

The Voice From The Middle Of All Things

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[0 : 00] Well, I have good news for you today. Would you like to hear it? I have good news for everyone in our city. Would you like to hear it? I have good news for everyone in the world. Would you like to hear it? Ready?

Ready? Things are not as they seem. That's right. Things are not as they seem. Or more accurately, things are not only as they seem.

In this very moment, in this very room, in the moments and rooms to which you will go after the worship service, wherever you find yourself tomorrow or on Monday or Tuesday or Wednesday or Thursday, things are not only as they seem.

The good news is that there is more. That there is more to every moment. There is more in every event. There is more to reality than we can know with our unaided intellect and emotions and imagination.

So much more. So much more. So very much more. And the good news is we can know that more. That's right. The more wants us to know the more.

[1 : 42] This is what is going on in the last book of the Bible. In the last book of the Bible, the so much more of every moment and every event is being opened up to us.

Now, this is the case with every book of the Bible, actually. But nowhere as powerfully and as creatively and as compellingly as in the last book of the Bible.

Over the next dozen or so Sundays, Pastor Ken is going to lead this community through a series of studies in the revelation of Jesus Christ. And he asked if I would help launch this series by taking us through the first chapter of the last book of the Bible today.

Before we read the text, a couple of observations. The last book of the Bible is a letter. Most people don't realize that. It's a letter.

It's a pastoral letter. It's the longest pastoral letter we have in the Bible. It opens up John to the seven churches that are in Asia. Grace and peace to you. That sounds like the way other New Testament letters open up, right?

[2 : 54] It's a letter. It's a letter. In which John, about whom I'll tell you more in a little bit, shares with the seven churches that he loves, a drama, a live drama, an audio-visual extravaganza, which Jesus put on for John one Sunday morning during worship.

Now, like all the other letters of the first century, John's letter was intended to be read out loud. Blessed is the one who reads and those who hear the words of the prophecy.

We're supposed to picture a bunch of people gathered together in a house church. Some of them are under persecution. All of them are being tempted away from loyalty to Jesus Christ.

And someone stands up in the midst of that gathering and then reads this precious document that they have received from their beloved pastor. This suggests to me that this drama conveyed in the letter was scripted and performed by Jesus more for the ear than for the eye.

Yes, John sees this drama and he painstakingly writes down what he sees onto paper, onto parchment. But it turns out that the best way for us to see what he saw is to hear how John describes what he saw read out loud.

[4 : 25] That's because we see through our ears. Faith comes by hearing the word, says Paul. Paul, you might know the name Martin Luther, the great Protestant reformer who regularly exhorted disciples of Jesus, stick your eyes into your ears because you only see when you hear.

May I suggest to you during these weeks that you get a CD of the whole book of Revelation read for you and listen to it all in one setting without reading your Bible.

You will see as never before as you hear. So this morning, as this community launches into a study in the Revelation of Jesus Christ, I invite you to give ear to the opening chapter of the book, to

Revelation chapter 1, a perfect text to come after Easter Sunday.

And I invite you to stand for the reading of God's word. Here we go. The revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show to his bondservants, the things which must shortly take place. He sent and communicated it by his angel to his bondservant John, who bore witness to the word of God and to the testimony of Jesus Christ, even to all that he saw.

[5 : 53] Blessed is the one who reads and those who hear the words of the prophecy and heed the things which are written in it, for the time is near. John, to the seven churches that are in Asia, grace and peace to you from him who is and who was and who is to come and from the seven spirits of God who are before the throne of God and from Jesus Christ, the faithful witness, the firstborn from the dead, the ruler of the kings of the earth.

To him who loves us and released us from our sins by his blood and has made us to be a kingdom, priest to his God and Father, to him be glory and dominion forever and ever.

Amen. Behold, look, he is coming with the clouds and every eye will see him, even those who pierced him, and all the tribes of the earth will mourn over him.

Even so, amen. I'm the Alpha and the Omega, says the Lord God, who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty. I, John, your brother, and fellow partaker of the tribulation, kingdom, and perseverance that are in Jesus, was on the island called Patmos because of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus.

