

Adult Faith Formation – Lent 2022
The Apocalypse or The Revelation to John
Week 3 – The Breaking of The Seals (Chapters 4-7)

Chapters 4 and 5 go together. Chapter 4 shows the Pantocrator seated on a throne and receiving the worship of the heavenly court. Chapter 5 shows the slaughtered Lamb through whom God's plan of salvation will be accomplished

The Worship of Heaven (4: 1-11)

God's throne and God Himself (4: 1-6)

- John is invited by Christ up into heaven through an open door
- John's vision is dominated by the white throne
- John can only describe God by comparison to jewels and light
- 7 flaming torches stand in front of the throne (symbolic of the Temple Menorah)
- Thunder and lightning come from the throne (common occurrence when a theophany occurs)

24 Elders

- The first ring around the throne contains 24 thrones for 24 elders who wear white garments and gold crowns
- They are symbolic of the people of God (12 under the Old Covenant and 12 under the New Covenant)

4 Living Creatures

- Covered with eyes (they see all)
- Have come to be associated with the 4 evangelists:
 - Matthew represented by a man = gospel relates genealogy of Jesus Christ
 - Mark represented by a lion = gospel calls Jesus Christ the Son of God
 - Luke represented by an ox = gospel begins in the Temple where sacrifices are made
 - John represented by an eagle = gospel calls Jesus Christ the Logos = Word of God of heavenly origin
- All are praising God. The Sanctus never ceases

Liturgy and Heavenly Worship

The Mass (on earth) joins in the heavenly praise in the Canon of the Mass with the Sanctus. Since all of creation is singing, it is not a good idea to be silent and not sing the Sanctus!)

The whole earth worships God and the Lamb

- Angels form the 3rd ring around the throne
- Elders form the 2nd ring
- Living creatures form the 1st ring
- Worshipers are countless in number GK=myriads (in the Greco-Roman world a myriad was 10,000, the highest number used)
- Heaven and earth and under the earth and the sea

Chapter 5: The Lamb and the Scroll

The Scroll

- Written on both sides
- Sealed with 7 seals
- Obstacle to opening is finding someone worthy to open
- Only the Lamb is worthy

The Lamb

- Lamb is slain but standing (GK slain = someone who has been killed by a violent act)
- Lamb stands in front of the throne to receive scroll
- Living creatures and elders praise God and the Lamb
- Elders hold harps and bowls of incense
- Parallel to Christian liturgy

The Seals (6: 1-17)

When each of the first 4 seals is broken, one of the Living Creatures says, "Come."

Seals 1-4

- 1) white horse: rider carries bow, he is given a crown, he rides to conquer
- 2) red horse: rider is given a great sword and permitted to take peace from the earth
- 3) black horse: rider holds a pair of scales, reference to the poor versus the rich
- 4) pale green horse: rider named Death and Hades follows him, he is permitted to kill ¼ of the earth by famine, sword, plague, and wild beasts
- This vision has a parallel in Zech. 1: 1-17 and 6: 1-8
- The calamities are not 4 different events but should be viewed as a single picture of divine judgment
- These calamities are usually the result of sinful actions rather than divine intervention, but in this case, power has been given to these riders. God has allowed the human will toward power and violence to run its course...God's permissive will. If this is true, why?
- These calamities are not new events...they have occurred throughout history
- Nothing about the 4 horses suggests anything with which we are not familiar

Seal 5

- Underneath the altar are the souls of martyrs who cry out to God "How long before you avenge our blood?" (parallel to Gen. 4:10)
- Blood on altar when animal sacrificed....martyrs blood beneath the altar
- Each given a white robe (GK stole) and told to be patient until the number of martyrs is filled
- 3rd century began practice of saying Mass over the tombs/relics of martyrs

Avenge vs. personal revenge

- 2 different things. Vengeance in the Bible is punishment that accords with justice
- Only God has the right to take vengeance

