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FOLLOWING CHRIST IN A FRIGHTENING WORLD: A Risky Invitation

Revelation 6:1-8

Well, last Sunday at this time, Cyndi and I were worshipping in a building with a roof and two walls on the west side of Maui. There is no presbyterian church on Maui and I am sensing a strong call from God to continue to make exploratory mission trips over there until I find just the right place to plant one. We had a glorious vacation of golf, tennis, snorkeling and walking on the beach. We are deeply grateful for the opportunity to enjoy that part of God's beautiful creation. It was quiet, restful and wonderful... then we flew home.

I am not a Catholic. I have never been a Catholic. But am beginning to believe in the doctrine of penance. If you enjoy something too much, you are going to pay a price for it. We returned Wednesday at 11:30 p.m. to discover a broken furnace, a car that wouldn't start and a dead fish. And, no, the cat had nothing to do with the dead fish. Maybe the fact that it was a "tropical" fish and that I could see my breath in the front room had something to do with it. Oh well, if that is the price to pay...it was worth it. But we are glad to be back home with you, our wonderful brothers and sisters in Christ. .

We come this morning to chapter six in our study of Revelation. As Pastor Darrell Johnson of Glendale Presbyterian Church observes, "It is at this point ...that most people stop reading The Revelation of Jesus Christ. It is this point when most preachers stop preaching The Revelation of Jesus Christ!" Why? Because here is where things really start going crazy. We've seen some pretty weird things so far, wouldn't you agree? A glowing man with a sword coming out of his mouth; six winged creatures covered with eyes. But you ain't seen nothing yet.

Here, in chapter six, is when things really start getting crazy. We see the unfolding of a great cosmic battle between the heavenly forces and the evil powers. We see the earth embroiled in warfare and suffering and pestilence. All of these things are revealed to

us in a series of three visions, each of them containing seven parts: Seven seals, seven trumpets, seven dishes. By the time we are done reading through the next seven or eight chapters, we will feel like we have been standing in the middle of that theater they used to have in Disneyland. Do you remember it? A 360 degree theater. No matter where you look, you see screen with something happening on it. Only in the theater of John's Revelation, every screen has a different image. You aren't sure what to focus on. And it can all seem pretty confusing.

We are going to do our best to unravel some of the mysteries over the next few months. By June 11, when we conclude this series, I hope you will have a greater understanding of this book. But remember this as we move ahead: The book of Revelation is spectacle. It is not meant to be dissected so much as to be experienced. We must resist the temptation to parse every single image. We must listen, instead, for the key themes that run throughout this confusing and exhilarating portion of God's Word to us.

Before we move ahead with the breaking of the seven seals, we must set it in its context. Its context is the throne room of heaven that we discover in chapters four and five. We spent all of Advent in that room. A glorious image of God seated upon his throne. Before him is stretched a sea like glass. From the throne an emerald rainbow emanates. Four creatures stand before the throne representing the brightest and best of all creation. Twenty-four elders offer eternal praise.

Then, suddenly, in chapter five, John notices something. The one on the throne is holding something. It is a scroll. It is sealed with seven seals. And we understand it to be a scroll that describes the unfolding of human history. It is the rest of the story. It tells of our future...of the world's future. John is eager to discover what is written upon that scroll. An angel cries out, "Who is worthy to break the seals and open the scroll?" John waits and looks. All he hears is silence. And in a poignant moment, John begins to weep and weep, sobbing uncontrollably, because he realizes that there is no one who is worthy to break the seals, open the scroll and set in motion the final chapters of human history.

But one of the elders tells him to stop crying. Because, he says, there is one who is worthy to break the seals. It is the Lion of Judah, the triumphant one. John looks around with excitement to

find this Lion. But what does he discover? Not a lion. Just the opposite. A lamb. A little lamb. And more than that, it is a lamb that has had its throat slit. A lamb that has been slaughtered. The Lion of Judah has, in fact, become the sacrificial Lamb of God who by his shed blood has redeemed sinful humanity. By his sacrificial death, he alone is worthy to break the seals and unleash the rest of human history.

Suddenly we discover that the lamb himself is also on the throne. Imagine the audacity! Who would dare stand upon the throne of God while he is seated there? The Lamb of God dares! And he dares to take the scroll from the hand of God. And chapter five, this wonderful vision of heavenly praise, closes with all of creation--the four creatures, the 24 elders, the angelic host and, finally, every living creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and on the sea, singing glorious songs of praise to the powerful, glorious, eternal Lamb of God and Heavenly Father.

