THE NATIONAL PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

In Faithful Hands: The Good News of the Book of Revelation

4101 NEBRASKA AVENUE, N.W., WASHINGTON, DC 20016

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In Faithful Hands

Revelation 1

Rev. Earl F. Palmer

It's wonderful to be back after our time in Seattle for Christmas. I want to begin a new series of sermons today on St. John's letter, the last book of the Bible, the Book of Revelation. And as a matter of fact for the next few weeks when we preach on this wonderful book, we have created a study guide. I've titled it "In Faithful Hands: The Good News of the Book of Revelation." And this study guide is available in the literature table and you may take a copy, or if you have several people that are in a study group with you and you want to use it that way or for your own personal Bible study, it will invite you to take a journey through the book of Revelation that I hope will be helpful as we're preaching on it during these next months.

This is the last book of the Bible. Listen to how it begins. "The Revelation of Jesus Christ which God gave him to show his servants what must soon take place." The word for Revelation is the Greek word *apocalypse.* In fact, that's why sometimes this book is called the Apocalypse. It is an interesting word. It means break through by surprise, to break through by surprise. A surprise discovery. It's the same word Paul uses in Romans 1 when he says, "I'm not ashamed of the Gospel, the power of God for salvation to the Jew first and also to the Greek, for in it the righteous character of God has *apocalupses,"* has broken through. His faithfulness for our faith. And that's the same word that's used at the beginning of the book of Revelation: by surprise, God has made known his will. So that's how the book begins.

"It is 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." John is now going to tell us about a vision that he had. I believe that this John that's referred to in the

book of Revelation is the same John who wrote the book of John, and also first, second and third John. He was the bishop of Ephesus. He was the youngest of the Disciples, the son of Zebedee, the brother of James. He is the one who writes this book. And you'll see in a minute it was written from a prison island called Patmos which is just a few miles away from Ephesus where he was the bishop. It's a little bit off the Turkish coast today and today it's called the Holy Island of Patmos, that's its official name; it's a Greek island. It's only four miles by eight miles and it has a monastery on the very top that goes back to the 9th century. But this island was a Roman quarry during the time of the first century where prisoners were brought to quarry stone for Roman buildings. And this is where John was taken as a prisoner. He'll tell you that in a few moments.

"Blessed is the one who reads aloud the words of the prophecy and blessed are those who hear and keep what is written in it for the time is near." That word "near" that's used here is the same word St. Paul uses in Philippians. Remember Philippians 4. He says, "Rejoice in the Lord always, again I say rejoice. Let all people know your moderation. The Lord is near" (Philippians 4:4-5). Nearby. That's what it means, nearby. It's not so much a chronological word in the sense of timing, it means presence. The Lord is nearby. That's the way Paul uses it in Philippians 4, and that's the word that's used here as well. The time, the *chiros* is nearby, is close to us, present to us. "John to the seven churches in Asia:" that would be the Roman province of Asia which is modern day Turkey, and that's where Ephesus is, and you'll see he's going to send this letter to seven churches that are all surrounding and nearby Ephesus where he was the bishop. "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 is throne, and from Jesus Christ the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, the ruler of the kings on earth."

You notice the triune formula that is right here at the beginning of Revelation. God the Father, and then instead of just saying the Spirit, he says the seven spirits. Seven is the perfect number in the Hebrew Bible. It's the complete number. It's the word for *Shabbat* or seven, cease. And because the letter is written to seven churches, and because the Holy Spirit is present among all the churches, that's how the Holy Spirit then is described as the seven. It doesn't mean there are seven Holy Spirits, but the complete or fulfilled Holy Spirit and Jesus Christ. There you have the triune formula. "To Him who loved us and loves us and freed us from our sins by his blood, by his life given in our behalf, and has made us to be a kingdom, priests serving his God and Father, to him be glory and dominion." Now the word for dominion here is the Greek word *kroctos* which means "might," literally, might. And you notice he's going to use it again in just a minute so I'll show you the two uses. "His might, forever Amen." Look he's coming in the clouds, every eye will see him, even those

who pierced him, and on his account the tribes of the earth will wail. This sounds almost exactly like the line that was read to you a few moments ago in the book of Daniel. And you'll see in just a moment we're going to hear more descriptions that are almost identical to what the Daniel text saw.

Daniel had a great experience, a vision in which he saw the Son of Man, you'll see that phrase will be used here, in fact that phrase is used to refer to the Messiah, it is the very phrase our Lord used when he described himself. Jesus did not describe himself as Son of God. He describes himself as Son of Man. It's said of him that he's the Son of God, but he uses the Daniel messianic phrase Son of Man, which you'll see is going to be used in just a moment too. So be it, amen.

