



## *Witness to Another City*

Rev. Chandler Stokes

On Revelation 21:1-6

**The Seventh Sunday in Eastertide**

**May 16, 2010**

It was Christmas Day, and I was supposed to meet Karen at Midway airport in Chicago at 3pm. On Christmas Eve she'd finished her services in California, gotten up the next morning, and jumped on a plane. All I had to do was meet her at the airport...

She was due in at 3. Given that it had been six weeks since we'd seen each other and given all that she'd done to get there, I really didn't want to be late for the plane...

Expecting a three hour drive minimum and never having driven to Midway, and with iffy weather—I left early. Smart man!

And then..., there is construction that my GPS doesn't anticipate, and I get kind of turned around. By the time I'm finally getting close to the airport, I'm flipping out; it's getting close to three. I've got to park. I've got to find where passengers come out. I'm running from the car, watching the minute hand of every clock I pass, asking strangers frantic questions, and I get there about three minutes after the top of the hour. And then look at the clock again... It says it's just after 2. I look at my watch. It's just after 3. Sigh. What an idiot... But a grateful idiot nonetheless!

What is it with time zones around here? On the west coast, there's only one. The only time it changes is when you go to Hawaii, where it doesn't matter what time it is. Here I drive south and go back an hour. It's just as weird as the weather.

Time zones affect things. The time you think it is affects what you think, what you see, and what you do and how you feel.

When I lived in California and had to fly east to New York or Atlanta for a meeting, I was always so awake and chipper for the evening meetings. I had a three-hour surplus of energy and alertness. A three-hour gift—being out of synch with the local time and knowing you're out of synch can be a gift.

The time you think it is can affect what you think and what you see and how you feel and what you do. The Book of Revelation is out of synch with the local time, and John wants us to have this gift. It can change what we think and see and feel and do.

Revelation is an odd book, and I want to talk about it for a while, because it is odd but also quite important.

The popular conception of Revelation is that it describes the end of the world and that, if you understand the secret codes in it, you can even determine when the world will end. That's just

*Because sermons are prepared with an emphasis on verbal presentation, the written accounts may occasionally stray from proper grammar and punctuation.*

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foolishness—and more proof that people prefer to invoke the Bible than actually read it. What Revelation says is that Jesus is Lord and in the end Jesus will be Lord. “The end” for John is the end of oppression, the end of violence, the end of death; the end is the transformation of the world. John says, “I have seen the new city. I have seen what lasts. I have seen the end, and the end is God.” John says that in this new city, the sea will be no more. The sea is the biblical image of chaos, of the forces that erode life. John says in the end, the sea is no more. The forces that erode life are cast aside. *Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the former things have passed away.* The end of “the former things” means the end of evil, of the forces that erode life.

And there is no timetable. John doesn’t even try to tell us when it will come or how, makes no attempt to provide a schedule. John simply wants to say, at the end, Jesus will be Lord. Most importantly, he makes this claim when for the church it was difficult to see any evidence that Jesus is Lord. So he says, “Even when it doesn’t look like it, especially when it does not look like it, Jesus is Lord and the world will be transformed.”<sup>1</sup> That is the message. That is the thrust of Revelation. It represents a great shift in our time zone.

Given that directness, why is the message presented in such a bizarre fashion?

The Book of Revelation is what we call apocalyptic literature. Sometimes it’s called “The Apocalypse of John.” Apocalypse and revelation are the same. One has a Greek root. The other has a Latin root. They translate the same word. “Apocalypse” means something uncovered. It comes from the verb meaning “taking the cover off.” It means something revealed—a revelation. John is trying to reveal the ultimate truth: in spite of appearances that hide this fact, in spite of all the suffering and pain and oppression, Jesus is and will be Lord. And John of Patmos (this John who sees his vision while on the island of Patmos in the Mediterranean) uses fantastical, even obscure and bizarre images to communicate his revelation.

John’s approach is on a grand scale, but it is nevertheless on one level something like this from Dr. Suess.