The 6th Seal

- Great earthquake/sun turns black/moon is like blood/stars fall from sky/every mountain and island is moved/all great and small hide in caves
- Vision of time just before history's end..."the great day of wrath"
- Like a fast forward collage of OT prophecies of judgment with Christ's eschatological discourse
- 7 classes of people represent the totality of humanity: kings, nobles, military officers, the rich, the powerful, slaves, free (See Catechism on Christian death: 1005-1050 and 1051-1060)

Before the 7th Seal is broken, the vision of the Seals is interrupted by 2 Interlude Visions

The First Interlude Vision

The 144,000 are marked (7: 1-8)

- 4 angels at 4 corners of the earth holding back 4 winds
- Angel comes from the East holding the Seal of God. Instructs the 4 angels not to damage the land and sea before the Seal of God can be placed on the foreheads of the “servants of our God”
- John HEARS number 144,000 marked with the Seal (from every tribe of Israel)
- 12,000 from the tribes of: 1) Judah, 2) Reuben, 3) Gad, 4) Asher, 5) Naphtali, 6) Manasseh, 7) Simeon, 8) Levi, 9) Issachar, 10) Zebulum, 11) Joseph, 12) Benjamin

Who are the “servants of our God”?

- 144,000 = symbolic number (12 x 12 x 1000)
- In Scripture the number 12 = the whole of God’s people
- 12 tribes descended from the 12 patriarchs
- 12 patriarchs of the Old Covenant + 12 disciples of the New Covenant
- 1000 is symbolic for a large number and is the largest military unit under one commander in the Biblical Hebrew army
- This is military imagery representing a census of men of fighting age (See Num. 1: 20-43)

So....who are they?

- Ethnic Israel? Jews and Jewish Christians? Doesn’t work
- After the Assyrian conquest (721 BCE) many of the 10 northern tribes were exiled and disappeared through assimilation with Gentiles (pagan groups) where they settled
- It is best to understand the “servants of our God” as symbolically representing God’s faithful people, both Jews and Gentiles (Jews, Jewish Christians, and Gentile Christians) who are united to Israel’s Messiah

The Seal and Its Significance

- The seal’s protection is spiritual, not physical (Luke 21: 16-18)
- As early as 2nd century the church fathers referred to baptism as the sacrament that conveys the seal (through the Holy Spirit)
- The seal is invisible but real, the mark of fully belonging to Christ
- Although the seal is received in baptism, it is important not to neglect the role of the Holy Spirit
- Catechism 1272-1274 and 1293

The Second Interlude Vision

The Great Multitude (7: 9-17)

- Great multitude no one can number stood before the throne and the Lamb, wearing white robes (like the martyrs’ robes) and carrying palm branches
- Palm branches symbolic of victory and the Feast of Tabernacles
- The angels prostrated themselves and also worshiped
- The multitude is engaged in liturgical worship
- Worship has 3 elements:
 - 1) worship in God’s presence
 - 2) complete end to suffering
 - 3) tender care given by God and the Lamb

John's Dialogue with an Elder

In apocalyptic literature it is common for a heavenly interpreter to explain the meaning of the vision

These are the ones who have survived the great distress. They have washed their robes in the blood of the Lamb

- Through free will they have done the washing themselves
- In the OT the blood of certain sacrifices functions as ritual cleansing to purify
- The one who sits on the throne shelters them
- GK shelter = to spread one's tent over
- The Lamb will shepherd them
- God will wipe away every tear

In the 1st century, this vision shows remarkable confidence in a struggling church
Apostolic teaching reveals little about the state of believers' knowledge of the time between death and a future resurrection. (Phil. 1: 23 and II Cor. 5: 1-8)

In these 2 Interlude Visions, all followers of Christ are saved, marked, and protected. A positive outcome is certain with an end to suffering

The Lord calls every Christian to holiness

Christ qualifies us to live in God's presence

He makes us holy through his death, conveying its benefits through the sacraments

But...we must strive to do our part...complete surrender to God (Heb. 12: 14)

The 7th Seal

After the comforting interlude of the 2 Visions, the 7th Seal is broken.

There is silence in heaven for about ½ hour.