And then, "I am Alpha and Omega." *Alpha* is the first letter of the Greek alphabet. *Omega* is the last letter of the Greek alphabet. "I am Alpha and Omega, beginning and end, says the Lord God who is, who was and who will be the Almighty." Now the word *kroctos* is used again, only this time a word is put in front of it, *ponto kroctos,* which means might in every direction. Ponto, everywhere. Everywhere might. So the RSV decided to translate that word "almighty." But it's the same word. Might in every direction. Full might.

"I, John, your brother, who share with you in Jesus the persecution," this word *phlixis,* we get the word affliction from this word, "tribulation" sometimes it's translated. In other words intense pressure, and that's why it's sometimes translated persecution. "I share with you this intense pressure and I also share with you the kingdom, and the patient endurance." *Upomeno.* "Who I was on the island called Patmos, because of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus. And I was in the Spirit on the Lord's day." This interesting phrase the Lord's day is interesting to us because it shows that the early Christians worship on Sunday as they also worshipped on the Sabbath. You see he doesn't say on the Sabbath day. The Sabbath day would be the seventh day. This is one of the internal evidences that the early Christians also worshipped on the Lord's day -- the day that remembers the resurrection of Christ. And that's of course what we do. We're worshipping on the Lord's day, the day that remembers the resurrection of Christ, but we could also worship on the Saturday for that matter too that would be the Sabbath day. But he says he was worshipping on the Lord's day, probably the first day of the week.

"And I was worshipping in the Spirit I was worshipping on the Lord's day, and I heard behind me a loud voice like a trumpet." That's a key word: "like." Be careful with all of the imagery we're going to meet in the book of Revelation, you can't really tightly define imagery because he says it was like a trumpet. He doesn't say, 'I heard a trumpet.' But what it sounded like was like a trumpet. "Saying, write in a book what you see and send it to the seven churches, to Ephesus." Now the

churches are mentioned, these cities: Ephesus, Smyrna, that's modern day Ismir which is just a few miles from Ephesus. Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, Laodicea." Those are all cities that are near Ephesus; Ephesus, of course, being the premier city and then the others surrounding it; Pergamum, being the capital city of the Roman province of Asia. "And then I turned to see whose voice it was that spoke to me, and I saw" and he then describes seeing, "I saw seven golden lamp stands, in the middle of the lamp stands I saw one like the Son of Man." Now this sounds almost exactly like the Daniel passage you heard read a moment ago. "Clothed in a long robe and with a golden sash across his chest. His head, his hair was white as white wool. White as snow. His eyes were like a flame of fire. His feet were like burnished bronze, refined in a furnace. And his voice was like the sound of many waters. In his right hand he held seven stars and from his mouth came like a sharp, two edged sword. His face was like the sun shining with full force, and when I saw him I fell down." That's the opening of the book of Revelation.

I want to ask you a question. Why should we study this book? Why should we spend these next months taking a journey through the twenty-two chapters of the book of Revelation? Why should we? Well, let me give you some reasons. First of all, it's a book of encouragement for those in the first century who were facing intense pressure, and dangers, and even persecutions. And we're in a time that faces intense pressures. So it's a book also for us. Anyone who faces *phlixis,* who faces intense pressure, it's a book of encouragement for those folks. That's one reason to study. Secondly, because the book has been badly handled, or not handled at all by Christians throughout the ages. It's the most quoted book by the church fathers, the book of Revelation. And yet it's also the book that's had a very interesting track record of being toyed with and being recklessly handled. Many, many cultic movements have recklessly handled the book of Revelation. So it's had bad handling down through the ages. And I think we should study it for that reason so that we can hopefully offer a thoughtful reading of this great book. It is a great book and it needs to be rightly understood.

During World War II one German Lutheran bishop, Hanns Lilje was put in jail just like Bonhoeffer was, only he did survive his imprisonment. He was in a Nazi prison for about four years during the war period. And when he was in the prison camp he wrote a commentary, this great theologian Hanns Lilje. He wrote a commentary; of all the books of the Bible he could have written a commentary on he chose to write a commentary on the last book of the Bible, the book of Revelation. It's one of the great commentaries. In that commentary Hanns Lilje says people who suffer (and he was with many people suffering in that prison camp) treasure the book of Revelation, and they never make light of it. But people who don't suffer often toy with the book of Revelation. In fact, maybe he was referring to himself before he was in his imprisonment. Perhaps he toyed with the book too, playing games with

the book, giving reckless and luxurious interpretations of the book. But people who suffer he said don't do that. They see the book as a book of comfort, as a book that helps them. And so that's why he wrote his commentary on Revelation.[1]

Now the third reason why we should study this book is because two huge themes are in the book of Revelation, and they're vital for our day just like they were vital in the first century. This is a book about power. Another commentator who wrote a commentary on the book is Jacques Ileul, a French lawyer, a layman. He wrote a great commentary on it; he just titled his commentary *Apocalypse*. He makes the comment that this is a book about power.[2] Bad power, good power, and it really is. The book of Revelation is a book about might, bad might, good might. Bad power, good power. And we're facing a time where there is wrong power and right power. So it's a book for us too.