I was in the spirit on the Lord's day and I heard behind me a loud voice like the sound of a trumpet, ta-da-ta-ta, saying, write in a book what you see and send it to Ephesus and to Smyrna and to Pergamum and to Thyatira and to Sardis and to Philadelphia and to Laodicea.

[7 : 30] And I turned to see the voice that was speaking to me and when I turned, I saw seven golden lampstands and in the middle of the lampstands, one like a son of man, clothed in a robe, reaching to his feet and girded across his breast with a golden girdle.

And his head and hair were white, like wool, like snow. And his eyes were like a flame of fire. And his feet were like burnished bronze, what has been caused to glow in the furnace.

And his voice was like the sound of many waters. In his right hand he had seven stars and out of his mouth came a sharp two-edged sword. And his face was shining like the sun in all of its strength.

And when I saw him, I fell at his feet as a dead man. You bet you would. And he laid his right hand on me and he said, Do not be afraid.

I am the first and the last and the living one. I was dead and behold, I am alive forevermore and I have the keys of death and in Hades. Write therefore the things that you have seen, the things that are, the things that shall take place after these things.

[8 : 41] As for the mystery of the seven stars, which you saw in my right hand, and the seven golden lampstands, the seven stars are the angels of the seven churches and the seven lampstands are the seven churches.

That's just the first chapter of this marvelous book. Holy moly. Let us pray. Living God, thank you that you saw fit.

You saw fit to inspire what John has described. And I pray now in your mercy and grace that you will take us all the way into the reality these words describe as never before.

For we pray it in Jesus' name and for his glory. Amen. You may be seated. And I think you'll be able to better follow me if you'll take out that outline that is in your program.

There are a couple of places where they'll be very helpful for you to have that in hand. The Revelation of Jesus Christ. That is the title of the last book of the Bible.

[9 : 47] And just saying the title stirs my soul. The Revelation of Jesus Christ. Keep this title before us as we read the rest of the letter, as we make our way through the drama, and we will not lose our way.

I think people lose their way through the book because they forget the title. The title is The Revelation of Jesus Christ. The title is not Revelations.

That's okay, but it's not the title. There are a series of revelations. It's not even Revelation, although it is one grand revelation. The title is The Revelation of Jesus Christ. Will you say the words with me, please?

The Revelation of Jesus Christ. Again, please. The Revelation of Jesus Christ. Once more. The Revelation of Jesus Christ. The point being that the book, the letter, the drama is all about a person of Jesus Christ.

In what sense is it of Jesus Christ? Of Jesus Christ as by Jesus Christ or of Jesus Christ as about Jesus Christ?

[10:57] Of Jesus Christ as by Jesus Christ or is it about Jesus Christ? Which is it? Yes, both. As is typical in John's writings. The title of the last book of the Bible is The Revelation of Jesus Christ by Jesus Christ about Jesus Christ.

Now, literally, the title is The Apocalypse of Jesus Christ. The first three words of the book are Apocalypse Jesus Christ the Apocalypse of Jesus Christ. Now, when you hear or see the word Apocalypse what do you think or feel?

If you're like most people in our time you think or feel oh no something really awful is about to take place right? So we have movies like Apocalypse Now or the movie that's going to come out very soon X-Men Apocalypse that I'm going to go see or the news media will speak of events like 9-11 or the bombing in Brussels or the attack on Christians in Pakistan as being apocalyptic events.

No one in the first century would use that word to describe those events. They would use words like horrific or catastrophic or even cataclysmic but not apocalyptic.

apocalyptic. The word apocalyptic moves in a whole different direction. When people of the first century heard that there's going to be an apocalypse their response was oh wonderful bring it on.

[12:30] You see the word apocalypse simply means unveiling disclosure opening up its literal meaning its technical meaning is breaking through from hiddenness.

The word is used for lifting the cover off of a box for opening a door that's been long closed or for pulling back a curtain so that what was always there but ordinarily hidden could be manifest. Let me put all that again. The word means the lifting of a cover off of a box opening of a closed door pulling back of a curtain so that what was always there but ordinarily hidden could now be manifest. Now in this room there is the best illustration of apocalypse possible. It's right over here. The rolling of the stone from the tomb where Jesus laid is the great apocalyptic moment.

