

The Living One In The Middle

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[0 : 00] Well, this posture is actually quite appropriate. You might know that the Lord Jesus' first public sermon was in Nazareth. And they handed him the scroll of Isaiah, and he turned to it, Isaiah 60, the Spirit of the Lord is upon me, and read the text, and then Luke says he sat down to teach.

There are two holy or sacred spots in the world for me. One is my study at home, where I read and pray and write in a chair like this.

And the other is this real estate right here. So it feels right that the two should be brought together in this way. Okay, the last book of the Bible is a letter.

It's a letter written by the Apostle John, one of the original 12 disciples, to seven first century congregations on the landmass that was called Asia Minor, which is now the Republic of Turkey. A letter, a pastoral letter, the longest pastoral letter in the Bible. John, to the seven churches that are in Asia, grace to you and peace.

[1 : 24] And goes on then to name the persons of the Holy Trinity. A letter in which John seeks to convey to these seven congregations a drama, a live drama Jesus put on for him one Sunday morning during worship.

Now, like all such first century letters, John's letter was intended to be read aloud. Blessed is the one who reads and those who hear the word of this prophecy.

The picture we are to get is that of people gathered together in house churches throughout these seven different cities, listening to someone who has stood up in their midst to read this precious document from their beloved pastor.

Now, this suggests to me that the drama conveyed in the letter was crafted more for the ear than for the eye.

Yes, John sees the drama. And yes, John painstakingly writes down what he saw. But it turns out that we best see what John saw when we hear his description of what he saw.

[2 : 57] We see through hearing. In 1999, I preached 38 or 39 sermons on the last book of the Bible in California.

And on New Year's Eve, 1999, three actors, three actresses, and a popular radio announcer from our congregation recited the whole book on New Year's Eve.

It takes 90 minutes. And when you hear the whole book all at once, you finally see.

Now, we're going to give our attention this morning to the opening act of the drama, to Revelation chapter 1, verses 9 through 20. I invite you to turn to that text in your Bible or take out the printout that's in your order of worship.

And I'm going to invite you to first simply read the text with your eyes, silently. And then in a moment, we'll hear the text with our ears.

[4 : 04] So just now read for yourself. Now set it aside and hear the word of God.

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 saying to me, write what you see and send it to the seven churches.

Send it to Ephesus and to Smyrna and to Pergamum and to Thyatira and to Sardis and to Philadelphia and to Laodicea. And I turned to see the voice that was speaking with me.

And when I turned, I saw one like a son of man clothed in a robe to his feet, girded across his breast with a golden girdle. His head, his hair, was white like snow.

[5 : 14] His eyes were like a flame of fire. His feet were like burnished bronze, like when you fired in the furnace. His mouth, his voice was like the sound of many waters.

In his right hand, he had seven stars. Out of his mouth came a sharp two-edged sword and his face was like the sun, shining in all of its strength. When I saw him, I fell at his feet as a dead man and he laid his right hand upon me and he said to me, Do not be afraid.

I am the first and the last and the living one. I was dead, but look, I am alive forevermore and I hold the keys of death and Hades. Write, therefore, the things that you have seen, the things that are and the things that shall be after these things.

As for the mystery of the seven stars, you saw in my right hand and the seven golden lampstands, the golden, the seven stars are the angels of the seven churches. The seven golden lampstands are the churches.

Let us pray. We believe that you gave this experience to the Apostle John, not only for him and not only for the seven churches, but for the church throughout the world.

[6 : 35] And we pray now that you would make this alive for us as never before. For we pray in Jesus' name. Amen. I know this has skipped a phrase, but we won't worry about that.

The title of the last book of the Bible is The Revelation of Jesus Christ. Whenever I just say that phrase, it stirs my soul.

The Revelation of Jesus Christ. Not revelations, although we are given a lot of them in the book, and not even the revelation, although we are given a grand revelation in the book, but 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?

Of. Of as in by Jesus Christ, or of as in about Jesus Christ. Yes, both, as is typical in John's writings.