In 1941 Britain was in a very dark time during the Battle of Britain. The United States had not yet entered World War II and it was a very, very open question as to whether England and Europe would survive. Germany had now taken control of virtually all of Europe. And during that hard and harsh time, BBC wanted a series of broadcast talks that would comfort the people of England, and give them encouragement. And the director of the BBC at that time read a book that impressed him. It was written by C.S. Lewis in Oxford called *The Problem of Pain*. He wrote it in 1939. And this director of the BBC was very impressed by the book; he didn't know anything about C.S. Lewis. But he wrote a letter to Professor Lewis at Oxford, and said, "Would you be willing to come down once a week to London and go to the BBC studios and broadcast for us a series of short talks that would help us during this time, this hard time?" And Lewis agreed. And he went for almost two years down from Oxford to London and gave what are called "The Broadcast Talks from BBC". You know that none of them were recorded, we're sorry to say. And they didn't record them, but they were there. I was told by one Brit that during World War II in the hard period of the Battle of Britain, the two voices that were most known to the people of England apart from the King (you know King George had a stuttering problem so he very rarely spoke), but the two voices that were most known in England were Winston Churchill and C.S. Lewis, because of his broadcast talks during that hard period of the Battle of Britain.

It's interesting when they invited him to come to give the broadcast talks, Lewis was given the title by BBC. He didn't get to make up his own title. And the title they chose was this: "Right and Wrong as a Clue to the Meaning of the Universe". Right and Wrong. Just like the book of Revelation. Right power, wrong power. They were facing a huge danger in Europe. They wondered if western civilization was going to survive what was happening in World War II. And they wanted him to speak on right and wrong. Those are the broadcast talks. Lewis gave them. You know they

were published after he gave those talks in the most published of all books Lewis wrote, the largest circulation of any book, is those broadcast talks; but he changed the title to *Mere Christianity.* And that's the book, *Mere Christianity.* But it was originally "Right and Wrong." It shows you it's a current theme. It's a very important theme. And the book of Revelation is about right and wrong.

But it's interesting that in Chapter 1 before anything else we meet Jesus Christ. We meet Jesus Christ right at the beginning. And the thing that interests me is, in our meeting with Jesus Christ, John and his vision gives us four verbs and four nouns to describe Jesus Christ. He's described with four positive indicative nouns that describe who he is, and then four verbs that describes what he does. It reminds me of Karl Barth's great line, that "in understanding Jesus Christ you cannot separate what Jesus said who he is from what he did.[3] What he said and what he did are inseparable." And you see that in the opening of the book of Revelation.

Let me show you the four nouns that describe Jesus Christ. We've just read them, but I want to highlight them for you so you'll see them. First, the first word describing Jesus Christ that we read, "grace to you and peace from He who is to come and the Holy Spirit, and Jesus Christ the faithful witness." Jesus Christ the faithful one, that's the first word about Jesus Christ, that he is the rock. He is the solid faithful witness, the faithful one. And that's the opening noun. Then the firstborn from the dead. That means the Lord of life, the one who conquered death. He is the first, firstborn is a Jewish way of describing the lordship. He is the Lord of life. Again, that's a noun. Jesus Christ is alive. He's not dead. And notice a little later when John will meet him in that vision, he says I'm alive. John says, "I saw him, I felt his feet as though I were dead. He placed his right hand on me saying don't be afraid, I am the first and the last, I am the living one, I am alive, I'm not dead." Jesus Christ is the firstborn from the dead, he is the living one. Three, he's called the ruler of the kings of the earth. And that's where I alerted you to the two word *Kroctos,* He is, he has might and he has *Ponta,* might. Might in every direction. He is the ruler. Might, full might. And then fourth noun, He is the Lord of time. And that's how we understand "I am Alpha and Omega." That's the first and the last letter of the Greek alphabet. I'm the one who was, who is, and who will be. All of that, all of those great nouns really, are describing the fact that Jesus Christ is the Lord of time. Notice the four nouns. He's the Lord of faithfulness. He's the one who doesn't change, he's faithful. He is the living one, who is alive. He is the one with might; in fact, full might, almighty might. And he's the Lord of time. Time is in his hands, past, present, future. Those are the nouns.

