

**Seeing Anew**  
Jubilee Mennonite Church  
November 25, 2018

**Purpose:** As we anticipate the full reign of Christ, we are invited to hope in what we sometimes struggle to see.

**Message:** We are invited to embrace the kingdom of God, already present, yet still to be revealed.

**Scripture:** Revelation 1:4-17 (I will read); John 18:33-38 (Please read)

**Synopsis:** There are things that defy description. Each time I travel to the Grand Canyon, I have the same response—an open mouthed awe struck silence. Where I asked to describe it, I would know that my words are, by definition, inadequate to the task. John, while on Patmos, is given an even more complicated task—communicating a vision of that which cannot be described. We know that what is beyond this world is beyond definition. Yet we insist on reading John’s vision as an exact foretelling of what is to come. The church has read it for as a prophetic vision for the sake of perpetuating power and presence, trying to project into the next world that which is important to them now. But the apocalyptic texts are meant to console and comfort, not frighten and foretell. We are called to look at the world as it is, but also to look at what Jesus holds in store for us. This is meant to be a foretaste of what might be, not a foretelling of a formula of how the world comes to an end. By remembering the vision that John is trying to convey is, by definition, incomplete, we might allow ourselves to hear the real message—that come what may, it is God who is in charge of the future.

Notes:

<https://www.evernote.com/l/APnuMf3fnENJops8LsHWVVM6nzduzCo1YOU/>

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John 1:4-17

4-7 I, John,  
am writing this to the seven churches in Asia province:  
All the best to you from  
THE GOD WHO IS,  
THE GOD WHO WAS,  
AND THE GOD ABOUT TO ARRIVE,  
and from the Seven Spirits assembled before his throne,  
and from Jesus Christ—Loyal Witness, Firstborn from the dead  
, Ruler of all earthly kings.

Glory and strength to Christ, who loves us,  
who blood-washed our sins from our lives,  
Who made us a Kingdom, Priests for his Father,  
forever—and yes, he's on his way!  
Riding the clouds, he'll be seen by every eye,  
those who mocked and killed him will see him,  
People from all nations and all times  
will tear their clothes in lament.  
Oh, Yes.

8 The Master declares,  
“I'm A to Z. I'm  
THE GOD WHO IS, THE GOD WHO WAS, AND THE GOD ABOUT TO ARRIVE.  
I'm the Sovereign-Strong.”

9  
-17 I, John, with you all the way in the trial  
and the Kingdom and the passion of patience in Jesus,  
was on the island called Patmos because of God's Word,  
the witness of Jesus.

It was Sunday and I was in the Spirit, praying.  
I heard a loud voice behind me,  
trumpet-clear and piercing:

“Write what you see into a book.  
Send it to the seven churches:  
to Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum,  
Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, Laodicea.”

I turned and saw the voice.

I saw a gold menorah  
with seven branches,  
And in the center, the Son of Man,  
in a robe and gold breastplate,  
hair a blizzard of white,  
Eyes pouring fire-blaze,  
both feet furnace-fired bronze,  
His voice a cataract,  
right hand holding the Seven Stars,  
His mouth a sharp-biting sword,  
his face a perigee sun.

I saw this and fainted dead at his feet.

His right hand pulled me upright,  
his voice reassured me:

17-20 “Don’t fear: I am First,

I am Last,

I’m Alive.

I died, but I came to life,  
and my life is now forever.

The book of Revelation is simultaneously both the most well known book of the Bible and the least cherished. Well known because of its vivid content and disturbing images. Popular culture, a mere reflection of ourselves, is obsessed with the world ending, and often turns to the vision of John and the apocalypse he sees for the source for every dooms day scenario ever invented. People may not even know that the images of judgment and the world's ending come from Revelation, but they definitely know what they look like. Least cherished because despite our fascination with the possibilities it reflects, we often don't know what to do with these wild images of judgment, revelation, and final battle. That and it scares the wits out of us. I know that even as I stand here to talk to you about this text, I am guessing more than one of you are flashing back to other fiery sermons you might have heard drawing on these words. The best I can hope for is a couple of handholds for grappling with a difficult book—a challenge for any given morning.

I never got tired of playing tour guide in Arizona. There is really nothing in the experience of the average Midwesterner, or anywhere else for that matter, to prepare you for what you encounter here. It never took a great deal of effort to shock people into disbelief. My favorite place to enjoy these phenomena is the Grand Canyon. Almost everyone has seen it in one way or another—wall calendars, post cards, random clips on television. But you know no matter how good the picture, it never does the experience of walking around the corner of the first overlook you come to, justice. Most people can only manage “Oh My” for about 3 minutes. There is something all-together other about the experience of being there in the midst of a work of time, erosion, and creation that word, picture, and film can never really convey—not that this stops me from taking several hundred pictures every time I go there. It is just one of those things that you have to experience for yourself in order to grasp the true nature of the thing. Every time you look you get a different vision as light, shadow, and the sheer mind-boggling magnitude of it all play together to provide something new. It is a vision beyond imagination.

I think an experience like this is important to keep in mind when you come to look at the work of John the revelator. It is a vision—John says so right from the beginning—of the coming the fulfillment of the work of Jesus Christ. It is the coming of the reign of Christ, the completion of the world as we long it to be. It is a glimpse at a future where God's conversation with the people of God extends not just in the daily experiences of those who seek to commune with God,

but in a real final sense when God again dwells with God's people in fullness and reality. We do well to understand that this vision of what is to be, even as we acknowledge that by its very nature, it points to something in the presence of God that is so out of this world that writing everything down with complete accuracy is doomed to fail. John is describing that which cannot be described, and inviting us into that description.