Now comes chapter 6. The elders and creatures are worshipping God. The Lamb is holding the scroll with the seals. We are all leaning forward with expectancy, waiting to see if he will do it. Will he break the seal? Will he open the scroll? We don't have long to wait. In this exquisite moment of drama, the first seal is broken. And the second. And the third. And the fourth. The four creatures cry out with voices like thunder, "Come!" And riding forth out of the mists of this heavenly vision we see what are probably the best known of all the images in John's Revelation. What are they? The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse. You knew they were called that, didn't you? Now do you understand **why** they are called that? Do you remember the Greek word for "Revelation?" Apocalupsis. Unveiling. These are the famous Four Horsemen of Jesus' Revelation to John.

The horses are different colors, each representing the task that its rider is carrying out. The second, third and fourth horses are the easiest to understand. Let's begin there. What is the color of the second horse? Red? Like blood. The second horse represents warfare. He has come to take peace from the earth; to drive men to violence against each other. The rider of the red horse carries a large sword.

The third horse is black. Its rider carries a pair of scales. In the background we hear the four living creatures narrating: "A quart of wheat for a day's wages and three quarts of barley for a day's

wages." What does the black horse represent? Famine. Need. Want. A denarius was one day's wages. Ordinarily, a denarius would buy fifteen quarts of wheat. But in a war torn world, suddenly food is scarce. Fields are burned. Black like the empty stomachs of the children who have little to eat.

What is the color of the fourth horse? It's not even a color, is it? It is described as "pale." What does that word conjure up? It is the color of death. Pale is the color of the corpse in the coffin. Bloodless. Lifeless. This is the rider that brings Pestilence. The world, weakened by famine, is now vulnerable to disease. And we are shocked to discover that, with the arrival of the fourth and final horse, one-fourth of the earth dies. One-fourth!

Warfare, famine, pestilence. But what of the first horse? What is his color? White. There is great controversy over the identity of this rider. Some view this as Christ, crowned, carrying a bow, riding into battle. But I don't believe it. The white horseman is not presented as battling against the other horsemen. He is the first of the four. They are a matched set. He is bringing havoc to the world as surely as the other three. Further, notice more carefully what is said of him in verse 2. How does he receive his crown? It is **given** to him. It is as if he is given permission, for a time, to do what he is doing. But surely this is not the same figure we saw earlier as the Lamb who boldly **takes** the scroll from the hand of God. Also, notice that he rides out "as a conqueror bent on conquest." It sounds as if he is a pretender to the throne. A pretender to power. Does this sound like the same Lamb of God we just heard sung about? Is the Lamb of God **bent** on conquest? No. How is he described? "Victorious!" He has ALREADY triumphed. He does not need to be **bent** on conquest. He **has** conquered. Do you see what I mean? It just does not ring true. No, I do not believe the first rider is Christ. I believe he represents tyranny. The unjust use of power. The subjugation of the weak.

So what does all of this mean? Remember back to these words. "Many will come in my name, claiming, 'I am the Christ,' and will deceive many. You will hear of wars and rumors of wars...Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. There will be famine and earthquakes in various places. All these are the beginning of the birth pains." Do you remember who uttered those words? Jesus, as he sat with his disciples on the Mount of Olives. They wanted to know when the

end would come. Jesus told them, "When you see these things...you will know it has started." As we will see, the Four Horsemen...the first four seals ...are the beginning of the end. As torn as this world has been by tyranny; awash as we are in the blood of hellish war; as hungry as famine-stricken parts of the world might be; as terrifying as AIDS and the Black Plague have been, these are but the beginnings of what the earth will experience as the forces of evil resist desperately but hopelessly against the creator God who will restore his creation.

But I want to point out how this all comes about. Did you notice that the appearance of each horse was preceded by the same word? What was it? Come! One of the living creatures cries "Come" and the white horse appears. A second cries "Come" and the red horse appears. The third cries "Come" and the black horse appears. A fourth, "Come," and the pale horse appears.

There has been great controversy over who is being called to "Come." The most obvious reading seems to be that the creatures are calling forth each of the four horsemen. This may be, but why would these representatives of creation call forth those who have come to destroy creation? Some have suggested that the creatures are calling to John to come and see what is unfolding. But this doesn't make any sense, either. John is already there, in heaven.

Let me offer a third suggestion. Could it be that the creatures are actually calling to the Lamb? Could it be that the best and brightest of creation is praying out loud the second clause of the Lord's Prayer, "...thy kingdom come." Think about it. The lamb is standing there, victorious, praiseworthy. He holds the future of the world in his hand. As all of the heavenly audience looks on, quivering, he does what no other is worthy to do. He breaks the first seal. He ushers in the final stages of God's historical plan. And as he breaks the seal, one of the living creatures cries out, "Come...come and bring your kingdom to earth. Come and fulfill what has been ordained from the beginning of time. Come victorious Lamb of God. Come!"

