

In the Courts of Heaven
LaGrave Christian Reformed Church
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Revelation 4

Reading and understanding the book of Revelation reminds me of the cryptic crosswords that my Dad does. I'm sure some of you here are into crosswords. And perhaps some of you are quite good at solving a typical crossword. And even those of us who don't play crossword puzzles all the time can pick up a regular crossword puzzle and work our way through it. We can figure the thing out. My dad, however, is into something called cryptic crosswords, and even people who are really good at regular crosswords have a hard time with these. Because cryptics have a whole different kind of clue. The clues are worded in a completely different way. They have their own language. For example, here's a real clue from one of the Toronto Globe and Mail's cryptic puzzle. See if you can make heads or tails of it: "Policeman shows signs of nervousness in church, six letters." That's the clue. The answer? Coptic. A policeman is a cop, a tic is a sign of nervousness, and of course the Coptic is also the name of a church found in Egypt and North Africa. That's how policeman shows signs of nervousness in church becomes Coptic.

I hate my dad's cryptic puzzles. I'm terrible at them. When I sit down with them I can't make heads or tails of the clues. My dad loves them. He's good at them. Somehow he has learned how to read these clues in a way that yields solutions. Somehow he has mastered this peculiar language.

There's a similar dynamic at work in the book of Revelation. For people used to interpreting the "regular" books of the Bible, this book is suddenly strange. People who feel comfortable in Paul, and who have more or less understood the gospels, get lost in John's strange vision. They read about the living creatures, and the wings covered with eyes, and the one who has the appearance of jasper and carnelian, and they go running back to Romans for something a little more straightforward. But just like with cryptic crosswords, once you spend a little time in the strange language of revelation, you start to get more comfortable. You start to get an idea of what these words mean. Pretty soon a whole new world opens up to you and you begin to enjoy yourself.

Not only is the book of Revelation cryptic; it's cryptic for a reason. It's not some sort of puzzle game like a crossword, it's cryptic for a purpose. During World War Two, after France had fallen, the BBC used to transmit radio messages across the English Channel to the French resistance. These messages would be in code so they'd sound completely nonsensical. "John has a long mustache and he takes his tea with honey." The resistance understood what this meant, the occupying Germans not so much. It was a way of giving instruction and encouragement during a time of dangerous occupation. Something similar is happening in the book of Revelation. The cryptic words kept the message secret from the forces of the empire, from the malicious forces of Rome.

Tonight I want to try to unpack this cryptic vision for you and see if we can't begin to understand its meaning. And I think once we begin to understand what the vision is trying to communicate, we will find here a word about strength and a word about weakness.

First of all, there is a word about strength. In the days when John saw the visions of Revelation, when people thought of strength they thought of one thing: Rome. The Roman Empire was at the height of its power and had been running the world since anyone could remember. No one could stand up against the might of Rome and the people who tried were in big trouble. The people of Jerusalem found that out the hard way. Just before Revelation was written, after a brief Jewish rebellion, the Romans knocked Jerusalem to the ground. Imperial power had no rivals.

And now imperial power had become a problem for the church. The emperor had set himself against the church. Persecution was heating up. The power of the great Roman empire had been set in opposition to the gospel of Jesus Christ. To people facing the might of Rome, this passage is a cryptic message encouraging them to be strong and stand up to Rome. What is the cryptic message saying? Well let's decode the clues.

The image of the throne of God is a challenge to Rome. People were used to thinking of the throne of the emperor as the seat of power in the world. They were used to thinking that there was no place with more power and influence than the emperor's court, where he was attended by soldiers and advisers plotting the course of the empire, planning wars, making laws, building new cities and burning others to the ground. This vision

shows us a higher court than the court of Rome. This King in the heavenly court is greater than the emperor in his Roman court. His throne is more magnificent. There are flashes of lightning and rumbles of thunder coming from his throne! This throne is encircled by a rainbow. The authority of King Jesus is far beyond any authority in the so-called eternal city. The throne in this vision is a challenge to the authority of Rome.

The picture of the 24 elders around the throne is also a challenge to Rome. According to David Aune who has made a thorough study of Roman culture and imperial practices, the emperor was always attended by 24 bodyguards. In the Roman world kings had 12 bodyguards. Proconsuls had 12 bodyguards. But emperors had 24. The High King of heaven is also surrounded by 24 attendants. But these aren't human bodyguards, these are angelic attendants, representatives of the mighty army of saints. The heavenly court echoes the Roman court, but in a way that shows this court is better, greater.

Finally, the words of praise offered to God at the end of chapter 4 are also a challenge to Roman power. According to David Aune again, the Emperor also regularly received acclamations of praise wherever he went. Much like the Queen of England gets called 'your majesty' or the President is called 'Mr. President,' the emperor's authority and power was acknowledged verbally by his subjects. One of the things the emperor heard a lot was the cry, "worthy." When the emperor entered the great hall of the senate, the senators would cry, "worthy!" When the emperor entered a city in grand procession, the people would cry "worthy!" And there were other acclamations. Here's a list of just some of the things the emperor would hear: People would call him 'holy one.' People said 'glory,' and 'salvation belongs to you.' People would cry out, 'righteous are your judgments' and 'you are worthy to receive power.' And finally as part of the cult of emperor worship, people would call him 'lord and god, lord of the earth, lord of the world.'

