

Sermon for June 10, 2018 - 3rd Sunday after Pentecost

Revelation 20:1–6 EHV

Theme: **The Truth about the times**

- 1) The devil has been defeated.
- 2) Those who lost their lives live.

Then I saw an angel coming down from heaven. He had the key to the abyss and a great chain in his hand. ²He seized the dragon, the ancient serpent, who is the Devil and Satan, bound him for a thousand years, ³threw him into the abyss, locked it, and set a seal on it, so that he could no longer deceive the nations until the thousand years come to an end. After this he must be released for a short time. ⁴Then I saw thrones, and those who were sitting on them were given the authority to judge. And I saw the souls of those who had been beheaded because of their testimony about Jesus and because of the word of God. They had not worshipped the beast and his image, and they did not receive his mark on their forehead and on their hand. They lived and reigned with Christ a thousand years. ⁵(The rest of the dead did not live until the thousand years came to an end.) This is the first resurrection. ⁶Blessed and holy is the one who has a share in the first resurrection. The second death has no power over them. Instead they will be priests of God and of Christ. And they will reign with him for a thousand years.

Being a Christian can be tough in today's world. We are often ridiculed for our beliefs. But I don't think any of us can imagine how tough being a Christian was when the Apostle John first recorded our text. Being a believer in Jesus could get you arrested, exiled or even killed.

Can you imagine what that would have been like: adhering to an illegal religion and belonging to and underground Church? Can you imagine what it would be like to have your property confiscated, seeing government agents arresting friends and hearing them threaten to execute family members if they didn't swear allegiance to Rome by renouncing Christ and offering a token sacrifice to Caesar as god?

How can this be? If Jesus is the LORD, why are they suffering? If Jesus forgave their sins, why does it feel like they are being punished? Where is the victory and life promised them in Christ, when all they see is defeat and death?

Even though every extreme evil experienced by the early Christians seemed to indicate that their faith was futile, the LORD allowed the apostle John to see the truth about the times: the devil was defeated and they were winning!

And what was true for the Christians back then, is also true today: regardless of how chaotic and difficult the times might be for Christians, we are always victorious in Christ. With the apostle John as our guide, let us consider **The Truth about the times**. 1) The devil has been defeated. 2) Those who lost their lives live.

Part One: The devil has been defeated

Our sermon text is from St. John's Revelation and, sadly, ranks as one of the most misunderstood, and misapplied passages of Scripture. Popular protestant theology points to it in defense of a false teaching that claims that Christ will establish a future, world-conquering earthly kingdom that will last exactly 1000 years.

While this false teaching might *seem* like a plausible interpretation of our sermon text, it actually misses the real meaning and comfort God offers us through this vision. Worse yet, such an interpretation can lead a person to believe other things that conflict with the Gospel's core message of salvation only coming by grace, through faith in Christ Jesus.

Now, even though our sermon text is sandwiched between a vision that describes the final judgment and another describing our final deliverance, it is not so much a description of what will happen in between those future two events as it is a review of the present, unseen realities that will lead up to them: realities that have existed throughout the New Testament era and that give believers wonderful comfort, confidence and hope in face of all the evils that try to tear them away from Christ. Our sermon text can be compared to watching a replay – sort of like the ones you see on TV while watching the Packers. It looks at the same history from a slightly different view, so as to gain a better appreciation of what's going on. And just as NFL broadcasts are chock-full of replays, so also is the book of Revelation.

St. John writes: *Then I saw an angel coming down from heaven.*

Who is the angel? We don't know for sure, but he certainly comes with the authority that only Christ himself can give. But, if this is Jesus, why is he called an angel? Understand that the basic meaning of the Greek word "angel" is actually "messenger". Even though it is a term that is most often applied to the spiritual beings that serve God in heaven, it can also be used in a more generic sense: referring to anyone having an important announcement to make – including the LORD himself!ⁱ And the angel's actions certainly do proclaim an important message. What is it? The devil's defeat! We read:

He had the key to the abyss and a great chain in his hand. ²He seized the dragon, the ancient serpent, who is the Devil and Satan, bound him for a thousand years, ³threw him into the abyss, locked it, and set a seal on it, so that he could no longer deceive the nations until the thousand years come to an end.

