

The Voice of a Great Multitude

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[0 : 00] Good morning to all of you. Can everybody hear me? Thanks, Justin. Good morning. My name's Tommy. I'm the rector, Church of the Advent. Delighted to be with you this morning. Delighted for the Easter season to finally be here.

You know, there's a sub-genre of story, often you find it in the fantasy genre, that seems to have a deep resonance with people. There are a number of great stories that have become timeless that have a common element to them.

So think of The Lord of the Rings, think of The Chronicles of Narnia, think of the Harry Potter series. All different stories, but they all have a common element to them.

They all involve someone who is fairly normal and mundane, going about their normal, mundane life, and then something happens. You know, they step through a wardrobe unknowingly, or a mysterious visitor, stranger shows up, or a letter arrives in the mail.

But some event happens, and because of that event, they end up discovering that there's much more to the world than they previously imagined.

[1 : 15] In a sense, the truth about reality is unveiled. And they begin to see things as they truly are, and then they get swept into this great adventure.

And as a result of that great adventure, they are forever changed. Their life is never the same, and they never see things the same way again. And I think there's a reason why these stories resonate. I think it's because deep down, these stories are speaking to something inside us. A kind of longing that is ever-present, even in the most hardened skeptics.

We live in a culture, post-modern West, that is dominated, more or less, by a worldview that we might simply refer to as materialism. A kind of baseline assumption that this is all there is.

There's nothing beyond what we can see, touch, taste, hear, smell. And as a result of that, religion is put in this category of personal preference. If you choose to believe in things because they give you some comfort, they offer you some crutch to help you cope with reality, then that's fine.

[2 : 26] But everybody knows there's nothing really true behind our religious beliefs. So we live in this kind of culture. And yet I believe that most people know deep down, even if they don't identify as religious, that there has to be more.

That this can't be all there is. There's a longing to pierce through the veil, to see something more. And the book of Revelation comes along, and it essentially says, you're right.

You should listen to that longing. The word revelation actually comes from the Greek apocalypse. Apocalyptic writing is writing that reveals reality as it truly is.

It reveals things as they truly are. It unveils the truth about the world that we live in. And so this letter, what we call the book of Revelation, it's actually a series of letters followed by a lot of prophetic writing.

This is like that letter that arrives at our door. It's like the mysterious stranger that shows up. It's like the wardrobe that we climb into and then find ourselves transported into a different world.

[3 : 43] And it confirms that sneaking suspicion we have that this world is spiritually alive. That there is much more going on than we can see or hear or touch.

And our lives are full of meaning. And we have a part to play in this. There's a greater purpose unfolding. And this letter invites us into that purpose.

Beginning this Sunday and going through the season of Easter, the lectionary tracks along with the book of Revelation. That's what we're going to be doing between now and Pentecost.

And we're going to be asking the question along the way, what does it mean to see things as they truly are? And how does that change our lives? And in chapter 1, the unveiling begins.

We see three things unveiled. We see the unveiling of the King, the unveiling of the Word, and the unveiling of the Church. Let's pray. Lord, we thank you for your Word.

[4 : 43] And we thank you in this Easter season that you are a living God who has risen. We thank you that because of that, we're not just here to consider human ideas, ink on paper.

We are here to hear from you. And we pray that, Lord, even as these words are spoken, that there would be the words that you speak to your people.

You know what we need to hear, and you can speak to us. And, Lord, it's your voice that we seek. It's an encounter with you that we need. We pray these things would happen by the power of the Spirit in the name of Jesus.

Amen. Amen. So, first of all, chapter 1, we begin to see the unveiling of the King. The context of Revelation is that it's written by the Apostle John, who is on the Isle of Patmos, and he's living in exile.

Revelation 1.9 says, I, John, your brother and partner in tribulation. So, he's experiencing the tribulation. And the kingdom and the patient endurance that are in Jesus was on the island called Patmos on account.

[5 : 51] So, why is he at Patmos? On account of the Word of God and the testimony of Jesus. So, literally, it's saying he's there because of the Word of God and the testimony of Jesus. The state is punishing him because of the things that he's been saying about Jesus and about his Word.

And, essentially, Patmos is a prison island. So, that's why he's there. And he's writing to Christians who are also suffering various forms of persecution as a result of their faith.

Some are being ostracized by their neighbors, by their coworkers. You know, they're being disregarded, marginalized, overlooked for promotions. Some are experiencing direct persecution by the government.