This vision is called an apocalypse—something that we think of as an event, but really means a revealing, like an unveiling of what is in the end of time. Apocalypses (there are many—more than 20 in the Christian tradition alone) are meant to speak to people in a time and place about what is to come with the goal of giving them a vision of how life might change from what is. Jewish tradition is full of apocalyptic literature—the book of Daniel prime among them—are writings meant to imagine what it will be like when long exile is over and YHWH restores Israel back to what it once was. John is writing this apocalypse in the form of a letter to the people of the churches of Asia, and there is little doubt that they would have welcomed a different view of the future. Because the view of the present was bleak indeed. Written around the times of Nero and Diocletian, the emperors who were most intent on destroying the Christian faith by way of persecution and death, those reading this vision were hungry for a sense of Christ triumphant into a world where that was least in evidence. We must take for granted that they, at least on some level understood the web of symbols and relationships that John offered in his revelation as speaking to them and their time. With the purposes in mind, John says what he says in a way that is meant as much as a healing vision, connecting the readers from the gloom of where they are now to what will be in the future as the life of faith is lived fully. Like any recorded vision of something that defies imagination as a new heaven and new earth no doubt does, Revelation describes the future of the faithful in a way that has far more in common to the works of the impressionists—full of translated images, fuzzy brush work, and complicated themes—then it does with a portrait, or a photograph.

Yet, through the years we have not read this book of Revelation in that way. Often we forget that this is a vision at all. We read this more as an arithmetic equation more than a vision of a healing future. We see the symbols as variables to be fulfilled, inserting the evil person of the day as the anti-Christ—Hitler, Stalin, or whomever the least popular person of power in the day is-- and solve for the definite date of the return of Jesus and the victorious Christ. We look at our days and say “surely this has to be the end.” There have been those who for the sake of

power have exploited the fears that we have, and the longing for what will be and assigned times, dates, and conditions to reflect whatever political or social agenda they might have. We Anabaptists were especially good at this with several apocalyptic movements forming from our history.

When we do this, we rob the vision of Revelation of its true purpose: to remind us of the relationship between God and God's people that we have been engaged in for centuries now will go on, and to point us even now to the hope of healing the God has for us in ways that we cannot imagine now. The important part of the message is not the precision of the ways and means of God's bringing things to an end nearly as much as it is to remind us that there is a God who is at work in the world, even in the future, and that God is trust worthy, worthy to be praised, and more than capable of holding us in the end, no matter how it happens to unfold.

Revelation is doing for us what all of scripture must: giving us a vision beyond our own. The world as it is denies us a view of what can be, and can stand in the way of how we see God. We know our world, and are acquainted with our pain, and we long to have the reign of God begin now and complete what we have longed for. We can only ever see in part; looking through the lens we know, and the blinders we may not even be aware of. We see the past, present, and future from the prospective that is by its definition, limited. None of us see neutrally, none of us see completely. We see and think our world is defined by our sight. We see a world at war and despair to think that the vision of God's peace will ever be realized. We see pain and suffering, and wonder whether there can ever be healing. We see the messy, complicated histories that we carry and stand in our way, and we wonder is there could ever be good found within them. We struggle to see God at work, and we need the vision of the scripture to come and comfort us when we are blinded by a reality that would seem to be devoid of hope. That is what this vision of Revelation is all about—pointing us to a future where God's way will reign; the completion of what God's reign already is in a fullness beyond our imagination.

We need God's vision because our own is so intermingled by the pressing needs of the here and now, the griefs of what has been, and anxiety of what will be. God's vision is different than ours. God sees all of us, and all things in this world—we have known that ever since we have learned Jesus Loves Me. God has seen not just the patterns of ordinary human lives, but the glories and scourges of our humanity, our wonders as well as our genocides, those done in God's

name and in our own. God holds all of our works in grace and hope. God sees the present with its demands and its graces without being bound as we are by the bullying of a ticking clock and a chirping calendar. God sees the future that we cannot see, yet we long to control, and holds all things in loving hands. God sees in ways that we cannot, in ways that escape us, knowing the future, holding the past, tending the present. Through it all of all God sees hope—sees it as the mix of human and divine intentions for a better tomorrow, even as they are realized today. John the revelation sees in hope because that is the way to see life and reality redefined by Christ the King; the reality of humanity being met by the gracious work of God. Hope is imbedded in the promise of creation and redemption. Christ's reign is a hope that is already here, yet is coming still, calling to see beyond the hills we now see before us, toward the dawn that is even now brightening the Eastern sky. Scripture connects us to God's vision, to God's hope, and as such, we cannot do without it.

We are invited to bring this vision of the end of times with the same expectation as we come to the more familiar parts of scripture—with an openness to catch this vision of what God is doing in us, in our history, in our time, as well as in the future. Reading Revelation with hopeful expectation and persistent vision invites us to lay down the anxious control of how and where, or who is represented by vivid symbols, or what might happen if four horsemen decided to take a ride. Try as we might, we will always struggle to make those images clear to us. But maybe we can be ok with that. Because when we read the ending as part of whole story, and the complete record of God's long journey with God's people, we see that God will be in the end the same loving, hopeful, healing, relational presence God always has been. I think John's vision would have us open our eyes to this bigger truth and be reminded that ours is a vision that is incomplete. There is something more to be sought. There is a reason to carry on. There is a future even when all would seem ended. There is a drink for those who are thirsty.

When we catch a glimpse of God's true vision, and God's full hope, may we be given the grace to say “come Lord Jesus, come and fulfill that which we cannot yet imagine, and that words cannot fully describe, that we might stand before you, and be at a complete, total loss for words.”