*On a far-away Island of Solama-sond,  
Yertle the Turtle was king of the pond.  
A nice little pond. It was clean. It was neat.  
The water was warm. There was plenty to eat. ...  
Until Yertle, the king of them all,  
Decided the kingdom he ruled was too small.  
“I’m ruler,” said Yertle, “of all that I see.*

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<sup>1</sup> A few of the ideas in these two paragraphs are derived from a sermon series by Rev. Tom Are, whom I cite explicitly later on in this sermon. The series was preached at Village Presbyterian Church in Kansas City in early 2009. In that series Tom also used Yertle the Turtle, which prompted my use of it.

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*But I don't see enough. That's the trouble with me. ...*<sup>2</sup>

You probably know the rest of the story of Yertle the Turtle. Yertle the king orders all the turtles to climb on top of one another and create a tower until he can see really far and extend his kingdom, and then the teetering tower of turtles comes crashing down with a thud and Yertle ends up as “king of the mud.”

As I said, John's approach is more grand, but even a child, to whom we might read Dr. Seuss, knows that you will not find a teetering tower of turtles in any “real life” pond—and yet Yertle tells us something important. Revelation speaks of beasts that are part lion, part tiger, part bear, oh my—but it tells us something vital.

Dr. Seuss wrote his fable in the years following World War II and he wrote it as a commentary, he said, on the arrogance of Adolf Hitler. Yertle says something important by untrue means. And, as Hitler is not the only Yertle of history, the fable still says something important.

That is true of Revelation as well. It employs fantastic language to address serious historical and contemporary issues. As a fable, it is not merely a fable. But, again, why use such bizarre language of beasts and trumpets and apocalyptic horsemen? Dr. Seuss could have written an editorial or sermon about Hitler's arrogance. He wasn't required to write a fable. Dr. Seuss was in a safe place to express his views. The war was over. His side had won. Dr. Seuss surely could have chosen another medium, but John is another story.

Revelation was written in its style out of necessity. It was written in a very different relation to power and choice. The parallel is closer to this. In the 1960's Gene Roddenberry created a science fiction program called *Star Trek*. Roddenberry operated in the medium of television, wherein the power of advertisers' dollars wields significant influence on what is broadcast and what is not. The sixties were a tense time in American public life. Addressing issues of sexism and racism was carried on in academia and in the news rather gingerly and not at all in entertainment TV. Advertisers did not want to explore uncomfortable questions on their dime. Roddenberry would bring his scripts to the censors and executives with what were really quite transparent fables about discrimination—almost as transparent as Yertle. The censors would say, “Gene, you're talking about race here. You can't do that.” Roddenberry would say, “No, I'm not. I'm not talking about race. I'm talking about green and purple people from outer space.” And he got away with it. When the power of money and influence would disallow such speech, he disguised his revelation and his rather progressive views in the fantastic language of science fiction.

Revelation is weird and exceptional in our New Testament canon—exceptional for this reason. You will look in vain for a clearly negative word about Roman authority in our New Testament—

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<sup>2</sup> Dr. Seuss. *Yertle the Turtle* (1950).

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except here in Revelation. The gospels, for example, absolve the Romans of killing Jesus, even though crucifixion was a uniquely Roman form of execution. All the gospels agree that Pilate's hand was forced by the crowds. Paul tells us to be subject to the ruling authorities. I Peter tells us to pray for the emperor. Acts tells us that Paul was a faithful Roman citizen and ends with his preaching openly in Rome, even though the tradition is that Paul was crucified by the Romans in Rome.

Revelation as distinct from the rest of the New Testament calls Rome a beast, the unspeakable of Babylon. The censors would say, "John, you're talking critically about Rome. You can't do that." And he would say, "No, I'm not. I'm not talking about Rome. I'm talking about beasts and ancient Babylon and green and purple people." And he got away with it and we have this book.

That is why Revelation is so odd, and that begins to suggest why it is so important. It is strange in order to protect its message, and its message is vital.