Things got pretty bad for the Christians under the Roman authorities who are pretty hostile to them. And we could ask why and get into all of the political reasons for that.

They did see these claims about Jesus as a political threat. He was being talked about in a way that seemed as though he was a rival to Caesar's throne. But the real reason why this is happening is because human beings live in occupied territory.

[7 : 03] We live in occupied territory. The world is in a state of captivity. In his final chapter to the letter to the Ephesians, the Apostle Paul pulls back the veil.

Tells us the true nature of the Christian life. He says, remember, we wrestle not only against flesh and blood. It's not just politics. It's not just social dynamics.

We wrestle against the devil. We wrestle against the enemy. There is a conscious, personal, spiritual evil that relentlessly aims to destroy God's people and God's world.

Persecution is just one tool that the enemy uses, but it's only one. That same enemy sits behind everything that threatens to destroy God's people and his world.

Threats from outside and threats from inside the church community. But this vision in Revelation shows us something that is vitally important for us to remember at all times.

[8 : 09] Even though it sometimes appears as though things are hopeless. Even though it sometimes appears as though the government is on the verge of collapse.

Even though it sometimes appears as though life is nothing more than chaos and injustice. Even though it sometimes appears as though our lives are so unpredictable.

The state of our employment and our financial security is so fragile. Many of us are feeling that right now. And it appears as though things are hopeless. Even though it appears that way.

Jesus Christ is Lord of all. And Jesus Christ sits on the throne of the world. See, most of us when we think of Jesus, we think maybe of Jesus' incarnation.

We think of a little baby lying in a manger. You know, gentle Jesus, meek and mild. Or we think of Jesus' earthly ministry.

[9 : 06] We think of this itinerant rabbi traveling around and healing. Telling people about the kingdom of God. We think of Jesus' death on the cross. As John says in verse 5.

Jesus, the one who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood. Amen to that, right? We think of his incarnation. We think of his crucifixion. Here we see Jesus in his glory.

Here we see Jesus after he has risen. Right? The description of Jesus in verses 12 through 16. You have, I think, the first eight verses.

But we're going to look at the whole chapter. If you have a Bible, you can pull it out. Read this description. It is rich with symbolism. A lot of it comes from the Old Testament prophets. Books like the book of Daniel.

A lot of it comes from Daniel. Some from Ezekiel. But this is even richer and fuller than what we see in the Old Testament. We see a vision of Jesus.

[10:04] Just imagine this in your mind. If you don't have a Bible, it's fine. Just imagine this. Dressed in a long robe with a golden belt or sash. This is the garb of a priest.

He's the true priest. He's the true mediator between God and his people. This Jesus has white hair like wool. He's the ancient of days from Daniel's vision.

He's the true spotless lamb of God who sacrifices himself to atone for sin. His eyes are like a flame of fire. These are eyes of piercing discernment and judgment.

These eyes can see through our masks. They can see through our facades. These eyes can see to the heart. This Jesus has bronze feet.

Unlike the clay-footed statue in the book of Daniel, which represented the human empires that will inevitably crumble, Jesus' kingdom will never crumble. It will never fade.

[11:11] It has no weak spots. It's eternal. From his mouth comes this sharp, two-edged sword. We'll look at that in more detail in a moment.

He holds seven stars in his right hand. These are the seven angels over the churches. Jesus holds authority over and cares for his church. His face, this Jesus, his face is like the sun.

It's full of glory. What happens when the sun rises? That's the sign that a new day is dawning in the world. He's ushering in a new age, an age of renewal and restoration and new creation.

This is Jesus in his glory. You need to understand, the apostle John used to be very close with Jesus in his earthly ministry. They would recline together when they ate supper together.

John is spoken about as the one who would rest his head on Jesus' chest. There's a profound intimacy between them. But when John sees the risen Christ in his glory, he falls to the ground in abject terror as though he's dead.

[12:30] So this is Jesus as he is now. And if we don't have this portrait in our minds, we have an incomplete sense of who Jesus is. Yes, he was the baby in the manger. Yes, he was the itinerant rabbi who died on the cross.

But now he is the risen king. And there is a glory to his presence that if we were to be in his presence, we, like John, would collapse on our faces.

Because we would be so filled with fear. This is the Jesus who says, I'm the first and the last. And the living one. I died and behold, I'm alive forevermore.

And I have the keys of death and Hades. One of my favorite verses. Jesus has absolute authority over time, over history. Over death, over the spiritual world, over hell itself.