And then the verbs. Notice the verbs. The first verb after we hear of his might, and I think this is so moving, we hear of his might, notice he is the ruler of the kings of earth. To him who loves us. The first verb and love is a verb, he loves us. It's present

tense. It's not loved us. It's loves us. We're doing a series on Wednesday nights from the fruit of the Spirit. We started it last Wednesday and now this week we get to talk about the first fruit. What is the first fruit of the Spirit? Love. Why is it first? It's the first verb that's used to describe Jesus Christ. His mighty act, his mighty love. It's one thing to have might and the awesome might of God could scare you. But the first word, the first verb, is he loves us, and has set us free, he frees us. That's the word for redemption. He sets us free, that's forgiveness. He sets us free by his blood, by his life given in our behalf, referring to the cross of Christ. Again it's a verb. He frees us from sin by his life given in our behalf. And then the next verb, he makes us priests and a part of his kingdom. And that is the commissioning of Jesus Christ that starts the book of Revelation, commissioning us to be his servants, to be his ambassadors in the world, to make a difference in the world. We're not just there; we're as priests and as members of his kingly reign in the world. And then finally, the final verb, he's coming again. He's coming. Notice, look, he is coming, just like the book of Daniel said, he's coming.

Now all these nouns and verbs converge in a dramatic scene that John himself experiences that begins this book. Verse 17, "When I saw him," notice now these nouns and verbs have all been shared, "When I saw him, I fell at his feet as though I were dead." It almost sounds like Isaiah... "In the year the king Uzziah died, I saw the Lord high and lifted up" and he fell down and said, woe is me, I'm a sinner. He says, I fell in the presence of this awesomeness, of this might, I fell as one dead. "But he placed his right hand on my saying don't be afraid." Remember how the angel said that to the shepherds at night. Don't be afraid. They were mega frightened when they saw this angel. Who wouldn't be? In the middle of the night, and he said don't be afraid. "He says do not be afraid, I am First and Last, *Alpha* and *Omega* again, I am the Living One. I was dead, but look, I'm alive for evermore and I have the keys that will open death and Hades." And that's how the book of Revelation begins.

You know it's very interesting. That's a terrifying moment. Think of what John has seen. He has seen this image in his vision almost like Daniel where he sees this one whose head was and hair was white as snow, his eyes like a flame of fire, his feet like burnished bronze, his voice like the sound of many waters, and then in his right hand these stars and then this sword that comes forward, and then he falls down like he's dead. And a big surprise happens. And do you know what it's like to be knighted by the king or the queen? Have you read *Once and Future King*? You know, it's that great moment when a young warrior or a young prince gets knighted. And when Queen Elizabeth knights someone you know what she does? You know what she does? She takes the sword of the empire, the sword of power, and she holds it over your head. Now there's a terrifying moment; what if she gets confused or if she decides she doesn't like you at the end? You're kneeling in front of

her, and she has the sword, and she could just whack your head off I suppose. It's a little improbable I think, the queen is a little frail right now but she has the sword. She has it in her hand. The king has a sword in the hand, you're down there as if you were dead because I see all this power and then the huge surprise happens that begins the book of Revelation.

At that moment with this picture of the Son of Man with his sword and the stars in his hands and his rush of mighty waters as his voice, and the trumpet sounds and he takes the sword, he could have whacked your head off, instead he puts his hand on your shoulder, just like when the queen, you know what the queen does when she knights you? She takes her sword and puts it on your shoulder and says, "I knight you." The might loves you. The might of the empire loves you. We are going to honor you for some great achievement that you've made that makes you now a knight and now you'll be Sir So-and-so, Lady So-and-so. You're knighted. And so she puts the sword on the shoulder and that's exactly what happens to John. He puts his hand on my shoulder and says, Don't be afraid. I'm alive. Notice what's happened. The might and the love they've all come together. All these nouns have come together with the verbs. He is the faithful one. He doesn't change. He is the Living One. He is the Mighty One. He is the Lord of time, and that One is the one who loves you. And that's the way the book of Revelation begins. This is a good book.

Heavenly Father, thank you for this book. Thank you that it starts this way. It doesn't start really scaring us, it starts surprising us, with how good you are, and how much power you have, good power, in our favor and in favor of the world and those around us, and people who are facing their very heavy dangers right now. We thank you that we can claim this book for our lives; we can claim the hope in this book for our lives, because of Jesus Christ who is at the heart of this book. May we experience it in Christ's name we pray, Amen.

1 Lilje, Hanns. *The Last Book of the Bible.* Muhlenberg Press, 1957.
2 Ileul, Jacques. *Apocalypse: The Book of Revelation.* Seabury, 1977.
3 Barth, Karl. *Dogmatics in Outline.* Harper Perennial, 1959.

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Sunday Worship at 8, 9:15 &11 a.m.
Classes for Adults, Youth, and Children at 9:15 a.m.

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4101 Nebraska Avenue, N.W.
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