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The National Presbyterian Church

The Grand Symphony IV: To Enter a Great City

Revelation 21:1 - 22:5

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Today is Palm Sunday, the day when Jesus came into the city of Jerusalem and a great crowd sang praises to him. "Hosanna, blessed be the name of the Lord who comes in the name of the Lord" (Luke 19:38). That song is from Psalm 118, a part of what was called the *Hallel* (Psalms 113-118). It was a very Messianic set of songs that has the great line, "The stone that the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone." The word *Hosanna* literally means, "Lord help us." They sang that Messianic song to Jesus. Luke tells us that they also sang the Zechariah 9 song. Here's the whole Zechariah 9 text:

*Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion! Shout aloud, O daughter of Jerusalem!
Your king comes to you, triumphant and victorious is he, humble and riding on a
donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey. He will cut off the chariots, he will cut off the
war horses, and the battle bow shall be cut off. And he shall command peace to the
nations. His dominion shall be from sea to sea, and from the River to the ends of the
earth (Zechariah 9:9-10).*

Again a profoundly Messianic passage.

When the people sang this, the Pharisees came to Jesus and said, "Rabbi, teacher, tell your disciples to be quiet." They recognized that the people were singing Messianic songs to Jesus, therefore they said to Jesus, "You should silence your disciples." Our Lord answers them in a hidden way. He says, "I tell you, if they were silent, the rocks would cry out" (Luke 19:39-40). In a way our Lord's words are a prophecy of what will in fact happen. They will be silent before this week is over; they will no longer be shouting these great songs. But also our Lord is saying that though the people are now subjectively calling me Messiah, even when they are quiet; even if they don't say it, the rocks will cry out. Their announcement is still true; what they

now say is still true, even though later they will forget it.

We all know what happened during this incredible week, the week like no other week, Holy Week. As the week moves on we know that the people will not sing this song throughout the week. The prophecy that they now sing in praise on Palm Sunday does not seem to be happening by the time they get to Thursday night and Friday. Nevertheless, what they said was true but it just doesn't look like it while they get to Thursday and Friday. On Friday our Lord dies on the cross, on Mount Calvary his path leads to Calvary. Then on Easter, three days later, a few of the disciples will meet the risen Lord. His resurrection is not in front of all the people. He doesn't appear before Pontius Pilate, he doesn't appear before the Sanhedrin or the High Priests. It will be his disciples. And then small groups meet the risen Lord. But those people will share that Good News that Jesus Christ has died on our behalf and has conquered sin, death and the power of evil, and he has been vindicated in the Resurrection. They will share that Good News and throughout their century that Good News will be spread from city to city throughout the Mediterranean world.

But pressures will build and intensify. In the 60s, near the midpoint of the first century, John writes the book of Revelation, the same John who also wrote the gospel of John, who is the son of Zebedee and one of the twelve disciples. During this time, John is the bishop of Ephesus but he is now imprisoned on a Roman colony island of Patmos, where he will write a letter to the brothers and sisters in Ephesus where he was bishop, along with the churches that surround Ephesus. He will write in his book seven letters to those churches, and in the midst of writing that letter John will have a great vision. This vision is filled with many things that are mysterious and that includes hard to understand imagery. His letter is written to Christians who were called arsonists and were targets of a terrifying persecution that was spreading throughout the Roman world because of the fire of Rome in 64A.D. The Emperor Nero had blamed them for that fire.

So the Christians who watched their movement grow, now watch as pressures build against them. Therefore they have many questions on their minds. I believe the book of Revelation speaks to those questions. It's interesting for those of us who read this book many years later that the questions they have are not very different from questions even where we live today.

Listen to their questions. As I see it, there are at least six questions that are on their minds. The first question is "How do we make sense of what's happening in the world right now?" How do we make sense out of the story of our lives, and everyone else's lives, past, present and future? If you think of history as if it were a great scroll, written on all sides with seals that seal it, how would you make sense out of that scroll? How would you interpret it? And most important of all, who can interpret it? Chapters 4 and 5 offer an answer to that question. "Holy, Holy, Holy, Lord God Almighty, who was, who is, who will be. By your will [by your decision]

all things were created" (Revelation 4:8). That's the first answer to the meaning of history. History has meaning because God made it. He blessed it with meaning from the very beginning.

But then in the fifth chapter this scroll of history's story is introduced. Who can open the scroll now? Who can make sense out of all the parts of it? At first, no one was found able to open the seals - no one in heaven or earth or under the earth. And then John, while he's weeping, turns and realizes that the Lion of the tribe of Judah who is the Lamb is able to open the scroll. And then we hear a second great song. "Worthy is the Lamb who is able to open the scroll" (Revelation 5:9). Who is able to interpret the meaning of history? History is in his hands, he is the Lord of history itself, and therefore that song is sung. Chapter 5.

