wonders of God. Our God is an awesome God. Our God is the God of Christmas birth. Our God is the God of Creation. Our God is the God of Easter resurrection. Our God is the God of life. Our God is the God that overpowers evil and conquers death. The deeds of our God are utterly astonishing. God should be the source of our hope.

**Soul Sucking:** God has given us the Book of Revelation to awaken our senses, to pull us out of our sleepiness, to awaken us to the source of hope. The Book of Revelation is a gift to our imagination.

I read recently that Tolkien's The Hobbit will soon be turned into two feature films, similar to the three films dedicated to The Lord of the Rings. Tolkien's epic struggle between good and evil requires the use of one's imagination if one is going to enter the story. One has to create pictures and images in one's mind that don't seem possible to create. The same is true of John's epic struggle between good and evil described in the Book of Revelation. The Revelation calls our imagination into vigorous play.

Einstein once said, "The imagination is more important than intelligence, meaning that there can be no meaningful use of intelligence unless there is imaginative perception." Eugene Peterson writes, "St. John uses words the way poets do, recombining them in fresh ways so that old truth is freshly perceived. He takes truth that has been eroded to platitude by careless usage and sets it in motion before us in an animated and impassioned dance of ideas."

When my grandfather died we came across some poetry that he had written to and about my Grandmother. It was wonderful. It was stunning. It was exciting to read. It forced my imagination to think about my grandparent's relationship in a whole new way. But it was a side of my grandfather I never knew, a side that had gotten lost, squeezed out over years of running a corporation and running a family. The most amazing thing about my grandfather's poetry, however, was what it did to me. Reading his poems gave me hope, hope that some where inside of me lay the gifts to write with that kind of passion and imagination.

Peterson goes on to write, "Familiarity dulls my perceptions. Hurry scatters my attention. Ambition fogs my intelligence. Selfishness restricts my range. Anxiety robs me of appetite. Envy distracts me from what is good and blessed right before me. Then St. John's apocalyptic vision brings me to my senses, body and soul. This power to wake us up is the most obvious use of the Revelation."

So much of the stuff of our daily lives seeks to suck out the joy of God's presence within us and stifle our imagination, stifle our hopefulness. The other epic battle between good and evil that is presently popular within our culture is the Harry Potter series. In those stories one of the most feared creatures are the Dementors whose own existence is maintained by sucking people's souls right out of them. I think at the heart of St. John's Revelation is how our culture, and many of the events of our lives daily suck the soul right out of us, suck our awareness of God's presence right out of us, suck the stories of God's faithfulness right out of us.

To live without your soul, after it has been sucked out by a Dementor, is the worst imaginable punishment in

the Harry Potter books. I wonder how often we already live with that most horrendous kind of punishment, a punishment that many of us don't consider a punishment but normalcy? St. John's Revelation seeks to revive our souls, our imaginations, our hope, our relationship with God.

**Misuse:** Unfortunately, the Book of Revelation has often been misused. We saw this in numerous ways at the dawn of the new Millennium, and every year since. The fact is there has not been a generation of people that has not sought to use the Book of Revelation in an unintended way. G. K. Chesterton once remarked that "though St. John the Evangelist saw many strange monsters in his vision, he saw no creature so wild as one of his own commentators."

Consequently, as we study Revelation we will be talking almost as much about what it isn't as what it is. Unfortunately as with any good gift it can be misused, become a wild beast of its own. The Book of Revelation has often had that fate. Today I hope and pray that we can begin to un-wrap the gift of Revelation in a way that will help each of us revitalize our soul, and revitalize our relationship with Christ and fill us with the Hope of God. Listen to the first three verses of Revelation. **Read Revelation 1:1-3**

**Historical Perspective:** These Words were to be a gift to the people in John's congregations because of the difficult situation they were in. Often, however, Scripture is taken out of its historical context and used for some other purpose. Personally, I think we always need to begin our study of Scripture by investigating its original historical purpose.

Like all of Scripture, Revelation was written at a specific historical moment to a specific group of people who were living in a specific situation. The Book of Revelation was actually a letter written to seven churches in Turkey. The letter was written from their pastor, John, who had been imprisoned on the Island of Patmos. The letter was to be read, in its entirety, during worship. The letter was intended to speak to the present situation of those seven churches, it was intended to speak to their immediate needs and struggles. It is not until we begin to understand the situation of those seven churches that will be able to unpack the meaning of the Revelation for our lives and our own church.

John wrote his letter somewhere between 75 and 95 AD. At this point Rome was ruling the "civilized" world. The emperor's of Rome had instigated some kind of emperor worship. The Roman's in general were polytheistic. Jerusalem had been completely destroyed, and the people of Israel dispersed. Rome had been burnt to the ground and Nero blamed the Christians. Most Christians were in an economically struggling situation. Earthquakes were frequent. Mt. Vesuvius had erupted turning the days as well as the nights black. Judaism had completely kicked the Christ believing Jews out of the Synagogue. Consequently, the Christians were starting over in terms of developing worshiping communities and defining themselves in relationship to Rome. Christianity was forced to explain itself and its purpose for existing to Rome. Rome was deciding whether Christianity should just be wiped out. Persecution was very real. The temptation to deny Christ was overwhelming. It was as challenging a time to be the church as ever, perhaps as challenging a time as the time we live in right now.

So John, separated from the churches he served, sought to send the members of those churches a word of encouragement. He sought to restore their hope. He did that by combining the roles of a theologian, a poet, and a pastor, and then sending off his letter as a means to revitalize their faith and lift up their souls.

**The Questions:** So put yourselves in the shoes of John and his parishioners. What would be your theological questions? How would you be feeling about God? How would you be feeling about your church? How would you be feeling about your culture? What fears would you have for your families, for your self? Where was God in the midst of all that was going on? Where was Jesus? Where was salvation? Who are you supposed to be in the midst of all this mess? Who has God called you to be?

**Conclusion:** When John's congregations read this letter it spoke to their lives, it nourished their souls, it revived their spirits. When John's congregations read this letter it made sense to them. So why not us, as well?

Were the lives of the people in the early church that different from ours? I don't think so! I just think we are totally out of touch with our own lost-ness. I think we are out of touch with how deeply dulled our senses have become. I think we are out of touch with how truly distant we are from the awesome work of God. I think the Cultural Dementors have been sucking on our souls for so long we can't even express the questions we have of God. We are blind to our need for Salvation. We are deaf to our need to hear God's Word. Well John's Revelation is here to wake us up, to revitalize us, to help us reclaim our souls, to help us repel the Dementors of our lives. Revelation is here to restore our hope.

I hope as we journey through the Book of Revelation that you will rekindle your imagination for God, and God's work in our world, in our church, in our lives. I hope you will read Revelation and let it wake you up. I pray that questions will begin to arise within you as you ponder God's involvement in your life and in our world. Where do you see God in this great on-going battle between good and evil, a battle in which we are a part? Today as we gather around our Lord's Table, let your imagination transport you into the meal, into the feast, into this place where God promises to feed your soul. Let us be fed today in a new way, with a new intensity, with a new passion for bringing hope to our God given spirit. Amen.