

19 September, 1999  
Chapel Hill Presbyterian Church  
The Reverend Dr. Mark James Toone

YOU'VE GOT MAIL  
*Revelation 1:1-20*

Well, this morning we plunge into our study on Revelation. Do you remember last week how I warned against the kind of wild speculation that is so common with his book? I shared as an example how, when I was a kid, we were trying to figure out who the Antichrist was and what the mark of the beast was. We were convinced that the mark of the beast was the VISA card because, if you take the Greek letters that spell "VISA", their numerical value adds up to "666." Or so we were told. I said how foolish I thought all of that was.

Thennnnnn I received this letter. Here at the church. This very week. Do you know what it is? A VISA card application! Do you know who it is addressed to? "Hill. P. Chapel!" It's a trick! I'm sure it's an evil scheme.

As we continue in our series on Revelationnnnn (not Revelations--by the way, someone came up to me after church Sunday and said "I'm so excited to start our study on Revelations." (I gave him an "F.") We discover that this book is, in fact, a letter. As we read our text, I want you to look for the following things on the envelope. What kind of mail is it? Who is it from? What is the postmark?—(i.e., where and when was it written.) To whom is it written? And what is the theme of the letter. Let's listen to God's word. (Read text)

This morning we discover something interesting. The Revelation is a letter. It is prophetic; it is apocalyptic. But it is also a letter. So for the next seven weeks, we are going to take up the theme "You've Got Mail." And for those of you who live in the Internet generation, this is called a "mailbox." Say that with me. We used to have "letters" written on "paper" delivered in this "mailbox."

So, were you listening? Who is the letter from? John. It tells us twice. Which John? Tradition ...a LOT of tradition...attribute this to the Apostle John, the same one who wrote the Gospel of

John and the three letters of John. The beloved Apostle. Recent scholars have worked hard to discredit John as the author of Revelation but conservative scholars continue to believe that the Revelation was written by whom it claims to have been written. John.

What about the postmark? Where was it written from? Patmos. It is a rocky little island with steep hills that sits in the Aegean Sea closer to Turkey than to Greece, to whom it belongs. During Roman times, it was a prison labor camp with rock quarries. Tradition has it that John was exiled to Patmos for preaching the Gospel.

I have been to Patmos. Twice. You ride a bus up a circuitous road to the top of the hill. They take you inside a building which has been constructed over a cave. Inside, the walls are dark with smoke from the candles that have burned there for 1900 years. To one side, you notice a shrine. It is built around a small hole in the wall near the floor, about the size of a basketball. Tradition tells us that it was here, lying on the floor, with his head inside that hole, that John had his vision of the Revelation. The book was probably written in the last decade of the first century, probably around 95AD.

To whom is it addressed? Seven churches in Asia Minor, what is now Turkey: Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia and Laodicea. Seven real churches with real people facing different kinds of problems as does every church ever in history.

Now...we move to the heart of the passage. What is the theme of the letter? John gave us a hint in his first words. The Revelation of Jesus Christ. The word "of" there means more than one thing. It means that Jesus is the *agent* of the Revelation. But Jesus is also the *subject* of the Revelation. In other words, it is Jesus who is doing the revealing and, we discover, it is Jesus who has been revealed. This Book is a glimpse into the glorious Christ.

I want you to buckle up. We have a lot of work to do this morning and you need to stay with me, OK. Because we are about to catch a breathtaking glimpse of glory. The heart of this morning's text begins at verse 12. Early in the reading, we hear marvelous words describing Jesus: "**The one who is and who was and who is to come; the faithful witness, the firstborn from**

**the dead, the ruler of the kings of the earth."** Again we hear the same theme in verse 8: "I am the Alpha and the Omega," says the Lord God, "who is, and who was, and who is to come, the Almighty." Alpha and Omega are the first and last letters in the Greek alphabet. This voice is claiming to be the beginning, the end, everything. And if we have any doubt to whom this refers, jump to verse 17: "I am the First and the Last." And this is Jesus speaking.

Do you see the marvelous claims that Jesus is making for Himself? But those are words. That's the narration. Now, we turn to the pictures. And what a picture it is. John's very first vision, the vision that sets the context for the entire book of Revelation, is a vision of whom? Well, we are never told. He is not named. But we know it is Jesus.