[7 : 41] The title of the last book is The Revelation of Jesus Christ, by Jesus Christ, about Jesus Christ. More literally, the title is The Apocalypse of Jesus Christ.

Apocalypse is Yesus Christ, the first three words of the text. And as we talked about in the introductory sermon, when most people hear this word apocalypse, they think, oh no, something bad is going to happen.

I predict that this afternoon on the news, this, this storm, what are they calling it? Do I? No, no, they have a word for it now for it, turning into Halloween.

Frankenstorm. I predict that by the afternoon someone's going to call it an apocalyptic storm. It's a tragic storm. Cataclysmic, but not apocalyptic.

That's not the right use of the word. When someone in the first century heard the word apocalyptic or apocalypse, their response was, oh good, bring it on.

[8 : 43] That's because the word apocalypse means unveiling, disclosure, opening up or more technically breaking through from hiddenness.

I know that's a big phrase, but that's the best way to convey the word apocalypse. Breaking through from hiddenness. The word was used of lifting the cover off of a box or opening the door or pulling back the curtain.

And you do that, you lift the cover, you open the door, you pull back the curtain so that what is always there but ordinarily hidden might now be manifest.

That's what apocalypse means. You might know that the apostle Paul really likes this word. Trace it, you'll see that he uses a lot in his pastoral letters.

For instance, in Romans 1.17, he talks about being eager to preach the gospel in the capital of the empire. Why are you eager? He says it's because the gospel is the power of God unto salvation.

[9 : 48] Why is the gospel the power of God unto salvation? Because, says Paul, in it, the righteousness of God is revealed. Apocalyptic time. The righteousness of God is revealed.

The righteousness of God breaks through from hiddenness. God's way of writing all relationships is finally uncovered and revealed to the world. That's why Romans is such a powerful book.

In his letter to the Galatians, in Galatians 1.12, he speaks of his own conversion as due to an apocalypse. 1.12, when God was pleased to reveal his son in me.

Apocalypse, say, God was pleased to unveil his son to me. God was pleased to disclose his son to me. God was pleased to have his son break through from hiddenness to me.

And to me. And to you. And to those we love. So, the title of the last book of the Bible is the Apocalypse of Jesus Christ by Jesus Christ about Jesus Christ.

[10:56] The title is the unveiling of Jesus Christ by Jesus Christ about Jesus Christ. The title is the breaking through from hiddenness of Jesus Christ by Jesus Christ about Jesus Christ.

No wonder then that the book is so full of songs and hymns because what else are you going to do when you have an apocalypse but worship? I fell down at his feet, says John.

Of course. You don't just sit there when you have an apocalypse. Now, as I pointed out in that introductory sermon and will point out again and again as we make our way in the next weeks, apocalyptic literature like the document we are looking at this morning has two practical purposes. Apocalyptic is very, very practical. Two practical purposes. And if we keep these two practical purposes before us, we will not go astray as we hear and read the rest of the book.

Indeed, if we keep these two practical purposes before us, then we will discover fresh joy and fresh strength for discipleship. The first practical purpose is to set the present moment in all of its uncertainty and ambiguity in light of the unseen realities of the future.

[12:19] Because if you can know the future, if only for a second, if you can know the future, it helps you understand the present differently, right? In fact, if you can know the future, it will determine how you live in the present.

It will make us live differently. Jesus Christ is coming. He's bringing with him a new heaven and a new earth. He's bringing a new city. It's the city we city builders have longed to build.

And if we can grasp just for a second what that city looks like, it changes the way we see our cities. So the first practical purpose is to see the present moment in light of the unseen realities of the future.

But more importantly, the second practical purpose is to set the present moment in all of its insecurity and uncertainty and ambiguity, to set the present moment in light of the unseen realities of the present.

I'm going to say that again. Set the present moment in light of the unseen realities of the present. Things are not as they seem. Or more precisely, things are not just as they seem.

[13:28] There is more to this present moment than we can know with our secularized, unaided intellect, emotion, and imagination. And it's the purpose of apocalyptic literature to open up that more and to set the present moment in light then of the more of the realities of the present.