This stone is rolled away so that we can see what was true when the stone was there that we can see what is true namely that Jesus is not dead. So, the title of the last book of the bio ■■■■ is the apocalypse of Jesus Christ by Jesus Christ about Jesus Christ.

[13:53] The title of the last book of the bible is the unveiling of Jesus Christ by Jesus Christ. The title of the last book of the bible is the breaking through from hiddenness of Jesus Christ, by Jesus Christ, about Jesus Christ.

And no wonder John then falls to his feet in worship, because when you have that apocalyptic moment, your heart is filled with awe and adoration. Now, apocalyptic literature, let's talk about that for a moment.

Apocalyptic literature, like we just read, has two purposes, two practical purposes, two pastoral purposes. And if we keep those purposes in mind, we will not go astray as we read the rest of a book.

The first practical purpose is to set the present moment in all of its uncertainty and anxiety in light of the future. Because if we can see the future, if only for a moment, it changes the way we see the present.

If we can see the future, it'll change the way we live the present, the future. Jesus is coming, and he's bringing with him a whole new heaven and a new earth.

[15:07] He's bringing with him the city of God. This is the city that we city builders have always wanted to build. And if we could just for a moment get a glimpse of that city, it would change the way we see our city.

So, the first purpose of apocalyptic is to set the present moment in light of the unseen realities of the future. That makes sense. But the second purpose is more important.

To set the present moment in all of its uncertainty and anxiety in light of the unseen realities of the present. Say that again.

To set the present moment in all of its anxiety in light of the unseen realities of the present. Things are not only as they seem. There is more to every moment.

There is more to every room. There is more to every event. There is more to every movement of history than we can know with our unaided senses and intellect and imagination. A whole lot more.

[16:04] And apocalyptic literature seeks to open up that more to set the present moment in light of the unseen realities of the present. That make sense?

And it turns out that the greatest unseen reality of the present moment is a person. The greatest unseen reality of this present moment is the crucified, risen, reigning, coming, Son of Man, Jesus of Nazareth.

Do you believe this? Does the church in the world today believe this? John would tell us that unless we believe this, we do not understand what's going on in the world accurately.

Consider the context in which Jesus gave this last book of the Bible. It's 96 AD. Although some people think it might be a little earlier in 67 AD, we're not absolutely sure.

Either date works. I think it's 96 AD. John is on the prison island of Patmos. This is just a little off the coast of Asia Minor, which is now the modern-day Turkey.

[17:21] Patmos is a prison island. It's the place where Roman government sent criminals and political troublemakers. Think Guantanamo Bay in Cuba.

Now, why is John, the apostle of love as he is called, out on Patmos? I mean, what crime did John commit? What did he do that he was thought of as a political troublemaker?

You may know that the emperor at that time was a man named Domitian. Domitian was a profoundly insecure man, as all dictators are, who, to compensate for his insecurity, ordered that all the Roman citizens should worship him, worship him as *domini et deus*, as Lord and God.

All Roman citizens were ordered to go, on some frequency, to a temple set aside for the worship of the emperor, take a pinch of incense, throw it on the fiery altar, and say the words, Kaiser Kurios, Caesar is Lord.

You could believe just about anything else as long as you would say the words that embody the spirit of the empire. Caesar is Lord.

[18:45] Now, John, in his mid-80s, is not about to bow his knee to a mere mortal who has usurped the place which only the living God can occupy.

So, graciously, I think, he refuses to abide by the emperor's edict. He was, therefore, from the perspective of the state, an atheist. He's an atheist.

Because he won't believe the spirit of the empire. Worship of the empire, emperor was the glue that held the empire together. And John's gentle refusal to worship Caesar now threatened the unity of the empire.

So he's hauled off to Patmos, where, in the words of Thomas Torrance, he's left to rot and bleach on the rocks. Wow. A personal crisis, no doubt.

I can imagine John initially saying, so this is the way you treat disciples you love? I served you all these decades, and now in my senior years, you abandon me?

[19:52] It's an ecclesiastical crisis, too. John was serving the seven churches of Asia as a kind of bishop, as a pastor to pastors. And now, there he is, out on that prison island, all alone, and the churches are left without leadership.

And it is a theological crisis. It's calling into question the very foundation of the faith that John taught and preached all his life, causing great consternation, if not outright fear, in the seven churches back on the mainland.

