

Ancient Resistance Manual for Modern Times

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- [0 : 0 0] So this Sunday I want to start out in a way that's a little different than I usually start out. I want to start out with our morning's scripture. It's a piece of scripture and indeed we're introducing a book that has a lot of imagery.
- So as I read this first chapter of the book of Revelation, I just invite you to really try to enter into this text imaginatively and to experience it as a letter.
- A letter that was written to these churches deeply in need. The revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show his servants what must take place.
- And he made it known by sending his angel to his servant, John, who testified to the word of God and to the testimony of Jesus Christ, even to all that he saw.
- Blessed is the one who reads the words of the prophecy and blessed are those who hear and keep it. Who keep what is written in it for the time is near.
- [1 : 1 1] John, to the seven churches that are in Asia, grace to you and peace from him who is and who was and who is to come. And from the seven spirits who are before his throne.
- And from Jesus Christ, the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead. And the ruler of the kings of the earth. To him who loves us and freed us from our sins by his blood.
- And made us a kingdom priests serving his God and father. To him be glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen. Look, he is coming with the clouds.
- Every eye will see him, even those who pierced him. And all the tribes of the earth will wail on account of him. So it is to be. Amen. I am the Alpha and the Omega, says the Lord God, who was and who is and who is to come.
- The Almighty. I, John, your brother, who share with you the persecution and the kingdom and the endurance in Jesus. Was on the island called Patmos because of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus.
- [2 : 2 0] I was in the spirit on the Lord's day and I heard behind me a loud voice like a trumpet saying, Write in a book what you see and read it to the seven churches. To Ephesus, to Smyrna, to Pergamum, to Thyatira, to Sardis, to Philadelphia, and to Laodicea.
- Then I turned to see whose voice it was that spoke to me and on turning I saw seven golden lampstands. And in the midst of the lampstands I saw one like the son of man clothed with a long robe and with a golden sash across his chest.
- His head and his hair were white as wool, white as snow. His eyes were like a flame of fire. His feet were like burnished bronze, refined as in a furnace.
- And his voice was like the sound of many rushing waters. In his right hand he held seven stars and from his mouth came a sharp two-edged sword and his face was like the sun shining with full force.
- When I saw him I fell at his feet as though dead. But he placed his right hand on me saying, Do not be afraid. I am the first and the last and the living one.
- [3 : 3 5] I was dead and see. I am alive forever and ever and I have the keys of death and of Hades. Now write what you have seen, what is, and what is to take place after this.

So the mystery of the seven stars that you saw in my right hand and the seven golden lampstands, the seven stars are the angels of the seven churches. And the seven lampstands are the seven churches.

Almighty God, creator of heaven and earth. Thank you for your scriptures that bear witness to who you are and how you are.

The ways in which you call us and love us. Thank you for this moment that we get to gather together as your body. The communion of saints.

The communion of sinners. Of those in need. Of those who have questions. I pray that as we come fully as we are, we would sense ourselves met deeply by you.

[5 : 00] Encouraged and challenged. And I pray, Lord, that as we start this series today in the book of Revelation, that we would experience weeks ahead of us. In which we come to understand more deeply what it is to follow you.

And in which we are initiated into a further experience of holy imagination.

And holy action. Thank you for your presence here. In Jesus name. Amen. All right.

All right. So we are fully here. Finally here. All year long. Pastor Anthony and I have kind of known. Like at some point we would probably do a series on the book of Revelation.

We're calling this sermon series right now. Reading Revelation for the Resistance. Dissident Discipleship in an Unjust World. So much has happened since the beginning of the year.

[6 : 04] So much has happened that has deeply affected our church. And the neighborhoods in which we live. So much has happened that has affected our friends and our family.

Our sense of career stability. Our sense of personal safety. So much has happened that has affected our sense that we had won certain rights that we could count on.

So much has happened that has affected our hope. Many of us have been made to question which way the arc of the moral universe, that long, long arc, which way it actually does bend.

We considered doing the series earlier in the year. But it became pretty clear that many of us were still just reeling. Still needing to hear nothing more than how to keep our own heads above the chaotic waters.