And it turns out that the greatest unseen reality of the present is a person. The greatest unseen reality of the present is the incarnate, crucified, risen, ascended, and coming Jesus of Nazareth. Do you believe this? Does the church in our time believe this? the greatest unseen reality of the present is a person.

And John would say to us that unless we believe this, we haven't got a clue about what is going on in our world right now.

The year is 96 A.D. John, as he told us, is on the island of Patmos. Patmos is a prison island, which the Romans maintained off the coast of Turkey.

[14:52] This is where Romans would send troublemakers and political, particularly political troublemakers. Think Guantanamo Bay. Now, why is John, the apostle of love, as he was known, on the island of Patmos?

what is John's crime? What did John do to make himself into a political troublemaker?

Well, you might know that the emperor at that time was a man named Domitian. Domitian, we are told, was a very profoundly insecure man, as many dictators are.

And in his security, he ordered that all of the citizens of Rome should worship him as Domini et Deus, Lord and God.

Now, he ordered that all Roman citizens were to go to a temple dedicated to one of the Caesars, take a pinch of incense, throw it on the altar, and say the words, Caesar Curios, Caesar is Lord.

[16:02] You could believe anything else you wanted, as long as you would say the words that bound the empire together.

Caesar Curios, Caesar is Lord. Now, John, I think by this time in his mid-80s, was not about to bow his knee to a mere mortal who had usurped the place that only the living God could occupy.

And so John, I think gently so, refuses the emperor's edict. And in so doing, John becomes an atheist. He's an atheist because he doesn't believe in the spirit of the empire.

He doesn't buy into the spirit of the state, of the nation. Because this confession, Caesar is Lord binds the empire together because John refuses to say the words, he is now a troublemaker and must be dealt with.

And so he's sent to Patmos, where in the words of Thomas Torrance, he's left to rot and bleach on the rocks. Now, this is the personal crisis, no doubt, for John.

[17 : 22] So this is what happens to the disciples you love. I serve you all these decades and then in my latter years, I'm in a place where I feel abandoned.

It's also an ecclesiastical crisis because apparently John served as a sort of bishop to the seven churches. He was kind of a pastor to the pastors of these churches.

And now he's gone. He's on the island and the churches on the mainland are left without their leader. But it's also a theological crisis because John's experience now is calling into question the very gospel he has spent his life preaching.

his situation is engendering fear and a lot of apprehension. Probably not only himself but in the churches back on the mainland. If Jesus is Lord, Jesu Christu, as the common creed of the church has said, if Jesus is Lord, if he is in fact the ruler of the kings of the earth, cannot Jesus take care of his disciples?

Can't he take care of his pastors? Can't he take care of his churches? Ever face such a crisis? Where something happens in your life that calls into question the very foundation of the gospel?

[18 : 57] I was on the island called Patna, says John. I was in the spirit on the Lord's day. That's where you want to be on the Lord's day. In the spirit. No matter what sanctuary you and you want to be in the spirit.

I was in the spirit. That is, I was working with the spirits, cooperating with the spirit as the spirit was enabling me to worship in those crummy theological crisis producing circumstances.

And I heard behind me a loud voice like the sound of a trumpet. A trumpet. This is not just flowery language. Because anyone steeped in the Old Testament, as John was, would know what the sound of a trumpet meant.

For what do trumpets do in the Old Testament? They call to battle, and they call people to worship. Indeed, trumpets regularly announce the presence of the living God.

In a prison? On Patmos? John says he turned to see the voice. I love that phrase, see a voice.

[20 : 17] You ever seen a voice? And when he turned, he saw the seven golden lampstands, which is the phrase I left out when I recited the text. And again, anyone steeped in the Old Testament like John was, would have realized what was happening, because just outside the Holy of Holies, on the south wall of the temple, is a seven branched lampstand.

And it is the job of the priests, clothed in robes to their feet, to keep those candles burning. Do you see what is going on here?