If Jesus is Lord, Jesus Kurios, as the common creed of the church put it, if Jesus is Lord, if he is the ruler of the kings of the earth, can he not take better care of his disciples and his churches and his pastors?

Have you ever faced such a crisis? Something happens in your life that seems to call into question the very heart of the gospel? I was on the island called Patmos, says John.

I was in the spirit on the Lord's Day. That's where you want to be on Sundays, in the spirit. In the spirit, meaning cooperating with the Holy Spirit, empowered by the Holy Spirit to worship God in those crummy, theological crisis-creating circumstances.

[21:16] And I heard a voice behind me, a loud voice, like the sound of a trumpet. Like a trumpet. Now, this is not just flowery language, because anyone who was steeped in the Bible, steeped in the Old Testament as John was, would have realized what was happening in that moment.

For in the Old Testament, trumpets do what? It's not a quiz, but what do trumpets do? Trumpets call people to battle, and trumpets call people to worship, and most importantly, when you trace the role of trumpets in the Bible, they announce the presence of God on Patmos, in prison.

John says he turned to see the voice. I love that expression, turned to see the voice. And as he turned, he saw seven golden lampstands. Now, again, anyone steeped in the Old Testament as John was would have gotten it very quickly.

Just outside the Holy of Holies in this tabernacle that Moses built, along the south wall, there are the seven-branched lampstand. And each of those branches of the lampstand, there is a bull with burning wicks.

And it's the job of the priest, clothed in a robe to his feet, to keep those lamps burning. You see what's going on here? John is discovering that that miserable rock pile is a sanctuary of the Holy God.

[22 : 42] Wow! In the Spirit, on Patmos, John is given an apocalypse, and he discovers that even a prison can be a holy sanctuary. Even a law office can be a holy sanctuary.

Even a school room can be a holy sanctuary. Even a hospital room can be a holy sanctuary. Set the present moment in light of the unseen realities of the present.

And I saw in the middle of the lampstands one like a son of man. Not just among the lampstands, but in the middle. John would learn later that the seven lampstands are the seven churches that he loves so dearly.

In the middle. The risen, ascended Jesus is there in the middle with John on Patmos, and the risen, and ascended Jesus is there in the middle of the churches of Asia Minor.

Not above, looking down. Not outside, looking in. But in the middle. Oh! The glorious Son of Man, the Lord of History, the one to whom every Caesar one day bows the knee, is there in the middle of those churches.

[23 : 50] He's in the middle of this church. He's in the middle of this gathering. He's in the middle of this very moment. moment. I could use a hallelujah about now.

Now, this morning, I want to call your attention, simply, to just three features of this initial unveiling of the greatest unseen reality of the present. The first is voice.

Voice is the dominant image of the first chapter of Revelation. Verse 10, I heard a loud voice behind me. Verse 12, I turned to see the voice. Verse 18, and his voice was like the sound of many waters. Voice. I think this is Jesus' way of saying to us that the basic discipline of discipleship is listen. Listen.

Listen. In the next chapters of the book, in Revelation 2 and 3, John will record seven messages Jesus dictated to the seven churches. and all seven of them have the same exhortation.

[24 : 59] Listen. Hear what the Spirit says to the churches. Listen. Hear. Voice. Now, the centrality of the voice in this initial apocalypse of Jesus is brought out in a unique way.

John employs a literary device. This literary device was common among first century Middle Eastern writers and speakers and is still common among 21st Middle Eastern communicators. The literary device is called the chiasm. It comes from the Greek word chi, Greek letter chi, which is like the English letter x. It's just that the scholars use that word chiasm only for part of the x, the sideways v.

The best analogy for this is think Canadian geese in flight. Canadian geese love to fly chiastically. Okay.

Now, stay with me. This is a little tricky, but stay with me because this is really, really cool.

Westerners tend to think in a linear way. We write and think in a straight line, so to speak.

[26 : 14] Middle Easterners tend to think in a chiastic way. They write and think in this sideways v. So, instead of one, two, three, four, five, six, seven in a straight line, the Middle Eastern mind does one, then down to the right two, down to the right three, down to the right four, down to the left five, down to the left six, down to the left seven.