The final choral of George Friedrich Handel's *Messiah* is this very text from Revelation 5, "Worthy is the Lamb who was slain to receive glory and blessing in our honor" (Revelation 5:12). Tonight, here at The National Presbyterian Church, our great choir augmented to 90 voices will sing that amazing work. There's nothing, in my opinion, like that final great chorale, "Worthy is the Lamb" followed by the wondrous chorale, "Amen." Amen is a Hebrew word, it means "rock," it means "faithful." Trustworthy. And that's the way *Messiah* ends: Amen.

So the fifth chapter of Revelation actually is a song sung to the meaning of the scroll and the One who has a right to hold the scroll. So there are questions. The first question is "How do we make sense out of what's happening in the world?" The second question is "How do we handle and survive the chariots, the weapons of battle, the warfare that the Zechariah text told about?" How do we handle that when it's around us, when we're faced with the terrors in the world right now with Nero and the persecution that we're seeing in all these cities in the Mediterranean world? And then third question: "When is Christ the Messiah coming to us again in glory?" We have come to believe in and trust him; we know of his victory on Easter, we know what happened on the cross but now we are asking, "When is that Christ returning to us?" This is the great expectation about the second coming of Christ. When will Christ come again in full glory? We heard about it, we sang about it on Palm Sunday in the Zechariah text, when will it happen that he will come again? And the fourth question: "Will there be judgment and justice in the world?" Will evil be judged, both cosmic evil, the devil who is the dragon and the demons, will they be judged? And what about their allies? What about human evil? Will it be judged? Is there judgment, is there justice? It's a huge question. It's been a question that we have in our hearts and minds in this day when and where we live, just like they did.

And then, the fifth question: "What are we to do right now in the middle of all this?" It's Bonhoeffer's great question: "How do we live in a time between times?"¹ We're in a time between times. In this middle place we're in, how do we live right

now? What are we supposed to do right now in this middle? And then finally, what do we look forward to when we die? What will heaven be like? This week *The Washington Post* devoted a whole page to what heaven will be like, asking various people to speculate on what they think heaven will be like. What do we look forward to? What is the fulfillment of history and what will it look like? Those are questions that they had. We know it. We can see it in each of the New Testament letters, and we see it lying behind all that's written in the book of Revelation. John in his great experience on the Island of Patmos received answers for the Lord of history, some of them hidden, but answers to those six questions.

First, the meaning of history? The scroll? The seals, the opening of the scroll, the past, present and future of all of the history of our lives? It's all in God's hands. He holds it. The Lamb holds history in his hands. He is now and will be in every future the Lord of history. And that's affirmed in the fourth and fifth chapters. He created everything that is and he is the Redeemer of everything and everyone. The spiritual has it right: "He's got the whole world in his hands." And that is the affirmation that's in the book of Revelation from beginning to end. Jesus Christ is *alpha* and *omega*. He is the beginning and the end; he holds history in his hands. The scroll can be held by the Lamb. Nothing, neither angels, nor demons, nor human beings can do it. Only he can. That's affirmed by text and song in Revelation.

Secondly, what about the dangers, what about the chariots and the battle bows that Zechariah talked about? How do we handle those? In the symphonic part of the book of Revelation, Chapters 6 through 22, which we have considered these last weeks we have seen John grapple realistically with the dangers we face, yet with a hiddenness, with a use of imagery that's absolutely terrifying. We meet a dragon. We meet a scary beast who rises up from the sea. Multi-headed, hydra headed beasts. We meet locusts. More than that, an army of locusts. How are we supposed to interpret those? We meet danger, huge caldrons that are tipped over, bowls that pour wrath down. What are we supposed to do? We even meet one human ally of the dragon who has a name, it's a strange name, it's a number, 666. What are we supposed to do with all of these dangers? They're there, they're portrayed. It's interesting in the symphonic part of Revelation we do hear an answer. And the answer affirms to us that, as terrifying as all of these separate threats are, they dwell within a number sequence one through six, and as the intensity may grow from one to six, the number seven, the fulfillment number always belongs to the Lamb. In each of the buildups that we watched in the symphonic part as the danger may build and build through one, through two, through four, for instance the four horses of the Apocalypse, and then we come to the fifth terror and the sixth, but the seventh belongs to the Lamb. And that's where great chorales are sung. The Lamb has the last word. Therefore, all of these dangers are penultimate. They are dangers for sure but they are not the last word. The last word belongs to the Lamb, belongs to the Lord of history. And that's affirmed in the symphonic part with all of the mysterious language that's used. Even the name "666" may be terrifying, it probably points to the name Nero, but it is still less than seven. In fact, you could have a million sixes

and they're still less than seven. Seven is the last word. Seven is the fulfillment word and that always belongs to the Lamb. It always belongs to God. So it means that no matter what dangers you and I face, no matter how real they are, they're not final. They're not ultimate. They're always less than seven, less than fulfillment.