Up until now, it has been Jesus the carpenter. Jesus the common man. Jesus the crucified. Oh, we have caught occasional glimpses of his glory. We saw it on the Mount of Transfiguration when he turned pure, blazing white. But the picture of Jesus up until this moment is the picture God intended, the God-Man. The one who left the glory of heaven and became one of us. But this image (wow!) this is like no Jesus we've ever seen. Do you remember that horrible ad campaign, "This is not your father's Oldsmobile?" Well, this is not your Sunday School Jesus.

John is in the Spirit on Sunday, that is the first and only time that this expression is used in the New Testament to describe the day of worship used by the early Christians. As he is worshipping, he hears what he describes like the sound of a loud trumpet. Notice, he says, "like" in verse 10. The is the first of many times when John will struggle to find an image to describe what he is seeing or hearing.

This loud blast surprises him. And in verse 12, he turns around to see where the voice is coming from. You can almost hear the tension. "And when I turned....I saw seven golden lampstands." And someone was standing among them. Someone "like a son of man."

Now, where have you heard that expression before? Jesus. It was his favorite expression for himself. When he taught parables, he often referred to himself in the third person as "the son of man." On the surface of it, it sounds like a rather modest claim.

Wouldn't it have been better if he called himself the Son of God, or the Son of Glory, or the Son of Eternity? Kind of boring.

Not if you were a Jew. Not if you knew the Old Testament. Not if you had ever read the Book of Daniel. For in Daniel 7, he describes a dream he has. Listen: "Thrones were set in place, and the Ancient of Days took his seat. His clothing was as white as snow, the hair of his head was white like wool, His throne was flaming with fire, and its wheels were all ablaze. A river of fire was flowing, coming out from before him. Thousands upon thousands attended him; ten thousand times ten thousand stood before him." His vision continues; he speaks of someone who approaches that throne: He was "coming with the clouds of Heaven. He approached the Ancient of Days and was led into his presence. He was given authority, glory and sovereign power; all peoples, nations and men of every language worshiped him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away, and his kingdom is one that will never be destroyed."

And what does Daniel call that stranger? **The Son of Man.**

When John calls this vision the "Son of Man," he is reminding us of the Old Testament image of the only one who was worthy to walk into the very presence of the Almighty God.

John tells us eight things about this Son of Man: First, he wore a robe with a golden sash around his chest. What does this mean? It was the sign of a priest. Before we know or see anything more about this person, we know that he is a priest. What was the role of the priest? To intercede between humans and God. To make sacrifice for their sin. To bring them into the presence of the Almighty. He is a priest.

Second? His head and hair, they are white like wool, as white as snow. What does white stand for in scripture? Purity. Do you remember Isaiah 1? Though your sins be as "scarlet" they shall be as white as snow; though they are red as crimson, they shall be like...what...wool." The Son of Man is pure.

Third, he is purifying. Notice his eyes. Blazing fire. The Old Testament is filled with fire. The pillar of fire, the fire on the altars, the fiery chariot, the burning bush. Fire in scripture is purifying. Notice what part is fire. His EYES. What does this mean? It means that he does not just look at us. He looks INTO

us. His piercing, purifying gaze stares straight into our souls. Here is where Eugene Peterson is so helpful. He says that "we are not a spectacle to Christ, we are invaded by him. He gets inside us and changes us.

Fourth, and I love this one, his feet. What are they made of? Bronze. So what? Well, we need to think back to Daniel again to get the impact of this statement. Do you remember Nebuchadnezzar's dream in Daniel 2? He dreamed of a great statue. The head was gold, the torso silver, the belly and thighs were bronze, the legs of iron. And while he was looking, a huge stone struck the feet of the statue and toppled it.

What did it mean? Daniel interpreted it. The different parts of the statue were the succession of world governments that would come and go. The Medes, the Persians, the Greeks, the Romans. In that statue, King Nebuchadnezzar was looking at the future history of the world...one great world power after another. Succeeding each other. Destroying each other. But what were the feet made of? Iron and clay. Iron and Clay don't mix. The base of the statue was faulty. It could not stand. Ultimately, as glorious and powerful as it all appeared, these worldly kingdoms collapsed.

Now, back to the vision. What are the Son of Man's feet made of? Bronze. Firey bronze! Do you see what is being claimed here? Unlike all the powers of the world, all the great kingdoms of history that were built on a crumbling base and could not stand, the Son of Man is firmly grounded. He has no feet of clay. And HIS kingdom will not collapse.