Do you remember what Jesus said in our Gospel lesson, when he was accused of using the devil's power to cast out demons? He said: *no one can enter a strong man's house to steal his possessions unless he ties up the strong man first. Then he can plunder his house.*ⁱⁱ

Jesus is the strong man who binds Satan and plunders his house – that is to say, steals souls away from him. And how does he do it? Through the Gospel message of forgiveness, life and salvation that he accomplished for us through his cross.

Think about it this way: what gives the devil his power over us? It's the law and the condemnation we deserve for breaking it. But Jesus kept the law perfectly in our place. More than that, he suffered on the cross the condemnation we deserved – thereby paying for our sins! Because Jesus did this, the devil holds no true power over us!ⁱⁱⁱ Proof of this fact is found in Jesus' descent into hell, where he made a public spectacle of the devil and proclaimed his utter victory over him.^{iv}

Regardless of whether or not the angel John saw was Jesus himself, this angel certainly operates under the authority that only Christ can give. But what does all this mean? The devil is a spirit, what is the chain that binds him? Why the thousand years?

As I mentioned before, Christ's work of atonement has taken all the devil's power away. The chain that binds him, therefore, is the Gospel message of Christ's work of atonement. The Gospel keeps the devil tied up, so that he can't deceive the nations.

Think of it this way: before Pentecost, all the nations of the world were pretty much under the devil's power and authority. But after Christ came, Jesus sent out his apostles to enlighten the Gentiles by proclaiming the Gospel of salvation. This message was powerful – rescuing many from their slavery to sin and bringing them into Christ's kingdom. The Gospel, therefore, bound the devil – preventing him from deceiving all people in every nation on earth with his plethora of false religions. It does this by proclaiming the truth.

Now, the fact that the Gospel prevents the devil from deceiving the nations does not mean that people can never fall victim to his dangerous deceptions. They certainly can. How so? Think of it this way: just as there are people who try to hop fences at zoos so as to get closer to the wild animals, so also many foolish people flirt with the devil – ignoring the protection offered to them by the Gospel – thinking that he is some cute and cuddly beast who would do them no harm. They, by means of their own foolishness, fall victim to the devil. But the Gospel shields believers from his damning deceptions. Sure, like the early Christians, believers might physically feel the rage of his allies, but the Gospel prevents him from harming their souls.

And the LORD made sure that it would remain this way for “a thousand years.” *After this*, our text says, *he must be released for a short time*.

What exactly is this “thousand years” business and what does it mean that the devil will be released? Like everything else in Revelation, the “thousand years” is meant to be understood symbolically – just like the “chain” that binds the devil. The number 10 is often used as a symbol of completeness throughout Scripture, and 3, more often than not, represents God. $1000=10 \times 10 \times 10$. The thousand years, therefore, represents the complete time God has determined the New Testament era to exist. It represents the time between Christ's ascension and his reappearing.

Regarding his reappearing, Jesus told his disciples that it will be preceded by the appearance of many false prophets and a great falling away from the faith.^v This is the “short time” described in our text, when the devil will be loosed. Think of it this way: if the Gospel is the chain that keeps the devil from deceiving the nations, what will happen if the Gospel is perverted, no longer preached or believed? The devil will regain his power to lead the nations astray – something that

seems to be happening in our own time, as whole denominations are abandoning the Gospel in order to believe the devil's lies. Yes, we seem to be living in scary times, but take heart. Why? Because as long as you trust in Christ and His Word – the devil can't harm you. Sure, the devil and his allies might make your physical life miserable with all sorts of pressure, problems and persecution (just as they did for John's first readers) but they can not change the fact that *in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For* (the apostle Paul writes in Romans) *I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor rulers, neither things present nor things to come, nor powerful forces, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.*^{vi}

Yes, things are not as they appear. Humanly speaking it may seem as if the devil is winning – especially when Christians are killed for their faith. But the truth is that the devil has been defeated. The Gospel prevents him from doing us any harm. The truth is that, even when Christians are killed for their faith, they remain victorious, as we will see next.