And then three, "When is Christ returning?" When is this victorious Messiah going to return? It was a question on the minds of first century Christians, we know. And our Lord offered an answer himself in the Olivet Discourse, and the book of Revelation agrees with our Lord's answer. "I will come," our Lord said, "Like a thief in the night. You will not know when I will return. So be ready, but don't worry. Be ready, but don't worry" (Revelation 16:15). And in a sense he takes that out of our hands. It's in his hands, as Karl Barth commented in his commentary on Romans, "No harm must be done to the critical choice. Our freedom is always preserved in the New Testament, but God's freedom is also preserved."² He is going to come; Jesus Christ will come when he chooses to come. And this rules out prophetic games of curiosity. It rules out charts and predictions that we might find ourselves falling into, to try to predict when the second coming of our Lord is going to occur. We do not know. It's in his hands. C.S. Lewis has an interesting line. He says, "It's in his hands. You might as well leave it there because it's there whether you leave it or not."³ It's in his hands, not ours. Jesus said it plainly: "I will come like a thief in the night." That's the language our Lord uses, it's the language repeated in the book of Revelation.

Four: "Is there judgment?" Is there final judgment? Will evil be judged? Is there justice? Are we living in a moral universe or is it a neutral universe? And the answer is a clear yes. In each of the symphonic movements the reality of judgment is there, especially in the third movement. There is final judgment, but not yet. It's interesting, even in the final symphonic movement that we'll look at in just a moment, the word will be still used with regard to final judgment. It's in God's hands. In a way, that's good news too. It's good news that there is judgment, there is a final reckoning, there is a final weighing. But that final weighing is in God's hands, not ours. And that's good news too.

One author put it this way. He says, "When God is still speaking, even if he's scolding you, then you know you're not in hell. You're in hell when the last voice you hear is your own."⁴ The loneliness of myself as lord of my whole life, if that were extended into eternity that would be hell. But when God is still speaking, you're not in hell. Thankfully for us God is still speaking. As we move to the third movement, the symphonic movement and now in the fourth movement as well. So there is judgment and there is a weighing and a final weighing but that too is in his hands at once.

Now, what are we to do now? How are we supposed to live right now? It's clear. In the book of Revelation, we're told that in the midst of all the terrors of Babylon (which is probably a hidden reference to the Roman Empire) there are believers that

are challenged to keep their integrity and to not buy into the ethical system that was around them. Those words are for us as well; don't buy into the injustice you see others using toward each other, don't buy into it. If you are living in a mean-spirited age (and we are living in a mean-spirited age right now) if there's a mean spirit, you don't have to buy into it. We have a choice to buy into a different ethical system and a different way of living. We're told to stay faithful. Stay faithful to the Gospel. In fact, when we look closely at the seven letters to the seven churches, all of the seven churches are given ministries to do in the midst of the world where they each dwell.

The most important ministry of all is the ministry of love. And we are told, don't leave that behind. The church of Philadelphia is told they have an open door to carry on their ministry. The opening of the book of Revelation tells us that we are priests to live out the priesthood of all believers toward the world. We are not just to stand by in the world and keep our integrity, but to keep our integrity with a mission, with roles to play here and now. And that's clear in the book of Revelation.

And then finally, "What do we look forward to?" What we look forward to is the final symphonic movement. Also, some of the hidden language is going to appear here but it's very clear in Revelation 21, the opening of the fourth symphonic movement. It starts like this:

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away. The sea was no more, and I saw the Holy City, the New Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God prepared as a bride, adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, 'See, the home of God is now among men. He will dwell with them and be their God and they will be his people. And God himself will be with them. He will wipe every tear from their eyes. And death will be no more, and mourning and crying and pain will be no more for the first things have passed away.' And the one who is seen at the throne said 'Look, I am making all things new.' [That's a fulfillment word.] And he said write this for these words are trustworthy and true. And then he said to me it is done. [Same word our Lord said on the cross just before his final word on the cross "Into thy hands I commend my spirit," our Lord said "Finished." Now here's the same word. At the battle of Armageddon scene our Lord said "Finished" and now finished, fulfilled. Fulfilled.] "I am alpha and omega, the beginning and the end. To the thirsty I will give water as a gift from the spring of the water of life.
(Revelation 21:1-6)