John is discovering that that miserable rock pile turns out to be a sanctuary. In the spirit, on Patmos, John discovers that even a prison can become a sanctuary of the Holy One.

Set the present moment in light of the unseen realities of the present. And I saw in the middle of the lampstands. Some translations have that.

I saw among the lampstands. No, no, no. In the middle of the lampstands. In the very middle of the lampstands. John discovers that Jesus Christ is there with him on Patmos.

[21 : 39] But Jesus is also showing John that he's there in every one of those congregations back on the mainland. Not just above his churches looking down. Not just outside his churches looking in.

But in the middle of the churches. In the middle. In the very middle of this church. In the very middle of this gathering. Now, for the rest of the time, I would like to just focus on three main features of this first unveiling of the greatest unseen reality of the present.

Three features. first voice. Voice is the dominant image in this text. It occurs three times. Chapter 1, verse 10, I heard a loud voice behind me.

Verse 12, and I turned to see the voice. And verse 18, and his voice was like the sound of many waters. Voice. voice. I think this is Jesus' way of saying the most essential discipline of discipleship is listening.

In the next two chapters of the book, in Revelation 2 and 4, John records seven messages Jesus dictates to the seven churches, and they all have one common exhortation here.

[23 : 13] hear what the spirit is saying to the churches. Voice. Listen. Hear. Now linger here for just a few moments.

I want to show you something really cool. The centrality of the voice in this text is brought out in the way that John describes Jesus' apocalypse.

John employs a literary device common in first century Middle Eastern speaking and writing and common in 21st century Middle Eastern communication.

The literary device is called a chiasm, which is like our X. But scholars use the word chiasm simply to describe one half of that X in an inverted V.

think Canada geese in formation. Now, stay with me because this is really, really cool. We Westerners, I've taught some of this in classes we've had, but not had a chance to do this in this context.

[24 : 29] We Westerners tend to think in a linear way. We read and we write in a straight line. Middle Easterners tend to think in a chiastic way.

They read and write in this inverted V. So, instead of a straight line, one, two, three, four, five, six, seven, the Western way, the chiasm moves differently.

One, then down, indent to the right, two, down, indent to the right, three, down, indent to the right, four, down, indent to the left, five, down, indent to the left, six, down, indent 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 is found at the pivot of this chiasm. And the major point is not the seventh line, but the fourth line.

Now, this is how much of the Bible is put together. And if we had time, I could show you that. Take, for example, Psalm 25.

[25 : 40] I lift my soul to you, O Yahweh. I trust in you. Do not let me be ashamed. None who wait for you will be ashamed. Make me know your ways, O Yahweh.

Teach me your paths. Remember your compassion. Do not remember the sins of my youth. Good and upright is Yahweh. Therefore, he instructs sinners in the way. Pardon my iniquity, for it is great. Yahweh will instruct the one who fears him in the way he should choose. Do not let me be ashamed, for I take refuge in you. I wait for you. Now, it appears that the point of the psalm is at the end.

Trust in Yahweh. Wait in Yahweh. It appears that the psalm is about this exhortation to trust. But that's not the point. Because the psalm goes together chiastically.

I lift up my soul to you, O Yahweh. I trust in you. Do not let me be ashamed. None who wait for you will be ashamed. Indent. Make me know your ways, O Yahweh.

[26 : 41] Teach me your paths. Indent. Remember your compassion. Do not remember the sins of my youth. Indent. Good and upright is Yahweh. Therefore, he instructs sinners in the way. Indent the other way.

Turn. Pardon my iniquity for it is great. Yahweh will instruct me those who fear him in the way they should go. Do not let me be ashamed for I take refuge in you. I wait for you.

Isn't that beautiful? You see how one and seven go together. Do not let me be ashamed. Wait, wait, trust, trust. And then two and six go together around the word way.

Six and five have to do with sin and iniquity. And then finally four having to do with Yahweh. The point being that the point of the psalm is the character of God. The burden or the weight of the psalm is that Yahweh is good and upright.

Now, because he's good and upright, you can trust him. Because he's good and upright, waiting on Yahweh is not wasting time. Because he will instruct you in a new way.