How to just take care of ourselves. To keep doing the things that allow us to be whole. To keep, as the vision of Free DC says, to keep prioritizing joy.

[7 : 21] To keep remembering, as Dan Savage once said, I think I used this quote earlier. Dan Savage once said when he was speaking of the way that queer activists in the 1970s and 1980s danced all night.

After morning spent burying friends and protesting in the afternoon. It is the dance that keeps us in the fight. Because it is the dance that we are fighting for.

So now we're a little bit later in the year. Perhaps a little bit less shell-shocked. Maybe just a little bit less. So it seems the right time to explore the book of Revelation.

Revelation is a book that's called the dissident discipleship. In the key of resistance to every structure and ideology of empire that demands our allegiance.

Revelation is a book that interrogates our action. That asks us to what extent we have accommodated ourselves to the things just as they are.

[8 : 28] And oriented our lives and our imaginations to the things as they are. Versus toward the things as they will be.

Toward things as they ought to be. It's a book about hope. The very thing that many of us are finding in short supply.

I've been pretty excited about this series. And really hopeful that it will stoke some good conversations. About what it means to live as a disciple in really, really turbulent times.

Yet this week, once I heard the news of the killing of Charlie Kirk, much of that excitement transformed into a kind of deep churn in my stomach.

As I prepared this sermon, I just felt bothered. I don't really know how else to say that. Just bothered.

[9 : 37] And I felt sad. And I'm not going to lie. Like a little bit afraid of what might happen next. So before I say anything else, I just want to acknowledge that this week has been hard for so many people in this room, for so many people watching online.

And I know that what we feel is probably wildly diverse. And that every one of us has been told that whatever it is that we do feel is wrong. Some of you feel relief.

Maybe you feel like you have a sense of what Miriam felt when she sang the song after the Hebrew slaves were rescued from the Egyptians.

Sing to the Lord, she said. For he has triumphed gloriously, horse and rider he has thrown into the sea. And some of you may feel wonder and want others to lean into the God who forgives sins without requiring blood.

The one who favors mercy over vengeance. Who runs to those who have wildly lost their way before they have ever had a chance to utter a word of repentance.

[10 : 53] I know that there are tensions in this room about what we are allowed to feel. What we should feel.

And I'm not the right person to solve all those tensions. My personality is generally like mild-mannered. Yeah. Even though I hold several of the identities against which Kirk spewed his heinous vitriol, I also have a lot of economic privilege.

And along with just the privileges of being an American citizen and speaking English fluently and being a Christian and holding multiple degrees. I am a person who tends to believe deeply in direct confrontation that is creative with unjust rulers, but not of the violent kind.

I tend to see violence as a tool of the master's house. So it won't be me who resolves the tension. Instead, for me and for, I suspect, many of us, it is time, now as ever, to be attentive to the voices of people with less privilege than we have, even as we protect those people and comfort them as practically as we can.

And if you know yourself to be one of those who right now in this historical moment is among the least of these, it is a time to listen to yourself, to what you feel, and even more to know that in God's world, you are the most favored.

[12 : 37] I am not the right person to solve all the tensions about what Christians should feel right now, or what they might feel right now.

But as your pastor, one of your pastors, there are two things that I do now. First, nobody has the right to police your emotions. This is a hard-fought one for me.

I say this as somebody whose gut reaction is to want people to feel certain things that I have been taught were righteous. Yet, I know that if abolition means anything, it has to mean getting rid of the cops in our own heads.

In the Bible, a fair bit of the most egregious violence expressed or carried out is actually revenge fantasy. Even though it did not historically happen, or the writers knew that it would not historically happen, or couldn't historically happen, they used it to express their profound grief, and rage, and desperate, and unjust situations.

Or they used it to make something clear about their own identities, and the ways in which God, indeed, was on their side in a violent world. Think the divine violence in the book of Joshua, or the cursing prayers in the book of Psalms, or as you'll see in the coming weeks, the visions in the book of Revelation.

[14 : 12] We can encourage people to not allow a desire for revenge to take root in their hearts, while also not inhibiting people's needs to feel difficult emotions.

And we can remember that our our vengeance and God's judgment are not the same thing.

The second thing, I know, is captured really well in the words of the brilliant Brandy Miller, who's the curator of a podcast called Reclaiming My Theology.

