

Holy War
LaGrave Christian Reformed Church
April 24, 2022-PM Service
Rev. Peter Jonker
Revelation 11:15-19

Allow me to let you into a typical Wednesday in my life. I share this with you not because it is particularly interesting or special, but because it is exactly the opposite. My Wednesdays are ordinary.

This last Wednesday, I got up at early and took the dog for a walk, did a workout, took a shower, got dressed, ate an egg and a piece of toast for breakfast, drank two cups of coffee to get my brain restarted, and headed off to work. Once at work, my day is filled with pretty ordinary minister stuff. I do my devotions. I answer my morning emails. I do a hospital visit and when I get back, I settle in to a couple of hours of sermon study and writing. In the afternoon I meet with the prayer group for an hour of prayer, and after prayer I spend some time prepping for the New Members dinner we had on Thursday. Then it was more sermon writing, a couple of phone calls, I wrote a bunch of cards, and answered a few more emails.

After work, I went over to my in-law's condo. They passed away a few months ago and Linda and I are trying to clear it out by the end of the month. We went out to the Brass Ring for a little dinner after that. Once home we mellowed out for about an hour and I was in bed by 9:30. That's my day and congratulations to all of you who managed to stay interested through all of that. It may seem ordinary to you, but it's my life and I kind of like it. And my guess is that if I were to ask any one of you at random to come up here and tell me about your Wednesday, your story would be a lot like mine. Certainly not exactly like mine, but like mine your Wednesday was filled with some mundane mixture of work and family and leisure time. A very ordinary day in a very ordinary life.

Notice what is conspicuously absent from my Wednesday. There are no dragons. There are no seven-headed, ten-horned beasts rising out of Lake Michigan. There are no angels unsealing scrolls, blowing trumpets or bowls of wrath poured out upon the earth. There are no riders on white horses, no locust plagues, none of that stuff. I'm guessing that your Wednesday didn't have much of that either.

Which is precisely why it's so hard to deal with the middle of the book of Revelation. Revelation 6 through Revelation 20 is filled with strange apocalyptic images. And I think the most basic, gut reaction most of us have to reading all this strange material is: What on earth does this have to do with me and my ordinary Wednesdays? What on earth does this have to do with my hardworking middle class life? Is there anything here for me? My goal tonight is really quite simple. We will get a whirlwind tour of the middle part of Revelation – because we really ought to know what's there. And then we will see what these strange chapters have to say to our ordinary Wednesdays.

The middle part of Revelation is structured around a series of three sevens. First, seven seals are opened. Then seven trumpets are blown. Then seven bowls of wrath are dumped. First, the Lamb opens the seven seals and terrible things are revealed. The first four seals unleash the four horsemen of the apocalypse. These horsemen bring famine and death and war and disease. The fifth seal reveals persecution. It shows us an image of thousands of faithful Christians suffering for their faith and crying out 'how long?' The sixth seal darkens the sun and causes earthquakes and makes people flee to the hills. The seventh seal is opened but instead of everything coming

to an end, seven angels appear with seven trumpets and as each trumpet is blown, we are launched into a new series of seven.

We go from seven seals to seven trumpets. The first trumpet brings hail and fire on the earth. A third of the world is burned up. The second trumpet causes the sea to turn to blood and a third of all sea creatures die. The third angel blows the trumpet and a third of all the rivers and the springs of water turn bitter and poisonous. The fourth trumpet strikes down a third of the heavenly bodies and brings darkness. The fifth trumpet unleashes a storm of locusts; thousands of locusts with breastplates like iron and tails like scorpions. The sixth trumpet unleashes a demonic army of 200 million horses and riders who slaughter a third of humanity. Finally, after all that destruction, the seventh trumpet sounds and we hear that the Lord reigns over the earth.

But that's not all the seventh trumpet does. The seventh trumpet paves the way for a new set of sevens: the seven bowls of wrath. Seven angels show up with these seven bowls filled with terrible judgments that they pour upon the earth. The first bowl causes painful sores to break out on people. The second bowl turns the sea to blood again; this time killing everything. The third bowl makes the rivers and springs turn to blood. The fourth bowl causes the hot sun to scorch the earth and burn people. The fifth bowl plunges the earth into a darkness so deep that humans gnaw their tongues in agony. The sixth bowl reveals three demonic spirits in the shape of frogs that torment the earth. And finally the seventh bowl: When it is poured out there is an earthquake that shatters nations and splits cities into pieces. And then finally after all that judgment an angel says 'it is done.'

And of course the three sevens aren't all that are in these passages. In between we hear about a woman and a child chased by a dragon and two different beasts. We hear about two faithful witnesses martyred for their testimony. We hear about 144,000 people marshaled together to fight on behalf of God. We hear about John being forced to eat a scroll.

Okay. Did you get all that? Are you still with me? It's a strange and violent set of images isn't it? So what does it mean? It's too much to explain everything in these chapters, so I'll focus on the trumpets. I'd like to try to give you a sense of what the seven trumpets are about and how they are meant to function in our daily lives. The rest of the Bible gives us a pretty good idea of what it means when a trumpet blows. The rest of the Bible gives us a pretty good idea of what we're supposed to think of when we hear a trumpet.

Trumpets are used in two ways: First of all, trumpets are sounded as a wakeup call. A trumpet blast means, "Wake up!" Not unlike the bugle that gets the army recruits up at the crack of dawn for their training. Biblically you see the trumpet as a wake up image when Paul talks about the resurrection of the dead. "We will not all sleep, but we shall be changed – in a flash, in the twinkling of an eye at the last trumpet. The trumpet shall sound and the dead shall be raised." The trumpet is a wakeup call for sleepers.