[27 : 44] Okay, now let's go back to the revelation of Jesus Christ, chapter one. In chapter one, verses 14 to 16, we are not to read what John says about Jesus Christ in a straight line.

We are not to read head, eyes, feet, voice, hand, mouth, face. Not in a straight line. The portrait of Jesus, if you read it in a straight line, just jumps all around, doesn't make sense.

We're to read it chiastically. Head, eyes, hand, voice, sorry, head, eyes, feet, voice, hand, mouth, face.

And we are to read across the chiasm and to read head and face together, eyes and mouth together, feet and hands together, and then finally, voice.

Eugene Peterson helps us here. Peterson suggests that head and face are coupled because they are the first and last impressions.

[28 : 55] Jesus' head, white, like wool, like snow, telling us that this one who is in our midst is immensely wise and that he's been around a long time and he knows a few things about life.

His face shining like the sun in all of its fullness. I don't know how John handled that part of it, suggesting that the one who is in our midst radiates with the glory of God.

Eyes and mouth go together, says Peterson, because they are the organs of relationship. His eyes are like a flame of fire. It's a way of saying that Jesus' eyes are pure and they're purifying and when he looks into us, he knows how to purify us just with the look.

And out of his mouth calls it sharp two-edged sword. A lot of art has a long sword. It's not a long sword. It's one of these short swords because it says that Jesus has come to do battle with our minds and with our souls because he wants to dig out all the lies in our hearts so we'll know the truth about him and about us.

And then feet and hands go together, says Peterson, because they're the parts of the body that express capability. His feet like burnished bronze.

[30 : 16] It means that his feet are hot. Where he walks, he brings purification. And in his hand, he holds seven stars. They turn out to be the angels of the seven churches.

But I think in the first century, they refer also to the seven planets that people thought ruled the world. Whatever cosmic, ecclesiastical, or personal forces there are in the world, he holds them in the right hand.

He's got the whole world in his hands. And then finally, leading to the voice, like the sound of many waters, says John, able to drown out all those other voices that are calling for our allegiance.

Again, the whole point is listen. The essential discipline of discipleship, listen to me. the implication being here, that the churches, the seven churches on Asia Minor were not listening to Jesus.

Not hard to imagine, is it? Congregations not listening to Jesus. The fact is, they were listening.

[31 : 29] It's just that they were listening to the wrong voices. They were listening to the threatening voice of demission, to the seductive voice of empire, to the voice that says we find our comfort and security in wealth and military power, to the voice that says it is possible to confess Jesus as Lord on Sunday, but live for idols Monday to Saturday.

Listen. Now, the second major feature of this initial unveiling, the voice speaks.

And he gives two commands. Two commands. How many? I didn't hear enough. How many commands did he give? Two commands.

They turn out to be the two great commands of the last book of the Bible. The voice says in verse 17, do not be afraid. And in verse 18, look.

Do not be afraid and look. It turns out that we obey the first by obeying the second. It's when we look that we're no longer afraid, which is saying to me that when I am afraid, it's because I'm not looking.

[33 : 02] I'm not looking in the right place, I should clarify. I'm looking at all the cultural factors. I'm looking at all the political factors. I'm looking at the rise of militant terrorism.

I'm looking at the escalating collapse of the moral order. I'm looking at the growth of addiction, salvation, but I'm not looking at Jesus. I'm not looking at the risen and ascended Jesus.

Look, says Jesus to John in the prison. I look. I was dead, but look, I'm alive forevermore. I'm the first.

I'm the last. I'm the living one. You've got to look at me. Now, it turns out that we look by listening. We see by hearing.

Martin Luther once said that Christian faith is an acoustical affair. Faith comes by hearing. And Luther used to exhort people, stick your eyes in your ears.

[34 : 08] Because you will not see until you hear. And it's when you hear that you see. And when you see, you're not afraid. And then the third major feature of this initial apocalypse.

In the middle. The voice speaks from the middle. Not just from above. Not just from outside. But from the middle.