It puts the words of the elders and the four living creatures in a new light, doesn't it? The words of verses 8 and 11 are subversive. When the 24 say, "You are worthy, our Lord and God, to receive glory, honor and power," it's a pretty clear challenge to the authority the emperor has claimed for himself. For the Christian struggling against imperial power, this vision would have been empowering. This vision of the true Lord and God would have reminded them that they finally didn't need to fear the emperor or serve him. They could boldly stand up to him and speak the name of Jesus. This vision would have made them strong to overcome.

This vision can empower us too. We're not under any official persecution today for what we believe, but there are other courts whose power tries to win our obedience. The court of public opinion is a powerful one. It's easy to become a servant of that court and to find yourself a slave to its judgments. The court of public opinion does not always have the same judgments as the court of the one who has the appearance of jasper and carnelian. A clear view of his throne and his power will help you stand up against the court of public opinion – something Christians have always had to do. I remember when I was in the Canadian Naval reserve for a summer (Yes, Canada has a Navy. Yes, I was briefly in it) I mixed with people from all sorts of backgrounds. Very few of them were practicing Christians. We were thrown together a lot and we got into all sorts of conversations. At one point me and another person said that we didn't believe in sex before marriage. We said that we were saving ourselves for marriage. There were a bunch of the others who thought we were crazy. "You're waiting? Why! You're crazy!" The court of human passed judgment and we were guilty by reason of insanity. But I felt pretty good about my position partly because I went to church every Sunday and every Sunday I turned my eyes to the court of my King.

But this vision isn't just a word about strength and where it comes from, it's also a word for our weakness. Because the threat isn't just the powers out there who set themselves against God and his people. Often the biggest challenge is the weakness inside of us. There are situations where we have no strength to offer. And for those times there are two images of God's faithfulness, his promise.

There is the rainbow around the throne. Where does the rainbow first appear in the Bible? At the flood. It was a symbol of God's covenant faithfulness. God sent the rainbow as a way to tell the people, I will never give up on my promise to you. As long as the earth endures I will preserve it and I will preserve you. The rainbow shows up in one other important Old Testament place. In the vision of Ezekiel. Ezekiel has a vision of the heavenly courtroom and when he sees the Lord seated on the throne he says, "Like the appearance of a rainbow in the clouds on a rainy day, so was the radiance around him."

Do you remember what was going on when Ezekiel was writing? Exile. People were in exile. And it was their unfaithfulness, their weakness, that put them there. Ezekiel excoriates Israel for her unfaithfulness. The people would have felt like God had given up on them, like he didn't care. The people would have felt that their failure and sin was so great that God would not want them anymore. Ezekiel's vision of God surrounded

by the rainbow told the exiles that God hadn't given up on the promises. They sinned and failed, but God's promise doesn't fail. They would be delivered. His promise stands. And now, here again, God shows John the rainbow to say God is faithful. The exiles in Babylon thought God had given up on them. They were wrong. Ezekiel showed them the rainbow. You persecuted Christians think God has given up on you. You're wrong. God showed me the rainbow around his throne.

There is one more image from Revelation 4 I want you to see hear, and that's the image of the sea of glass, as clear as crystal. How is this an image for our weakness? Well, remember where John is when he receives this vision? He's on an island. He's a political prisoner on the island of Patmos. Patmos is a scrubby little rock in the Mediterranean Sea. As John sits on this rock he knows that this is the place where he will spend the rest of his life. Around him, like the bars of his prison, stretches the churning sea. As far as he can see in every direction there is water. As John experiences the sea, it is a heaving, chaotic mass. It is huge. It is unruly. It is unconquerable. It is opaque. For John the churning of the sea would be like the churning uncertainty of his life.

And the sea isn't just a symbol of uncertainty for John, as we've already seen in this service, the sea has been a symbol of trouble and chaos and evil all through the Old Testament. All the prophets and the poets talk about their troubles and their weaknesses like a great churning sea that threatens to drown them. From the perspective of John, and from the perspective of anyone who is overwhelmed by life, the sea of our troubles seems like a prison from which we can't escape.

But this heavenly vision gives John another perspective on his troubles. The Spirit helps John to see his troubles from the perspective of heaven. And from the perspective of heaven, the troubles of life aren't a stormy sea, they are calm. They are like a sea of glass. From the perspective of heaven, the sea of troubles isn't gray and dark and unfathomable, they are clear as crystal and you can see all the way through to the other side. From the perspective of heaven, our troubles aren't hopeless, with the help of the one who is on the throne, they can be overcome. At four in the morning, lying awake in bed, our troubles can seem titanic, mythical. And even in the clear light of day they can be pretty frightening. Once in a while we need to take a heavenly perspective on our lives and realize that in Christ, they have already been overcome.

A vision for our strength. A vision for our weakness. It's no wonder this vision is so celebrated in art and in music. It's just what we need. May we never lose sight of this vision. May we always find ourselves beside the four living creatures and the elders saying, to the One on the throne, "you are worthy."

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