Brilliant human. She wrote this week, I don't want a world where death feels like a victory, even if that's the world we know.

I don't want a world where death feels like a victory, even if that's the world we know. How, in this moment, do we keep doing what gives life instead of doing what brings death?

[15 : 21] How do we orient ourselves toward the new Jerusalem instead of being preoccupied with Babylon? How do we shape our resistance to the beasts of this world so that we do not ourselves become beasts, becoming what we most despise?

how do we follow the lion who really is a slain lamb, who, as one scholar put it, wreaks weakness and in the end is victorious.

Luckily for us, I guess, and my mom would say, the Lord, yes, no, it's not luck. The Lord has made it happen right now. We are about to start a book that explores the exact kinds of questions I've just asked.

It's a book that provokes discernment in exactly the kind of times that we live in.

Revelation is a book that many of us have forced into silence. It's a book that we have effectively decanonized in reaction to often, like, people we know that obsess over it or abuse it.

[16 : 54] It's full of this kind of wild imagery. And it's full of a lot of binaries that seem really problematic to the modern mind.

It's full of lots of violence. Many famed and scholarly people have had much to say about the book of Revelation. And here are just a few of my favorite quotes.

Martin Luther said of it that it was neither apostolic nor prophetic. He said, I can detect in no way, I can in no way detect that the Holy Spirit produced it.

Again, they are supposed to be blessed to keep what is written in this book. And yet no one knows what that is. To say nothing of keeping it. Christ is neither taught nor known in it.

Friedrich Nietzsche called it the most rabid outburst of vindictiveness in all recorded history. That's a big claim. Playwright George Bernard Shaw probably has my favorite quote, calling it the curious record of the visions of a drug addict.

[18 : 06] There it is. misogynist male fantasy at the end of time. That's what a feminist New Testament scholar Tina Pippin calls it.

And then New Testament scholar John Dominic Crossan, who has, you know, perhaps the most damning theological critiques, sees it as a book which turns the non-violent resistance of the slaughtered Jesus into the violent warfare of the slaughtering Jesus.

Jesus. Everyone from towering theological giants to ordinary Christians seem to struggle with the book of Revelation.

So you, you're not alone. You're not alone if you struggle with it. Most of us know it as a book that largely in our culture provides fodder for escapism about the end times.

When will the four horsemen appear? Is that person's hand gesture or that person's hat tied to the mark of the beast? Yeah. I know some of y'all have asked that question, okay?

[19 : 13] But honestly, in the prescient words of Sweet Brown, ain't nobody got time for that. There are people, and these are the people I agree with, who see the book of Revelation as timeless theology that describes and catalyzes our discipleship, that prioritizes the views and needs of oppressed people, that challenges and inverts everything that we think we know about power.

Scholar G.K. Bill says, Revelation may be the most relevant book in the entire Bible. And Richard Baucom adds to that, not only one of the finest literary works in the New Testament, but also one of the greatest theological achievements of early Christianity.

How can those last two things be true of a book that is this contested? That's what I want us to consider in this sermon series over the next several weeks.

We can talk about what other people think of this all day long, but ultimately, I want to know what you think. I want you to discuss this book in your community groups and affinity groups and after church on Sundays to ask the question together of how this might affect your discipleship in this critical moment.

What does it mean to witness to the Lamb today? How do we think about power? Why is worship so essential to discipleship?

[20 : 49] Does the good actually triumph? what is the end that God desires to bring about for our world and for us? So now, in the last couple minutes of this sermon, I just want to do a little bit of quick teaching.

This is going to be a really quick, I'm not going to lie, a little bit of a dense overview of the book, but I wanted to present something so that as we go through the rest of the series, you always have something to go back to.

You want to make notes, you may want to make notes or you may want to go back to the recording for this part later as you talk about and think about this book. I just want to make sure we have a really solid foundation to know where we're going.

So, three things. First, in the very opening line of the book, John says that this letter contains a revelation from Jesus Christ. The word for revelation there is the Greek word *apokalypsis*.

It means unveiling. It means revealing or stripping. The idea is that something about reality that has not historically been known is about to be uncovered.

