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Chapel Hill Presbyterian Church  
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## THERE IS NO "S" IN "REVELATION"

*Revelation 1:1-3; 22:18-21*

Four or five months ago while I was playing tennis, I hurt my foot. My doctor says it is planter fasciitis. I can't spell it but what it means is that every morning when I get up and step on my left foot, it feels like a dull thumbtack right in the middle of my heel. Last week my wife finally talked me into going to physical therapy. My new therapist is a beautiful, bubbly young woman named Teri. But underneath that phony façade lies the heart of a Spanish Inquisitor! In fact, I gave her a new name: Torquemada. He was the chief official during the Spanish Inquisition responsible for torturing persons mercilessly until they finally agree to become Christians. (They call them TV evangelists today.)

Teri took my foot, stuck her thumb in the middle of the heel and said, "Is it right there?" "Yooooow...yes, it's right there," I said, after I peeled myself off the ceiling. With that well trained thumb of hers, she managed to hit a nerve.

When I announced a few months ago that I was going to preach on the book of the Revelation, I hit a nerve! I have never had more people respond to the announcement of a sermon series in my ministry. And believe me, the response was mixed! On one hand there were the folks who were thrilled. They can't wait for me to explain whether the seven-headed beast with ten horns is the European Common Market or to reveal the hidden identity of the Antichrist.

The responses from the other side could be summed up succinctly: "What do you want to do that for?" I even heard that from a pastor. I told him that Rick Murray, pastor at First Pres., Yakima, and I were going to be working on this series together. (Rick's cheating. He's not starting for a few more weeks. So I have to do all the work first.) He was genuinely puzzled as to why I would give a year of my preaching ministry to this book.

Where are you in that conversation? Are you in the "I can't wait to hear all the juicy, gory details" group? Or are you in the "this book is the craziest assortment of stories and pictures I've ever read. It doesn't make a lick of sense" group? Perhaps somewhere in the middle. Wherever you are, Revelation strikes a nerve. Of all the books in the Bible, I'll bet this is the one that elicits the strongest emotion. And perhaps the most interest among the unchurched, especially the unchurched young people.

So....why? Why am I doing it? Can you think of a better time to preach on Revelation than now? We are approaching a new millennium. Y2K is 110 days away and counting. Never in the last 1000 years has there been greater interest in matters pertaining to the end times than what we are experiencing right now. The "Left Behind" series by Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins is selling millions. (Show of hands...how many have read at least one of those books? See what I mean? Incidentally, those WON'T be texts for this series.) People are hungry. The world is hungry to know what the future holds. Where better to turn, then, than to the Lord of the future?

I am convinced of a couple things. First, you probably aren't going to hear what you expect to hear from me. And second, if we give ourselves seriously to this task, we will have a profound experience with Jesus Christ. Let's dig in by reading from the prologue and epilogue of John's Revelation. The title of this sermon is "There is no 'S' in Revelation. That will form the outline for my message this morning. First, like I said, there is no "S" in Revelation. Really! This is the Book of the Revelation. Singular. Not "Revelations." Say it with me. (Revelation!) Good. The first person I hear calling it "Revelations" will get a big fat "F" in this class. It's a pet peeve of mine. Right up there with calling espresso "expresso" and prostates, "prostrates." Revelation!

Revelation. The title of the book comes from the first word in the text: *Apokalupsis*. What does that sound like to you? Apocalypse. That's where we get the word. In Greek the word means, literally, an unveiling or a revealing. When we read "the Revelation of Jesus Christ which God gave him to show his servants what must soon take place," the author, John -we will talk more about him next week - is telling us that it is Jesus himself who has uncovered - unveiled these things and revealed them to him. And now, John is revealing them to us.

That's one "S" that isn't in Revelation. Here's another. "Stupid." Some folks think it's just plain stupid, a waste of time to study this book. When you read the Revelation - especially from chapter 4 on, it is as if you have stepped into another world. And indeed you have. A world of grotesque creatures, gross plagues, talking animals - it is bizarre. Some folks think it is downright stupid. The great reformer, Martin Luther was one. He hated this book. Didn't think it belonged in the Bible at all.