And the point of the sentence is not found at the end of the sentence as in Western communication. The point of the sentence is found at the pivot of the chiasm.

So, the point of the sentence is not the seventh, it's the fourth. Now, this is the way much of the Bible is constructed. The whole book of Revelation of Jesus Christ is put together chiastically.

It's an easy way to remember it. And I'll show that to you if you come to the Saturday seminar next week. Most of the Bible put together this way. And, this is important for our time right now, most Middle Eastern thinkers and leaders still communicate this way.

One of my great prayers since 9-11 has been, God, will you raise up for Western leaders someone alongside them who will enable them to hear how Middle Eastern leaders communicate.

[27 : 51] It's not in the straight line. It's in a chiasm. So, for example, right after 9-11, the president of Iran published a letter in the New York Times. At the beginning, there's all this noise.

Then there's a point in the middle and at the end, there's all this noise. And everybody paid attention to everything he said here and everything he said here. And they didn't pay attention to the chiasm. You know what was that the chiasm?

Why do you hate us? The president of Iran was asking the Western leaders, why do you hate Middle Easterners? Can you think of how the world would have been spared of all the tragedy we've had if someone had listened carefully?

Chiasm. Chiasm. I have a friend, by the way, who's doing some study in neurology and he suggests the human brain is classically constructed. Anyway, okay.

Cool, huh? Now, in the first chapter of the apocalypse of Jesus Christ, then in verses 14 to 16, John describes Jesus' first apocalypse, first unveiling, but not in a straight line.

[29 : 02] it's not head, eyes, feet, voice, hand, mouth, face. Boy, that jumps all over the place. That doesn't make sense. It's put together chiasmically. Head, eyes, feet, voice, hand, mouth, face.

And what we're supposed to do is read across the chiasm. You're supposed to read head and face together, eyes and mouth together, hand and feet together, and then finally you come to the voice. Does that make sense? If you look at that carefully, that's a better way to read this. Okay, now, let's go on. Eugene Peterson here helps us a lot.

He suggests that head and face are coupled together because they are what makes the first and last impression. When you meet somebody, right?

It's the head and the face. Jesus' head is white, like snow, snow. It means that this one who is in our midst right now has been around a long time and he's immensely wise.

[30 : 09] And his face shining like the sun in all of its fullness, it tells us that the one who is in our midst radiates with the glory of God. Eyes and mouth are coupled, says Peterson, because they're the organs of relationship.

That's how we relate to each other, eyes and mouth. His eyes are like a flame of fire. This one who is in our midst is very insightful. He is pure and purifying. His mouth comes a sharp two-edged sword.

That's because this one in our midst comes to us and he speaks very intensely to us. A word of judgment and a word of grace and a word of healing and a word of creating. His feet and hand are coupled together, says Peterson, because these are the organs of capability.

His feet are like burnished bronze. They're strong. They're able. Wherever Jesus walks, he gets a victory. His hand, he holds the seven stars. The seven stars are the angels of the seven churches, but in the first century, they're also the seven planets that people thought ruled the world.

The one who stands in our midst holds all the cosmic and earthly forces in his hands. The little children are right. He's got the whole world in his hands. And then this whole chiasm goes to the inherent authority of his voice, like the sound of many waters, meaning that his voice drowns out all these other voices that are clamoring for our attention and allegiance.

[31 : 32] Jesus' voice trumps every other voice. I chose my words carefully there. Every voice gets trumped by Jesus Christ.

Therefore, listen. the essential discipline of listening to me, to the one who holds it all together.

So the second major feature of the initial unveiling of the great unseen reality of the present, the voice speaks. And he gives two commands.

Two commands. Two. They turn out to be the two greatest commands of the rest of the book. Two commands. How many commands? Two. The voice says, do not be afraid, verse 17, and look, verse 18.

Behold. Do not be afraid, and look. Do not be afraid, look. Do not be afraid, look. It turns out that we obey the first by obeying the second. We stop being afraid when we start looking, which is to say, when we are afraid, it means we're not looking.

[32 : 50] or, as I should say, we're afraid because we're looking in the wrong direction. We're looking at all the economic factors, and all the social factors, and the cultural factors, and the political factors.