Revelation, like all apocalyptic literature, is a view from the bottom of life. It is a perspective that those of us toward the top do not often have and do not want to have. Although sometimes our image of the persecution of the early church is exaggerated, the particular place and time of John's Revelation—Asia Minor at the turn of the first century—was a time of severe Roman repression of the church. Apocalypse was the ideal medium for the powerless and persecuted church. It is a view from the bottom that sees and declares the fall of the enemy.

It's the view from the powerless. Two weeks ago we remembered the powerless, the 30,000 children a day, the one every three seconds, who die from the effects of extreme poverty (snap, snap, snap). They are those at the very bottom of contemporary power structures. From that point of view, the world's structure is horrific, nightmarish, a living Revelation—they live under the full tyranny of "the former things." John's is a vision of beasts—of four cold riders and of armies and horrors and fire and blood. His medium is not rhetorical flourish. It is the story of the powers that oppress the world's children told in the only way it could be told—and it is no children's story. Revelation tells this hardest of truths.

Brian Blount, the President of Union Seminary in Virginia and one of our foremost scholars on Revelation lifted up the cautionary words from the villain of the movie *Pirates of the Caribbean* to clarify John's intent. Captain Barbossa warns Miss Swann, the woman he has kidnapped and locked up in the brig of The Black Pearl; he says: "You best be believin' in ghost stories, Missy. Cause you're in one." Dr. Blount says, "John is all but certainly telling those of us who read his Revelation: 'You best be believing in dragon stories, Christian. Cause you're in one.'"<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> This is taken from Dr. Blount's Convocation sermon, "Helicopter War," preached in the fall of 2007; this was quoted in one of Tom's sermons on Revelation in early 2009.

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That is the nature of John's Revelation. It is a shocking fable that tells the hardest truth—a story from the point of view of those at the bottom of the pile and on the edges of power. It is a dragon story that speaks more painful truth than the newspapers. John says, "It is this beastly. It is a beastly existence for those at the bottom."

Revelation tells this hardest truth and then tells what must then seem an impossible truth. "This is the way it is, but it will not always be so, because Jesus is Lord and will be Lord." John says, "Rome is killing us, but Rome will crumble. And when Rome has crumbled, God will remain. And when the next empire has come and gone, God will remain. Whatever empire erodes life, even if it is our own empire, it will crumble and God will remain."

That is the vital, dual truth of Revelation: it tells the starkest truth of the world's suffering and declares unequivocally that God will wipe away every tear and death will be no more. It is the truth of the crumbling of the former things and the revealing of the city of God. Bishop Will Willimon tells a story of his ministry in a white community in Mississippi. It captures this reality. He says, "I was leading a study of the sixth chapter of Romans... that includes words about dying with Christ to the old self and rising with him to new life. [All I got were] silent stares from the group assembled. In desperation, I asked, "Has anyone here ever had to die to be a Christian: I know that we didn't put enough water on you to kill you at your baptism, but did any of you have to die?" Silence. Then someone spoke, "When the schools of Jackson integrated, I thought I would die. I knew enough to know that, on that day, when black children went to school with white, it was over for us. Our world was gone. But now my neighbor and my best friend is black. An old world died, but a new world was born."<sup>4</sup>

Revelation is vital to the church, because like that member of the Bible study, it shows us what must crumble and what will last.

Revelation's genius is that it provides both. Revelation's stark and shocking images say so clearly that we are in a dragon story. It is Scripture's snapping fingers. It describes in beastly terms the powers that erode life. And it declares with equal confidence that the former things will pass away. John says, "I saw it."

But actually what John says and what makes it so compelling is, "The former things have passed away." He's not in synch with local time. John, though caught in the grip of Rome's power, says, "I have seen it. I have seen a different city. I have seen the New Jerusalem, the city of God. The former things have passed away. The sea was no more. In the end, there is God."

This is Dr. King, standing in a Memphis pulpit — assassins waiting in hiding, local police corrupt, the governors of Alabama and Mississippi declaring segregation as the eternal way of life — and

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<sup>4</sup> Quoted in Michael Lindvall, The Christian Life: A Geography of God, pp. 26-27.