Obviously I don't think it is Stupid. Neither did John. In fact, the reader and listener of this book are promised something they don't get in any other book in the Bible. Did you see it? Verse 3: "Blessed is the one who reads the words of this prophecy, and blessed are those who hear it and take to heart what is written in it, because the time is near." No other book in the Bible promises a blessing to those who read it. I want that blessing for my life, don't you? Even if Martin Luther didn't.

There's another "S" that we are not going to find in this study of Revelation: "Speculation." Revelation is probably the most "speculated-about" book ever written. There have been enough clever outlines, enough imaginative scenarios, enough creative interpretations, enough intricate timelines conjured up out of this book to choke a seven headed beast with ten horns.

Believe me, I was no exception. I have told you of my high school years when Hal Lindsey's "The Late, Great Planet Earth" came out. Everyone was reading it. I did too. And it sparked a fire of speculation about the end times. I remember sitting in our youth room at Westminster Church in Yakima (with its ugly patchwork rug and garish purple cross on the wall--we called ourselves the "God Squad") I remember sitting in there and working ourselves up into a lather about who the Antichrist was and what the Mark of the Beast meant. Some of us were convinced that John F. Kennedy was the Antichrist because he died of a head wound and nobody had ever really seen his dead body. And the Visa card must be the sign of the beast because the letters VISA in Greek added up to "666." And on it went!

I know this will disappoint some of you, but I'll tell you right up front. I don't believe that stuff. Much of what you have heard about this book is pure speculation - pure baloney. I agree with the Christian writer G.K. Chesterton who once remarked that "though St. John the Evangelist saw many strange monsters in his

vision, he saw no creatures so wild as one of his own commentators."

As a matter of fact, I think that commentators and preachers who launch themselves into some of these fanciful excursions would do well to re-read 22:18-19: "I warn everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book; if anyone adds anything to them, God will add to him the plagues described in this book. And if anyone takes words away from this book of prophecy, God will take away from him his share in the tree of life and in the holy city, which are described in this book."

Do you think John was serious about that? We already saw that this book begins with a promise of blessing for any who will listen to it. Now it ends with a grave warning for those who monkey with the message! It is the only book in the Bible to do so.

We are going to take this book very seriously. And we are going to try to take the book on its own merits. As much as possible, we will let the book speak for itself. Believe me, there is enough that is exciting here without inventing any more.

Now let me give you a few "S's" that ARE in Revelation. First, "Spectacle." This book is spectacular. Remember I told you that the title comes from the first word, *Apokalupsis*? What does it mean? Revealing. Unveiling. But it came to mean something else, too. There is an entire genre of literature called "apocalyptic." It appeared about 200 years before the time of Christ. Apocalyptic literature had several elements. It was "hidden." That is, it contained mysteries that were difficult to comprehend. It always contained great upheaval and drama. Earthquakes, plagues, the end of the world. It contained vivid images. Persons that are actually animals. Strange creatures of odd design. Vivid color; sweeping panoramas of action; war, sickness, plague, death. And most importantly, Apocalyptic always includes the intervention of God. Everything looks bleak and hopeless and, suddenly, God intervenes.

The book of Daniel in the Old Testament is apocalyptic. Parts of Isaiah and Jeremiah are, too. Even some of the images and stories from Jesus are apocalyptic. When Jesus said, "Destroy this temple and in three days I will rebuild it," that was apocalyptic. Apocalyptic may seem odd to us but to John and his readers, it was understood and embraced. And if we are going to understand it, we are probably going to have to do so as children.