Part Two: Those who lost their lives live.

The early Christian Church saw a lot of people lose their lives for their faith in Christ. Humanly speaking, it seemed as if they died in defeat – at least, that is what the enemies of the Church proclaimed. Was this true? Not according to the vision God granted St. John. We read:

⁴Then I saw thrones, and those who were sitting on them were given the authority to judge. And I saw the souls of those who had been beheaded because of their testimony about Jesus and because of the word of God. They had not worshipped the beast and his image, and they did not receive his mark on their forehead and on their hand. They lived and reigned with Christ a thousand years.
⁵(The rest of the dead did not live until the thousand years came to an end.) This is the first resurrection.

John sees the souls of all who died trusting in the LORD. What happened to them? Did they cease to exist? Did they go to some purgatory to burn off sins? No, rather God seated them in his presence to reign with him. From the moment their souls departed their bodies, they have been at home with the LORD – very much alive because God raised them to life at their baptisms.

In order to understand our text, there are some key Biblical concepts we need to keep in mind. The Bible describes all people outside of Christ as being spiritually dead.^{vii} But, wherever Christ's Gospel is proclaimed, His voice is heard – calling his elect to faith. Whenever a person is converted, a spiritual resurrection takes place: instead of being dead in trespasses and sin, he becomes spiritually alive in Christ.^{viii} This, then, is what John is referring to when he speaks of the first resurrection - the resurrection to spiritual life through faith in the Gospel, because of which a person never truly dies; as Jesus told Martha: *"I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me will live, even if he dies.*^{ix}

Our text continues. *Blessed and holy is the one who has a share in the first resurrection. The second death has no power over them. Instead they will be priests of God and of Christ. And they will reign with him for a thousand years.*

What is the second death, mentioned in our text? It's eternal damnation in hell.^x And why is it called the “*second*” death? Because, on the last day, all will be raised to physical life in order to face judgment. Those who believed in Jesus will be raised to live eternally with God on the new earth, under the new heaven. Those who refused to believe in him will die a second time in that they will be cast into everlasting hellfire: once again separated from God and all his goodness.

The prospect of spending forever in hell is certainly a scary thought – but it shouldn't terrify believers. Why not? Because the LORD enabled us to partake of the first resurrection (that is, he brought us to spiritual life through faith in the Gospel) and will make sure that we remain in the Gospel so as to never perish.^{xi} He will preserve us as his royal priests, who will not only spiritually live and reign with him as long as this earth endures, but (as the rest of Revelation indicates) he will raise our physical bodies to experience the perfect everlasting paradise he is even now preparing for us.

I know, with all the evils we face on this earth, it certainly doesn't seem as if we Christians are reigning with Christ. But the truth is that we are. This is the whole reason God gave John this vision: to reassure persecuted believers that he remains true to his promises. Even though it may look like the devil is in control, he has lost his power. The Gospel keeps him bound. Even though it may look like martyred Christians lie dead in defeat, their souls live and rule victoriously with Christ. These are the truths about the times that God wants us to know, so that we might always live in hope. And when the New Testament era finally comes to an end, God will fulfill his final promise and, after judging the world, deliver his believers into the eternal paradise Christ won for them. Amen. Come soon, Lord Jesus!^{xii} Amen.

ⁱ The “Angel of the LORD” of the Old Testament at times identifies himself as the LORD by the way he speaks. (e.g. Genesis 22:11-12)

ⁱⁱ Mark 3:27 (EHV)

ⁱⁱⁱ Cf. 1 Corinthians 15:55-57

^{iv} Cf. Colossian 2:15 and 1 Peter 3:18-20

^v Cf. Matthew 24:5-6

^{vi} Romans 8:37-39 (EHV)

^{vii} Eg. Ephesians 2:1f

^{viii} Cf. Ephesians 2:4ff and John 5:24,25

^{ix} John 11:25 (EHV)

^x Cf. Revelation 20:14, 21:8

^{xi} Cf. John 11:26

^{xii} Cf. Revelation 22:20