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his saying: “I have been to the mountaintop. I have seen the Promised Land. I may not get there with you, but we as a people will get to the Promised Land.”<sup>5</sup>

That is out of synch with local time, but in synch with sacred time, with holy time, with the time of the Holy City.

John can see it; Dr. King can see it, because they’re not in caught in the local time zone. They’re living on Kingdom time, Holy Time. Desmond Tutu sounds the same. Same world, same beasts roaming around, but in their time zone, the beast’s days are at an end. Bishop Tutu, while staring in the face of the beast of apartheid said, we have already won; the dragon is already dead. Come over and join the winning side, for “goodness is stronger than evil; love is stronger than hate; light is stronger than darkness; life is stronger than death. Victory is ours!”<sup>6</sup> Now!

Out of synch with local time—in synch with Kingdom time, sacred time... When I thought I was might be late for that plane, I was never more clear about my situation and my priorities. If we’re going to do mission, if we are going to witness to that other city, it’s about that. It’s not in synch with local time, but in touch with and confident in what God has done, is doing and will do.

I’ve wanted to tell you this story for a long time now. It clarifies my sense of our time zone. I talk about my friend Tom Are as much as any of my preacher friends in the Moveable Feast. Much of today’s sermon is from that chorus of witnesses, but I’m leaning on Tom a lot today. And there is one story, I can only tell in Tom’s first person.

Much of what I feel in my bones about God’s promises, I have contracted from Tom like a positive contagion. There is a piece of Tom’s faith, shaped by his brother Gene. “Gene was born with a generous heart, but a limited mind. Gene will never forget Tom’s birthday, but he will never read a book. He knows Tom’s name, but he calls him ‘Brother’ — or ‘Bwuddah,’ as he says it. More than anything in the world, Gene wants to drive a car. That’s his big goal in life. Gene turned 46 this year, and he’s still waiting to drive a car. He wants to stop by the gas station to ‘filler up,’ get a coke and drive his car.” Let me just quote Tom directly.

I say, “Gene, where are you going to go?” “I’m gonna come see you, give a kiss to my niece and nephew with a big hug.” “That’s great, Gene. What are you going to do then?” “I’ll take you, and we’ll go see Daddy. Don’t tell him I’m coming.” “Oh, I promise, Gene, your secret is good with me.” That’s what he wants, just to drive a car. We were eating in Shoney’s Big Boy because he thinks that’s fine dining. We both had ordered the “cholesterol plate.” We were talking about the trips he would take. In a moment that was so unlike him, so real that it seemed unreal, he said,

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<sup>5</sup> This was Dr. King’s vision in his final sermon on the night that he was killed.

<sup>6</sup> “Victory is ours” Words: Desmond Tutu; Music: John Bell © Iona Community, admin. GIA Publications, as excerpted in Tom Are’s sermon from the Revelation series.

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“Bwuddah, do you think I’ll ever drive that car?” “Gene, yes I do.” How can I say such a thing? He will never drive a car — not my car. But it’s not about driving, even for him, I don’t think. It’s not about driving. It is about all that has gone wrong in this world being made right. I said yes because I believe that the love of God is the ultimate power of this world. There is a holy love that will redeem everything that has gone wrong. Those tears that cannot be comforted in this life will be wiped away in the presence of the living God.”

Now, where does that vision come from? Comes from having your clocks all screwed up, being out of synch with local time, comes from living in another time zone, a holy time, the time of the Holy City... I wouldn’t know how to give anything to mission, when things are so broken— unless I had caught that sense of another time zone. The time you think it is can affect what you think and what you see and how you feel and what you do. John said,

*See, 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; he will wipe every tear from their eyes.*

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

There is a holy love that will redeem everything that has gone wrong. There is a holy time that will redeem everything that has gone wrong—and death will be no more.

Let all of God’s people say, “Amen.”