Yes. From the middle of the churches. From the middle of the candlesticks. Candlesticks. But as John will discover as this drama unfolds. He speaks from the middle of other places.

From the middle of everything. Revelation chapter 5. The lion is triumphed. John turns expecting to see a lion. And he says, I saw a lamb as if slain.

Standing in the middle of the throne. Revelation 5.6. In the middle of the throne. Now there's no way the lamb can be standing in the middle of the throne unless he's standing in the middle of the almighty who sits on the throne.

[35 : 17] Which means that he stands at the very middle of everything. This voice speaks from the middle of everything. Do you believe this?

does the church in our time believe this? That Jesus Christ stands at the center.

And that he is the center. This initial apocalypse of the apocalypse of Jesus Christ takes me back to something we talked about last spring.

The marginalization of the church. The marginalization of the church. If I'm reading the Christian landscape correctly, especially in the Western world, many, if not most, believers and church leaders are feeling marginalized.

Marginalized vis-a-vis the culture, right? Marginalized vis-a-vis the great powers of our time, right? Marginalized vis-a-vis the power structures that seem to control our lives, right?

[36 : 30] Many people feeling marginalized. Understandably so. The surrounding culture does not seem to care that the church is even here. It seems as though the church has just disappeared from the radar screen of our culture.

You may have seen a couple of months ago this proposal by IKEA to build a new city just outside of London. A marvelous city. There isn't one place of worship in that new city.

It's okay. New York City started without one, too. First ten years of its existence, they didn't have a church either. But the church is off the radar screen.

But as I see it, in light of the last book of the Bible, as I see it, the crisis for us right now is not that we might be marginalized. The crisis is that we feel marginalized.

I can repeat that. The crisis is not that we might be marginalized. The crisis is that we feel marginalized. For one only feels marginalized if he or she thinks he or she is not in the center.

[37 : 41] I'm going to say that again because that's the key turning point here. It's the pivot of the chiasm. We only feel marginalized if we think we are not in the center.

So, for example, we feel marginalized via the Hollywood, which we think is the center. Or we feel marginalized relative to Ottawa because we think or feel Ottawa is the center.

Or we feel marginalized via Beijing or Washington, D.C. because Beijing is the center or Washington, D.C. is the center. Well, things are not as they seem.

Hollywood is not the center of the universe. I'm not dissing Hollywood. Just saying. Hollywood is not the center. Ottawa, Beijing, Washington, D.C.

are not the center. Apple, Microsoft are not the center. Wall Street's not the center. Not dissing any of those capitals. Not dissing any of those corporations. Just saying. They are not the center.

[38 : 49] The center is a person. The center of everything is a person. And what is not in sync with the person is on the margins. And what is not true to him is on the margins.

The church in our time feels marginalized because we have allowed our souls to give in to the illusions around us.

And we are now assessing our own worth and our ministries against false centers. Listen. Look. In the middle. The risen and ascended Jesus is in the middle. Am I making sense? I think I hear Jesus saying to me and to the church in our time.

You get discouraged because you get disoriented. And you get disoriented because you get distracted. I think I hear Jesus say you think that in order to have influence in your city, you need something more attractive than me.

[40 : 05] I hear him saying you think that in order to have influence in our time, you need something more concrete than me.

Something more marketable than me. Something more believable than me. And Jesus says to us, no, what you need is an apocalypse. To see the present moment in light of the unseen realities of the future and to see the present moment in light of the unseen realities of the present.

And I am the great unseen realities of the present. I'm alive. I have the keys.

No one else has the keys. None of no one else has the keys. I've got the keys to death and Hades. And if I have the keys to death and Hades, then I've got the keys to everything else.

Look and listen. Do not be afraid. I've got the keys.

[41 : 21] I've got the keys. I've got the keys. Let's just be still.

And I'd invite you right now to just name anything you're afraid of. Anything that's causing you fear. Just name it to the Lord Jesus who's very present here.

And if you're feeling trapped, if you're feeling bound, captured, invite Jesus to use the keys to set you free.

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