What do I mean? We went to Disneyland this summer. There are lots of rides at Disneyland that we, the parents, enjoy. (Although after three days, if you never stand in another line again it will be too soon.) But there is one section of the park that we don't like. We don't get it. Which is it? Fantasyland. Alice and Wonderland. Peter Pan. Mr. Toad's Wild Ride. We don't mind so much standing in a line to go on "Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom." But to stand for 45 minutes to ride on Peter Pan? It just doesn't make any sense. We hate it. And then—we look over at our children and see their faces. Absolutely captivated. Enthralled. Scared. Delighted. To me, Alice and Wonderland is hokey. To Cooper, it is a magical place with smiling, invisible cats, a crazy queen and playing cards with arms, legs and spears.

We must try to become like children as we read this book. Revelation is not so much to be dissected and figured out as it is to be experienced. It is a divine and inspired message given to us in a form that is a combination of prophecy, cartoon, MTV and video games all wrapped up in one!

Listen to these images: "One like a Son of Man" standing in the midst of seven lamp stands holding seven stars in his right hand. A throne surrounded by four living creatures, full of eyes. A lamb, as if slain, with seven eyes and seven horns. A beast from the sea with ten horns and seven heads followed by a beast from the earth with two horns like a lamb who speaks like a dragon." Wow! And if it all sounds a little bit confusing, take heart. As we will see, even John didn't know what was going on a lot of the times. In fact, he got it all wrong more than once. But he kept looking. He kept listening. He wanted more Revelation—all that the Lord would give.

Revelation is a Spectacle. Try reading it this week. Maybe more than once. Maybe out loud. Don't try to "figure it out." Just read it. Listen to it. Absorb it. Revelation is meant to be experienced as Spectacle.

Revelation is also about Salvation. It is a Revelation of Jesus Christ. But it is also a Revelation about Jesus Christ. It tells the story of how Jesus came to earth. Did you know that there is a Christmas story in Revelation? Go home and look it up. Revelation 12. I'll be preaching on it for Christmas Eve. It tells of his sacrifice for us. It trumpets his resurrection! It shouts of his victorious battle with the forces of evil for our eternal souls. It is

the gospel of salvation. But it is the gospel as we never see it in Matthew, Mark, Luke or even John.

Last week, I was meeting in my office with elder Sam Gott and Judy Kuehn, our Queen of publications. Sam set his glasses down on the floor in front of him and went outside for a moment. Judy wanted to show me something and got up. But her foot was asleep and, you guessed it, she stepped right on Sam's glasses. And I mean she STOMPED on those puppies. They were a mess. A lens was popped out. The eyepieces were sticking straight out. The nose pads were smashed flat. I was sitting there trying to put it all back together when Sam walked back in. And wondered what I was doing fiddling with his glasses. Judy begged Sam to tell her that he had bought them off the rack at Rite-Aid. It didn't help when she found out they were brand new, \$500 glasses!

The story of Revelation---as you will see—is a story of Salvation. It is a world that has been stomped on—flattened out—nearly destroyed. And a Messiah who intervenes to save what seems beyond saving.

There's another "S." Sanctification. That is a fancy word that means to be made holy. To become more and more like Jesus. Our mission statement here at Chapel Hill is "to present everyone mature in Christ." I believe that this study is going to help us grow up. To mature. Not because each sermon text will have nice, neat three point outlines that can be drawn from it. No—it will be something deeper than that. We are going to discover something about worship that we have never known before. As we read these pages, we are going to find ourselves being drawn into the presence of Almighty God with words and emotions that we have never encountered before as a Church body.

By entering into this Spectacle with the Apostle John, we will have a vivid, Technicolor, awesome, breathtaking experience of Jesus Christ. I believe that. As John writes, we will hear the voice of Jesus. As John writes, we will hear the angels singing around the throne of glory. As John writes, we will get a glimpse of heaven...a heaven that is larger and grander than anything we could ever imagine. As John writes we will be shaken by the mighty voice of God as he speaks the culmination of all things. As John writes we will join with the saints of two thousand years in crying out, "Maranatha. Come, Lord Jesus. Come now!"

I pray that will be our experience. Amen.