There's a second way in which a trumpet blast functions in the Bible. The trumpet is also a call to battle. It is a summons to Holy War against the forces of evil. The prophets Joel and Amos and Hosea all talk about the sounding of a trumpet as a call to battle or as a warning that Israel is under attack. Remember the story of Gideon who blew the trumpets before he attacked the Midianite camp. Or better yet, remember Joshua and the battle of Jericho; another story with six days of blowing trumpets followed by the Lord bringing a great defeat of evil. Trumpets are a call to be on our guard, alert and ready to confront the evil powers in our world.

When you hear the sound of the trumpets in these chapters, when you combine it with all the imagery of battle and confrontation that surround the blowing of the trumpets, you begin to get a sense of what this vision is saying to us. These trumpets are a call to arms. These trumpets say to

us, “C’mon folks get out of bed! Arise from your sleep! Shake off the cobwebs! Put on the armor of God and fight the good fight!” If the trumpets are calling us to a fight, what exactly is the conflict to which we are called? In the past we’ve talked about how the churches of Revelation faced persecution. We’ve talked about how they were threatened by the Roman Empire. And that’s right. At least 5 of the 7 churches seem to have been suffering under persecution. But persecution isn’t the only problem. Two of the churches face a very different problem. Persecution isn’t their enemy; it’s complacency. Sardis. “Wake up!!” says Jesus to the churches of Sardis. “You think you are alive, but you are really dead! Obey and repent! If you do not wake up I will come to you like a thief!!” Laodicea. That was a wealthy church. Jesus says to them, “You are lukewarm - neither hot nor cold – and I am about to spit you out of my mouth.” Some of these churches were threatened by the sword of persecution. But others were threatened by the pleasant drug of contentment and complacency.

Which of these two threats to discipleship is a more clear and present danger for us? Is it persecution or complacency? Think back to my Wednesday a minute, my comfortable, upper middle class Wednesday. What do you think is a bigger danger in my life, persecution or complacency? It’s pretty obvious isn’t it? My Wednesday doesn’t look like a battle. It doesn’t look like I’m going out to be confronted by powers of evil. The closest thing to a trumpet calling me to arms is the two cups of coffee I have before work. And I think this is true of most of us. We must hear the trumpets. The trumpets remind comfortable people like me that the Christian life is a battle against the forces of evil. It is a struggle against principalities and powers. When I get up Wednesday morning, I cannot simply listen for the voice of my datebook calling me to routine, I must also listen for the trumpets calling me to engage in the struggle, to join the fight.

What kind of weapons do I use in this fight? I chose the title ‘Holy War’ for my sermon, but I hesitated doing so because in this present climate, I thought it might give the wrong idea about how we are supposed to handle things. Yes, Revelation describes a battle between good and evil. But the battle it describes is not the sort of Holy War we hear about in other quarters. In Revelation’s Holy War, we human beings are not the ones executing the judgment. We are not the ones doing the direct fighting. We are not the ones pouring out the bowls, we are not the ones breaking the seals, we are not the ones blowing the trumpets. That’s so important. God and his angels take care of all that. The battle belongs to the Lord, as we sometimes say. And that’s right. It means that the victory belongs to him, but it also means the executing of final justice belongs to him too. We don’t get to wreak revenge on our enemies. We don’t get to pound on the people who have brought evil to us and to the world. God executes the judgment.

What is our part in the battle? If we’re supposed to hear the trumpets in the morning and put on the armor of God, what sort of fight are we in for? Revelation tells us that too. In Revelation the people of God are portrayed in all sorts of struggle, but none of it is particularly violent. None of it involves us clobbering others in the name of Jesus. Here’s how the church of Revelation fights: The church witnesses – proclaiming the Lordship of Jesus and calling people to follow him as portrayed in Revelation 11. The church prays for justice and peace as portrayed in Revelation 6 when the suffering church members cry out “How long O Lord until you bring justice!” The church praises its Lord, joining its voices with the choirs of heaven as pictured in Revelation 4,5 and 7. And the church perseveres. Every letter to the 7 churches ends with a promise of new life for the person who overcomes. Put it all together and you see that the weapons of our fight are grace and love, prayer and praise. Our lives together, our lives with our neighbors, are a sign of the kingdom to a world that’s forgotten its true King. That’s the battle the trumpets call us to fight every morning.

And even if your Wednesdays are ordinary like mine, there are lots of points at which the battle is engaged. When you're trying to teach your son to ride his bike and he falls for the sixth time and you feel yourself getting impatient. The battle is engaged. When you hear some criticism at work, some little nitpicking complaint, totally unfair and directed at you, the battle is engaged. When you are standing in front of the shirt rack at the mall, thinking about buying that cool looking shirt even though you already have 3 perfectly good shirts in your closet that you never wear, the battle is engaged. Or this: When I first came to LaGrave, I really noticed the desperation of some of our neighbors. My heart would be pierced when I would see some poor soul shuffling on the corner at seven in the morning in the middle of winter carrying a bag and a knapsack. After eight years of coming down here every day, it's a lot easier to let them blend into the background. I need to hear the trumpets because the battle is engaged.

Wednesday is coming people. And so is Monday and Thursday and Tuesday and Friday and Saturday. Hear the trumpets calling you to attention, calling you to battle. Go forth into your ordinary days ready to engage the enemy with the weapons of faith and hope and love and grace. Go forth in the firm and certain knowledge that the battle belongs to the Lord.

© Rev. Peter Jonker