He has absolute authority over all of it. There is no great battle between good and evil. Don't you understand? Nobody's biting their nails wondering how's it all going to turn out.

[13:36] There's no contest. Jesus is victorious. He holds the keys. And yet, even though this Jesus looks very different and he is terrifying and he's filled with glory, it's the same Jesus.

With the same heart. The same man who, at one point, encounters a leper who hadn't probably been touched in decades.

And he reaches out his hand and he touches this man and heals him with a tenderness and a compassion that is almost unthinkable. And how do we know this?

Well, here we see something extremely beautiful. See, throughout Revelation, by the way, we'll see this more as the series progresses. John loves to put, he loves to juxtapose two images together.

And when you hold those two images together, you see something beautiful, theologically rich, profound. Here's one of the first examples of this. In verse 16, Jesus holds seven stars in his right hand.

[14:40] As we said, the stars represent the church. Jesus holds the entire church firmly in his grasp. He's protecting the church. He's providing for the church. He has authority over the church.

He's managing and overseeing the church. That's verse 16. Verse 17, when John falls to the ground in fear, he specifically says that Jesus reaches out with compassion and touches John with his right hand.

And he says, fear not. See, we often think, you know, compared with the suffering of the world, compared with what's going on, overseas in this place or that place, compared with what's

happening in the lives of those people I know, my friends.

My suffering is so silly. It's so lame. How could God possibly care about my little issues when there's so much real suffering happening in the world?

Don't you see what this means? Christ has the whole church firmly in his grasp.

[15 : 47] He's holding all things together across space and time. And yet, at the same time, he is still intimately involved in the daily struggles of each one of us individually.

That is absolutely mind-blowing. This is Jesus. He's the Alpha. He's the Omega. He's the one who sits on the throne of eternity. He's aware of all of those needs everywhere in the world.

He knows all of them. And yet, when you lie there in the middle of the night in your own sadness or your own pain or your own fear, he is there with you.

He is reaching out. He's touching you with compassion. He's saying, fear not. Fear not. I'm with you. And he does that as though you're the only one there is.

As though you're the only one with any needs anywhere in the world. But he does that for each one of us individually. See, only the risen Christ can do that. That's the kind of king I want.

[16 : 53] So here we see Jesus revealed as he truly is. Only when we see Christ, by the way, as he truly is, do we have any shot at seeing anything else as it really is.

So this begins by us unveiling Christ, the risen Christ, in all of his glory. And then through that, we have the unveiling of his word. His word.

Here's the thing. If Easter is true, if Jesus has conquered sin and death and he's the true king of the world, his words matter more than anyone else's words.

This is why John says in verse 3, blessed is the one who reads aloud the words of this prophecy. It's Jesus' words. And blessed are those who hear and who keep what's written in it.

He's saying Jesus' words are unique in that they have the power to bless those who hear and keep them. There's more to his words than our words.

[17 : 55] His words can confer blessing to those who hear and keep them. And then in this vision, I said we'd come back to it, verse 16, from his mouth comes a sharp two-edged sword.

In other words, Jesus' word is like a sharp blade. Jesus' word uniquely has the power to divide between righteousness and sin.

It has the power to divide between truth and falsehood. It has the power to divide between life and death. Because he holds the keys.

So the word of God is extremely powerful. Many people like to look at the word of God, at Jesus' word, as a kind of source of advice and wisdom.

I need guidance. I'm trying to figure out what to do in my relationships, trying to figure out what to do with my vocation. I want to take everybody's advice into account. So I talk to my friend. I talk to my counselor. I talk to my spiritual advisor.

[18 : 56] I go online, read some articles, and I consult the Bible. And it all goes into the hopper for my consideration. When we do that, I mean, with all due respect, it shows our ignorance.

We don't understand the power we are invoking when we allow God's word to enter into our consideration.

This tells us what we're really dealing with here. You know, when my kids, I'll be cooking, and I have a knife out, and I'm prepping for dinner, and one of my kids will come in and say, can I help?

And they'll pick up the knife. And I'll immediately say, oh, be very careful. Set that down. Why? Because if they don't know how to handle it, they're going to get caught. It's dangerous. Sharp blades are dangerous.

Depending on how we respond to Jesus' word, it can either be an instrument of war, a sword, or it can be a surgical knife.