And then we hear the dimensions of heaven, and the dimensions are immense. And I think it's the immensity of the number that's the key. We're told that when the New Jerusalem was coming down from heaven and the text states an actual dimension, it was 1,500 miles wide, 1,500 miles long, and 1,500 miles high. That's a pretty big cube. And it's meant to just be immense. It is an immense picture he gets, just like the immensity of 1000-year reign. Or the immensity of 144,000. Those

are numbers used to show immensity. This is beyond imagining. But the big thing is not the glory of the city, and all the precious stones and gold and all that are told that are in the walls, that's not what's important in this final picture. The important thing in this picture and the fourth movement are the people we meet. We meet the Lamb and the Father. And listen to this:

That there's no need for light in the city because Jesus Christ the Lamb is the source of light. So the nations shall walk by its light, and the kings of the earth shall bring their glory into it, and its gates shall never be shut by day and there will be no night there. And people will bring into it the glory and the honor of the nations and then the angel showed me the river of water of life, bright as crystal flowing from the throne of God and the Lamb, through the middle of the street of the city and on either side of the river, the tree of life, twelve kinds of fruit, producing its fruit each month and the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations.

(Revelation 21:23-22:2)

By the way, let me do a word study with you. Three times a word that's translated in our English Bible, "nations," is used. Do you know what that word is? Do you know what "nations" is? It's the Greek word *ethna*. The ethnic groups. It's a word that shows that our identity is preserved in heaven. If you're an African-American, you're an African-American. If you're white, you're white. If you're an Asian, you're an Asian. Your ethnicity is preserved. We're not turned into something grey. And we're not going to all look alike. We will be who we are. Our uniqueness is preserved in this picture. And not only that, you bring your glory. The word "glory" means presence. You bring your presence, your gift, and you bring it in. If you're a harpist, you play the harp. If you're a saxophonist, you play the saxophone. You're going to be fulfilled. This is a fulfillment passage. Johan Sebastian Bach will play the organ, he won't play the harp. Harpists play the harp. There's too many people that think everybody's going to play harps in heaven, but they're not.

You're going to be fulfilled. Because you're bringing your presence, your *ethna*, you're identity is being brought in and fulfilled in this picture. St. Paul has the same picture in Romans 8, that the whole created order will be fulfilled, not incinerated. The future of the earth is not its incineration, it's fulfillment. Read Paul, Romans 8. Read this. It's a fulfillment; everything will be made new, and fulfilled. That means mountains; they're going to be there. That's good for skiers. Skiing will be there. You're going to be fulfilled there. Nothing is going to be lost there. What an argument that is in favor of continuing your scientific research. Pierre Teilhard de Chardin was a Roman Catholic Jesuit priest and also a famous paleontologist. And one of his best friends was Julian Huxley the atheist, and their correspondence is really interesting. Huxley the atheist and humanist wrote to Chardin and said he believed that when he died that everything was over. And Chardin answered him and said, "Huxley, for you everything is over but not for me. When I die and move on, I fully expect to continue my research on into eternity. As a paleontologist, now I can see what those dinosaurs really looked like. I'm going to continue my research on into eternity."⁵ We're going to be fulfilled. That's what we look forward to. The fulfill-

ment of life. The fulfillment of identity, not a blurring. Not just a grandstand where we sit and watch other people do things. We bring our glory to the stream. And it's interesting what it says-- that at the stream the Lamb is there, and two trees, the tree that feeds and a tree that heals. A tree with leaves for the healing of nations. What a tremendous picture. That's what we look forward to. No wonder this book of Revelation is a book of comfort for people who are suffering, people who are struggling. It's a book that tells that history is in God's hands. And that history is going to be fulfilled. That's the fourth symphonic movement.

Heavenly Father, thank you for this text and thank you for these words from the book of Revelation, not a book that causes us to do our own speculations beyond what is in the text, but Lord a book that encourages us and gives us hope because Jesus Christ is Lord and he holds history in his hands, which means he holds our lives in his hands. We thank you for that. In Christ's name we pray, Amen.

1 Bonhoeffer, Dietrich. *Ethics*. SCM Press, 1955.

2 Barth, Karl. *The Epistle to the Romans*. Oxford University Press, 1968.

3 Lewis, C.S. *The Weight of Glory and Other Addresses*. The MacMillan Company, 1949.

4 Lewis, C.S. *The Great Divorce*. The MacMillan Company, 1946.

5 Chardin, Pierre Teilhard de. *The Phenomenon of Man*. 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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