We're looking at the rise of militant terrorism. We're looking at the collapse of the moral order, but we're not looking at Jesus, the Lord, ascended master of the universe.

look, says the voice from the prison cell in Patmos. Look, says Jesus. I was dead, but look, I'm alive forevermore. I'm the first and the last.

I'm the living one. Do not be afraid. Look. So the third major feature to which I call your attention, in the middle. The voice speaks from the middle, not from above only, not from outside, but from the middle.

Now, yes, speaking from the middle of the seven golden lampstands, verse 13, which are the seven churches, but when you read the rest of the book of Revelation of Jesus Christ, you discover that he speaks from the middle of everything.

[33 : 58] Revelation 5, the lion has triumphed. I turned to see the lion, and I saw a lamb as if slain, standing in the middle of the throne. Revelation 5, 6 is the key to the whole book.

Revelation 5, 6, in the middle of the throne. Now, there's only one way for the lamb to stand in the middle of the throne. He's standing in the middle of the Almighty who is on the throne.

The voice of Jesus speaks from the very middle of everything. Do you believe this? And does the church of Jesus Christ in our time believe this?

Do we believe that the Lord and ascended Jesus speaks from the middle, from the center, that he is the center? The initial apocalypse of the apocalypse of Jesus Christ speaks to what many Christian leaders lament as the marginalization of the church.

If I'm reading the Christian landscape correctly, especially in the Western world, many, if not most, leaders and believers are feeling marginalized. Feeling marginalized vis-a-vis the culture, feeling marginalized vis-a-vis the power forces at work, feeling marginalized vis-a-vis the structures of power that seem to rule the world, right?

[35 : 17] Am I right? Feeling disconnected from all that? Shake your head yes, right? Now, in light of the revelation of Jesus Christ, the crisis is not that the church might be marginalized.

The crisis is we feel marginalized. marginalized. The crisis is we feel marginalized because we only feel marginalized if we think we are not in the center, right?

One only feels marginalized if one does not think he or she is in the center. So, we feel marginalized relative to Hollywood, for instance, because we think or feel that we are left out from the center that is Hollywood.

Or we feel marginalized relative to Ottawa or Beijing or Washington, D.C. because we think or feel we're left out by Ottawa and by Beijing and by Washington, D.C.

Or some of you students think you're marginalized relative to UBC or SFU because you feel left out of the center that is UBC or SFU. Well, well, well, well, look, things are not as they seem.

[36 : 38] Hollywood is not the center. I'm not dissing Hollywood. I'm just saying Hollywood is not the center. Ottawa, Beijing, Washington, D.C.

are not the center. I'm not dissing those capitals. I'm just saying they're not the center. Microsoft and Apple and Google are not the center. You got to pay attention to Google, but Google is not the center.

I'm not dissing Google. I'm just saying it's not the center. Am I right? That wasn't very good. Am I right? The center is a person.

The center of everything is a person. Now get this. What is not in sync with the person is on the margins. Whatever does not work Jesus way in the world is on the margins.

Oh, brothers and sisters, we feel marginalized because we've given into the great illusion. And so we evaluate our ministries and our lives in light of false centers. Listen, look in the middle.

[37 : 45] The risen and ascended Jesus speaks from the middle. I think I hear Jesus saying to me, you get discouraged because you get disoriented and you get disoriented because you get distracted.

I think I hear Jesus saying to me, you think that in order to have influence in the world, you need more than me. You need something more attractive than me. You need something more marketable than me.

You need something more believable than me. What you need, Jesus says, is an apocalypse to see the present moment in light of the unseen realities of the future, but more importantly, to see the present moment in light of the unseen realities of the present.

I, he says, I am the great unseen reality of the present. Look at me. Listen to me. I have the keys. I have the keys to death and Hades. And if I have the keys to death and Hades, if I have the keys to that which you fear the most, you can know I have the keys to everything else as well.

[38 : 55] Do not be afraid. Things are not as they seem. I who was crucified am alive and I have the keys.

Amen. Amen. Let us pray. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.
Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.
Amen. Amen. I invite you to simply, if you're able, be still in the presence of this great apocalypse,
to name your fears, and then ask Jesus to use the keys to unlock you from fear.