[21 : 57] And while so much of revelation seems strange to us, the form of revelation, its genre, would have been extremely familiar to people, Jews and Christians, living in the first century.

Many writings floated around at the time that were similar in style to this one. And just as we understand the rules of encountering science fiction or fantasy or even political cartoons, the people receiving this letter would have understood the rules of this genre.

The extreme binaries, the heavenly and hellish figures and the boldness about what the end would be. Probably the most famous definition of this type of literature was given by John Collins and this is like the classic definition I learned in seminary.

He says, Apocalypse is a genre of revelatory literature with a narrative framework in which a revelation is mediated by an otherworldly being to a human recipient, disclosing a transcendent reality which is both temporal insofar as it envisages eschological salvation and spatial insofar as it involves another supernatural world.

So basically, you're always going to get a story delivered from a heavenly being to a person about a reality that we can't see regarding the future or regarding the present invisible world.

[23 : 30] In the case of Revelation, the apocalypse is contained inside of a letter to several churches in what is now modern-day Turkey. It also has, so because of that it has letters also, it has characteristics of a letter as well, that genre form.

And if that doesn't make things complicated enough, it also has characteristics of an Old Testament prophecy. So again, when you read this book, if you're like, ooh, a lot is happening, you are right.

Okay, a lot is happening. But maybe the most important thing to say about the genre is that John claims to report a vision.

So to read it well, you have to kind of enter into the sights and sounds of the book. You can't just put them aside and try to like get to the truth behind them. The sights and sounds and smells are part of the scripture.

In reading it well, your imagination is critical, just as it would be if you were reading a work of science fiction or watching a fantasy movie. The book does not work by putting forward these like logical propositions or appealing to your reason.

[24 : 42] It works by eliciting emotion, which can be uncomfortable. And it works by inviting you to be involved in it. It's a book of images.

It's like a kaleidoscope. That's probably my favorite way of thinking about it. You take it and you turn it slightly and you get something new and incredibly vivid. As people who are formed in the logic and reason of the West, it can be hard to accept revelation on its own terms.

But here's how Christopher Leroy inputs this. To extract the message from revelation and leave behind the images in favor of something more manageable and rational is to run the risk of evacuating the apocalypse of its power by ignoring that which enables it to be the word of God.

This is a book that is formative for holy imagination and unashamed Christian living. Second, we don't know a lot about the writer except these few fragments of his identity.

I, John, your brother and companion in the suffering and kingdom and patient endurance that are ours in Jesus was on the island of Patmos because of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus.

[26 : 06] Just as the rest of the book is radically non-hierarchical, John only says that he is like those to whom he is writing, their companion in suffering.

Even though he uses these amazing thought forms of a prophet. While we don't know for sure, it is likely that he was exiled to the island of Patmos about 60 miles off of the mainland for preaching about Jesus.

That's what most people think. So this book has kind of a whiff of a prison letter. Think of letters like the ones penned by Dietrich Bonhoeffer in prison or Nelson Mandela or Martin Luther King Jr.

It's this insight from a place of exile. And then finally, the book's audience is the seven churches in the province of Asia. I'm going to talk more about that next week, but suffice it to say that the churches John is writing to were struggling with how to faithfully resist the kind of worship that the empire demanded.

Worship of the rulers and the ruling system as gods. How to dissent with their lives from the pressures of the state. How? Under the threat of losing social and economic standing to continue to proclaim that Jesus is Lord and not any king.

[27 : 36] Y'all, the center of the book of Revelation is not the four horsemen or the number 666. The center of the book of Revelation is Jesus Christ.

The book is not about decoding the future, but about discerning the present, about how to live well now as a dissident disciple. It's about what it means to witness and live inside of patient endurance, which the first hearers would have understood as keeping commandments such as love of God and love of neighbor, even when the situation was not conducive to that.

And right at the beginning of the book, John lets us know that his revelation is from the risen and exalted Christ, the one who has triumphed through faithfulness and models for us how to triumph through faithfulness, how not to be afraid.

One scholar says that Revelation is a classic example of art that stimulates rather than prescribes. May our time with this book, the book of Revelation, over the coming weeks, stimulate our faith and give us strength.

Amen.