Fifth...a voice like rushing waters. If you have ever stood at the base of Snoqualmie Falls or at the side of Niagra Falls, you know the roar of that sound. You FEEL the water. When he speaks, everything in creation stops and listens.

Sixth-There are seven stars. In a moment, the stars are interpreted to us as angels for each of the seven churches. But do you know what else the seven stars meant to any listener of that time? They were the seven known planets of the time! When the ancients looked into the sky they saw what looked like seven stars that moved through the heavens. This was the basis of astrology. They believed that these seven stars, as they moved through the skies, directed the course of all living things.

Now, what does the writer think of this theory? Where are the stars located? In the Son of Man's right hand. These stars, the planets which we think govern our lives...sit in his right hand. They are at his disposal. They are under his control. You realize what is being said here, don't you? It is not the stars that govern our lives. It is the Lord of the universe, the one who holds the stars in his right hand, who governs the universe. For those of you who continue to follow your horoscopes, take heed. You are worshipping the creation instead of the creator.

Seventh--here is the oddest part of the vision. What comes out of his mouth? A sword. A two-edged sword. Now what is that? If you were here Wednesday, you should know. What does the writer of Hebrews say is sharper than a two-edged sword? The Word of God! What does Paul describe as our sword in our spiritual armor? The Word of God! Kings need their armies with their swords to defend their kingdoms. The Son of Man simply speaks...and it is powerful. By his word, creation came into being. By his Word, he declared our work of salvation completed. And by his word, he will judge all things and bring all things under his dominion. By the power of his word.

Eighth--Finally, his face was like the sun. Shining in its brilliance. We are reminded of the Aaronic blessing that I offer every Sunday. The Lord bless you and keep you. The Lord make his face to SHINE upon you..." When Moses came down from the mountain, his face was brilliant from being in the presence of God. When Jesus ascended the Mount of Transfiguration, he became brilliantly white. It is the sign of the presence and the blessing of God.

Wow. What would you do if you turned around in the darkness of your cave and saw an image like that? Exactly what Isaiah did in our reading with the anthem this morning. Exactly what John did in this text. He said, "I fell at his feet as though dead." When we see this image of Jesus, we see something we are not accustomed to. We are so used to thinking of Jesus as the man on earth...as the approachable, friendly, common man on earth, that we forget from whence he came and to what he returned. He is the glorious God/Man. He is the priest who is the forgiveness of our sins. He is pure and the purifier. He is the one whose voice sounds like thunder and is more powerful than any weapon ever

created. He is the eternal one who holds the destiny of the universe in his right hand.

To be in the presence of such a person, we have only one response. Just like John, we fall as dead before his feet. It is too much, too glorious, too holy, too good. We cannot stand it. We cannot face it.

And then a remarkable thing happens. He places his right hand on us, the hand that holds the seven stars, he leans down, touches us and says these precious, glorious words: “Do not be afraid. I am the First and the Last. I am the Living One; I was dead, and behold, I am alive for ever and ever. And I hold the keys of death and Hades.”

My friends. You have just met the glorious Jesus in all his power. We have no right, no hope, no strength, no chance of standing in the presence of such glory. Yet what does he do? The glorious one reaches down, touches us and says, “Do not be afraid, my child. I have the key to eternal life. And I give it to you!”

Have you received it? Do you know this glorious Jesus?

SERMON DISCUSSION QUESTIONS  
*YOU’VE GOT MAIL*  
*Revelation 1:4-20*

*19 September, 1999*  
*Pastor Mark Toone*

- Read the entire first chapter of Revelation out loud. Share your comments with each other. What do you FEEL when you hear these words?
- Look at vv. 4-8 and following. How is Jesus described? What does he do for us?
- Together, try to decipher the meaning of each of the descriptions of the Son of Man. Turn to Daniel 7:9ff for help. How is the Revelation Son of Man different from the Daniel Son of Man. (Hint—note in each case who is described in the glorious terms.)
- John’s response is to fall at the feet of Jesus. How does this description of Jesus strike you? Is it foreign? Helpful?

Frightening? How does his response to John in verse 17 address your concerns?

Pray for each other. Pray for the church as we continue into our fall year. Pray for Pastor Mark as he speaks to the Gathering in Texas. Pray for our church finances.

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