[20 : 00] It's two different kinds of blades with two very different purposes. What's the situation? Which are we going to get? You know, for those who reject his word or treat it just like another source of advice, it will be like a sword to us.

It will be an instrument of war that ultimately brings wrath, and rightfully so. But for those who hear and keep his word, as this says here, it won't come into our lives like a sword.

It comes into our lives like a surgical blade. It has the power to cut out the tumor of sin. It has the power to heal those who would embrace it, who hear it and keep it.

The choice is really ours. How do we interact with his word? Which will we get? Because here's the thing. If Easter is true, if Jesus rose from death, and if he holds the keys of death in Hades, his word

stands alone.

His word deserves our primary allegiance. It doesn't mean that these other sources of advice can't be helpful, but it means there's a hierarchy, and it means his word is up here, and everything else is ordered after that.

[21 : 19] What your parents think, what your friends think, what the internet thinks, is you can figure out where that, how that stacks up. I'm just telling you what needs to be at the top.

If Jesus rose from death, we need to listen to every word he said. His word should always be the final word in our lives. Even when all of our advisors and the internet and everything else is going in a different direction, his word is the final word.

Now, if Jesus didn't rise from death, then I don't know about you, but I don't really care much about anything he said. But treating Jesus simply as an advisor is not an option that the Bible really leaves open to us.

His word is either the final word, or it's maybe not even worth considering. John's response, I believe, is the correct response. When I saw him, I fell at his feet.

That's not someone who's just taking Jesus' words into consideration. That's someone who is falling to the ground in submission and reverence. So as we see the truth of the king revealed, unveiled, then we see the truth about his word unveiled.

[22 : 38] But the third thing we see in this passage is the unveiling of the true nature of the church. Now, we already looked at the breathtaking description that we have of Jesus, but there's more going on here.

If you notice in verses 12 and 13, John first hears the word of Jesus. This is another one of those juxtaposed images. He hears the word of Jesus, and then he turns, and when he turns, he sees seven lampstands, and then and only then does he see Jesus himself.

But first he sees the lampstands, and then where is Jesus? In the midst of the lampstands. And we're told that these lampstands represent the seven churches in Asia.

They represent the church. Here's the point. Now, if you want to see Jesus, if you want to know Jesus, I know this is going to be controversial for some of us, look to the church.

That's the point that John's making. If you want to see Jesus, if you want to hear Jesus, look to the church. In other words, Jesus wants to be seen and heard and known through his church.

[23 : 55] That's what's being revealed here. Now, there are a lot of people these days who want nothing to do with the church, but they want to hold on to their relationship with Jesus. And if they were to hear me say something like that, and maybe this is you, they would immediately become angry.

And they would object, and they would say, I can know Jesus. I don't need some group of people. I can have a direct relationship with Jesus. And I would say, theologically, yeah, that's true. You can. You can have a relationship with Jesus.

You can pray to God and ask for forgiveness. You can come to Jesus in faith and repentance, and he will forgive you. He will pour grace into your life. And there are people who want nothing to do with the church, and some of them have good reasons.

They've been hurt. They've been mistreated. They've been abused. They've seen leaders do horrible things, and so they don't want to have anything to do with it. What we need to see here is that Revelation doesn't deny that the church is deeply flawed.

If you go on and you read chapters 2 and 3, you see that Jesus not only recognizes all the flaws and all the problems in the church, but he confronts the church about it.

[25 : 04] I mean, if you're a Christian and you go to church and you read chapters 2 and 3, the letters that he writes to the various churches, not for the faint of heart. I believe Jesus continues to confront his church over her failures of faithfulness.

And yet, he is still in their midst, and he still desires to be seen and known through his church.

The lamps, what does that tell us about the church? The church is here to uphold and to shine the light of Jesus into the world like a lamp.

And the world is meant to come to know Jesus through his visible body, which is the church. That is the primary purpose of the church in the world, to make Jesus known like a lamp shining into the darkness.

And if we were to look at this and to say, well, that, I'm not sure it's actually making that point and try to argue in another direction, the connection actually becomes more clear and more explicit

when we understand the meaning of verse 15, where it says, his voice was like the roar of many waters.

[26 : 24] You see this language in Ezekiel, but you also see it more meaningfully later in the book of Revelation, chapters 14 and 19.

The exact same description that is used of God's voice here is also used in those chapters. But what's it describing? It's not describing the sound of Jesus' voice.

It's describing the sound of God's saints as they sing praise to him. It's the same description, like the roar of many waters.

