

**Davidson College Presbyterian Church**  
**Davidson, North Carolina**  
**Lib McGregor Simmons**  
**“Can I Get a Witness?”**  
**Revelation 1**  
**4th Sunday after Pentecost**  
**June 12, 2016**

Say the word “Revelation,” and a menagerie of images menacingly rear up on their hind legs in the minds of many:

Four fearsome horsemen;  
The mysterious number 666;  
Multiheaded beasts;  
An end-times Battle of Armageddon which leaves million slaughtered.  
Not exactly a beach bag full of light summer reading, is it?

To read Revelation across the arc of summer would seem to some people to be the most incongruous of undertakings.

Obviously, I disagree.

It is true, Revelation, written 20 centuries ago, is not an easy read for you and me. It is however worth the effort. It is worth the effort because ultimately it leads to the hope of Jesus Christ which sustains us when life is hard and the future seems uncertain.

And so, my dear brothers and sisters, tune your ears and your hearts to hope as together we listen for God’s word.

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New Testament scholar Barbara Rossing has written, “Revelation takes us on a journey into the heart of God’s own dream for our world.” (1)

The journey begins 2000 years ago. Pastor John is at the helm for the duration of this Revelation journey. This Pastor John is not John the Baptist. He is not the John who was one of Jesus’s disciples. It is very unlikely that he is the Pastor John who wrote the gospel that bears his name.

This Pastor John wrote Revelation late in the first century during the reign of the Roman Emperor Domitian, in the years 95-96 C.E. He doesn’t tell us much about himself other than that he was on Patmos, a small island about sixty miles off the coast of present-day Turkey. He does tell us what he most wants us to know: “I, John, your brother who share with you in Jesus.” (1: 9). What he most wants us to know is that he is a brother and a fellow-sharer in Jesus Christ. In other words, he is one of us.

John is one of us. He is also a pastor of seven churches which are symbolized in today’s reading as seven golden lampstands and seven stars which represent the corporate spirit of each of the seven churches. He is also a consummate writer, the Stephen King or the John Grisham of his day. This is to say that he wrote using a form that was highly popular, the form of apocalypse. It is said that ancient readers, be they Jewish, Christian, or pagan, loved to read apocalypses. They held in high esteem the visionaries who wrote them. Readers in the first century would have been as familiar with the exaggerated imagery found in Revelation as television viewers today are with the characters of Downton Abbey or the Big Bang Theory or Charlotte sports fans are with Cam Newton and Luke Kuechly. They were enchanted with the way that apocalypses lifted the lid off of the stewpot (2) of their everyday lives, to borrow a phrase from Eugene Peterson, to reveal a deeper spiritual reality.

Here is another thing that you should know about Pastor John.

One sometimes hears that a preacher’s job is to “comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable.” John of Patmos’s pastoral skill set definitely tilted in the direction of “afflict the comfortable.” There is a bit of the “comfort the afflicted” aspect in John, but for John, the comfort comes only after people and church’s have been rousted out of their complacency in order to bear witness to the fullness of God’s justice as revealed in Jesus Christ.

I would compare Pastor John of Patmos to my friend Pastor Kelly Allen. I attended Kelly’s memorial service yesterday. In the wake of Kelly’s sudden death from a hemorrhagic stroke at the age of fifty, one of her congregants, Nicole Foy, wrote this, “A friend on Sunday talked about how our pastor Kelly Allen’s sermons on community building and Christ-centered social justice would leave him hopeful and uplifted. Then, he’d have a

private talk later with her and leave feeling a bit annoyed. That's because Kelly would always prod him on what MORE he could be doing instead of CELEBRATING all that he had done. That was Kelly's way—there was an urgency to her work and she used her influence to push us all into action. I have been in that same place," Nicole admitted, "secretly wanting a pat on the back from Kelly, only to get a nudge forward into new, deeper, more meaningful waters." (3)

This is Pastor John of Patmos, through and through. So, if you come to church today or any Sunday this summer, expecting a soothing pat on the back from John of Patmos. I am making a promise to you right here and right now: You are apt to leave disappointed.

HOWEVER, if what you are yearning for is new, deeper, more meaningful waters on which to propel your boat of faith, then I promise that Revelation will not disappoint you. Reading Revelation, your reward will be great.

Here is what you can expect this summer:

You can expect Pastor John's writings to lift the lid of the stewpot off of the superficiality of your everyday life in order to reveal a deeper spiritual reality.

You can expect to experience Pastor John pressing you to examine your political allegiances with no less urgency that he pressed his first-century readers to stand up courageously and defy the power of the Roman Empire and thus to become the countercultural community of Jesus Christ which embodied the principles of God's love and justice.

You can expect to hear Pastor John constantly annoying you, even shouting at you: Can I get a witness to the love and justice of Jesus Christ? Or, in other words, "what are you going to do to make following Jesus not just something you do on Sunday, but a whole way of life?"

And if you are willing to join Pastor John on this dangerous journey into the heart of God's own dream for our world, then you will, in the words of Revelation 1: 17, feel the right hand of Jesus, the one who sits on the throne and is the ruler of all the kings of the earth, taking your hand in his and saying, "Do not be afraid; I am the first and the last, and the living one, and I am here for you."

1. Barbara R. Rossing, *Journeys Through Revelation: Apocalyptic Hope for Today* (Louisville: Horizons, 2010), 3.
2. Eugene H. Peterson, *Reversed Thunder: The Revelation of John and the Praying Imagination* (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 1988), 19.
3. Nicole Foy, Facebook post, June 6, 2016.