So listen to what this is telling us. When Jesus speaks, what does his voice sound like? It's not just one voice.

Revelation tells us that Jesus' voice sounds like a countless multitude of saints singing praise to him. That's what this is saying.

[27 : 22] So do you want to know what the risen Christ sounds like when he speaks? You know, we had a Sunday school class our first week. You're welcome to join in next week if you'd like to come on a book called Hearing God by Dallas Willard.

And one of the questions we asked was, what would it be like to hear Jesus speak to us? This is telling us, if we want to know what the risen Christ sounds like when he speaks, listen to the sound of the church praying together.

Listen to the sound of the church confessing their faith, confessing the creeds together. All of those individual voices merging together into a sound like the roaring of many waters.

If you want to hear the voice of Jesus, listen to the church singing together. The interplay of melody and harmony as a multitude of voices merge into one voice, like the sound of many waters, that's the voice of the risen Christ speaking.

It's when all of the saints come together and their voices merge into one. This is why there's such an emphasis on unity throughout the New Testament.

[28 : 42] This is why Paul doesn't say the church is like the body of Christ. He says the church is the body of Christ. Right? So what is Revelation telling us? It's saying this, Jesus is not just with his church, he is his church.

And they are him. We are one with him. See, the great promise of the gospel is that Jesus and his church will become one, like a bride and groom.

And the Apostle John says that it's gonna be made even more explicit by the fact that when we meet him, we're gonna be like him because we are in him. Jesus wants to be known.

He wants to be seen. He wants to be heard. Through his church, I believe that it is almost impossible to sustain a relationship with Jesus that is in any way meaningful, that is in any way intimate, that is in any way life-giving, that is in any way a relationship in which we are growing and maturing apart from the church.

As flawed as it may be, and somebody said we were at the men's retreat this past weekend and it was absolutely wonderful and kudos to you men who made it back for church on Sunday because a lot of you guys were camping out, I think, in the rain last night.

[30 : 05] And so, but we had a great time and it was wonderful. And somebody said at the retreat, they quoted, you know, the quote that if you ever find a perfect church, if you ever find a perfect church, don't go there because you'll ruin it.

I love that quote. There is no perfect church. The church is deeply flawed. Jesus knows that. But that's where he is. And if you want to see him and hear him and know him, that's where he is to be found.

So let's pull all of this together. Point of Revelation 1 and really a theme that traces throughout the entire book is this. Things are not as they appear to be now.

Things are not as they appear in this present moment. Even though it appears as though the world is full of chaos and injustice, even though it appears as though life is totally unpredictable and meaningless and death is unavoidable, the truth is that Christ is risen.

He sits on the throne of the world. He holds the keys of death and Hades in his hands. And one day, every knee will bow and every tongue confess that he is Lord. Even though it appears as though Jesus' words are no different than any other source of input, we might take into consideration, the truth is that Jesus Christ has the final word on our lives and on history.

[31 : 42] And his word is the only one that matters. And even though it appears as though the church is hopelessly flawed and divided or irrelevant, the truth is that Jesus Christ loves his bride.

And like a good husband, he will never leave nor forsake her. And if you want to experience the life of Christ, you find that in the church, in his body.

So just like all the great stories that we talked about at the beginning, in all those great stories, you see the same thing. Once reality has been unveiled, once we begin to see things as they truly are, the worst thing we can do is to go on pretending as though things are the way they were before.

We have to accept the fact that now that we have seen truth, it demands a response. And the life of faith is a life of commitment. It is a commitment to walk in the light of what is real and true.

Not what we would prefer, but what is, regardless of how things may seem in this present moment.

Let's pray. Lord, this can only be true through your grace, through your mercy, through the power of your Holy Spirit.

[33 : 03] It's why you offer yourself to us. It's why you invite us to come and to share in your body and blood. It's why you meet us here. It's why we need an encounter with you.

It's why we need to share in your life. It's because this kind of life, this kind of walk is not something we can do alone. We need one another and we need you. And I pray even as we come and pray together and confess our faith together and share in the sacraments together, Lord, I pray that

through this gathering you would strengthen us for a life that unabashedly faces reality as it truly is. That we wouldn't need the crutches. That we wouldn't need the denial or the minimizing. We

wouldn't need the escapist fantasies. that, Lord, you would strengthen us to live in the light of what is real and true.

And that begins with you. And we pray this in your son's holy name, Lord. Amen.