Remember, this word brackets the book of Revelation. In chapter 1, Jesus is described this way: "Look, he is **coming** with the clouds, and every eye will see him." Jesus goes on to describe himself this way: "I am the Alpha and the Omega, "who is, and who was, and who **is to come**." In the last chapter, we hear this in verse 7: "Behold, I am coming soon! In verse 12: "Behold, I am

coming soon! In verse 17: "The Spirit and the bride say, "Come!" And let him who hears say, "Come" And the final cry of the Lord's people is heard in verse 20: "Amen. Maranatha. Lord Jesus." Do you know what that means? "Come Lord Jesus."

The entire Book of Revelation is the unveiling ...the revealing ...of what has happened when the eternal one, the Lamb of God ...CAME into our history. And it looks ahead to the time when the Victorious Lamb of God will once again COME into our history. In fact, it is the story of how, even now, Jesus is COMING into this world, making himself known, calling forth his faithful, preparing for that final day when all things will be reconciled to the Father.

Could it be that when the living creatures cry, "Come," they are begging the Lamb to get on with it? To get going! To put and end to this infernal delay? Come into the world and put an end to the forces of evil?

Then what happens? What in the world happens? If they are calling forth the Lamb, why does the counterfeit champion who would enslave the world appear on his white horse? If they are calling forth the Lamb, why come the red horse of bloodshed and the black horse of famine and the pale horse of disease? Why, if we are calling for the coming of Messiah, do things get worse instead of better?

Because, in fact, that is exactly what happens. It is a risky thing to invite Jesus to "Come" into your life, into your marriage, into your work, into your finances, into your world. It is a risky invitation. Because often, when Jesus DOES come, things get worse before they get better.

Do you remember that wonderful image out of the letter to the Laodiceans where Jesus says, "Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone lets me in I will come in and dine with him and he with me." That sounds great, doesn't it? Inviting. What a wonderful thing that Jesus would want to come into our house ...into our heart ...and enjoy our company. Wonderful, that is, until he is actually sitting in your living room. And you look around and realize, to your horror, that your house is an absolute mess. Ladies, have you ever had that experience? Surprise visitors that drop in unexpected and the place looks like a junk pile?

It is a risky invitation to cry out "Come" to Jesus because when he takes us at our word, all heaven breaks loose! He begins to clean house. He begins to change our hearts. He begins to change our relationships. And ...honestly ...oftentimes things get worse before they get better.

Do you doubt that? Some of you here this morning are alcoholics. When you finally, desperately invited God to save you from your beloved liquor, did it immediately get better? No. Things got a whole lot worse. When God's kingdom began to come into that part of your life, every evil force that had its claws in you began to fight for dear life, didn't they? How about you cancer survivors? When God brought healing to you, did it immediately get better? No! You fought your way through surgery, radiation, chemo, hair loss, hopelessness. How about you married couples who almost didn't make it. When you invited God into your broken and bleeding relationship, were things immediately better? No! Suddenly you had to be honest. Suddenly you found yourself dealing with the pain and anger that you had buried for so many years.

When we invite Jesus to "Come" into our lives, oftentimes things get worse before they get better. Because Jesus is not content to put a band-aid on a tumor. He will cut it out. He will insist on perfect healing. The easiest thing might seem to be to leave it alone. To do nothing. Easiest, perhaps, but not safest. Not best. Because in our heart of hearts we know that it is only when we invite Jesus to "Come" that we are ever going to find victory, hope, forgiveness, peace. Perhaps it is time for you to speak those risky but wonderful words: "Come, Lord Jesus. Come."

SERMON DISCUSSION QUESTIONS
A RISKY INVITATION
Revelation 6:1-8

*Pastor Mark Toone
January 23, 2000*

- *To understand the section beginning with chapter 6, you must understand chapters 4 and 5. How are these two chapters the theological anchor of the book? In what way do they prepare us for*

what we discover as the seals begin to be opened in chapter 6?

- *The Four Horsemen represent Tyranny, War, Famine and Pestilence. As you think back over your own lifetime, what are the most serious examples of each of these that you can recall? How are things better than they were 2000 years ago? Worse? If chapter 6 represents what Jesus calls the "birth pains" of the final days, what does that suggest to you about the end times?*
- *Each of the four creatures cries out "Come" preceding the appearance of the horsemen. Pastor Mark argued that they might actually be calling upon the Lamb to "come" and set up his kingdom. Do you agree or disagree with him? Why?*
- *Pastor Mark suggests that when we invite Jesus to "come," things often get worse before they get better. Has that been true in your own experience? Why is this probably inevitable?*
- *Into what aspect of your own life does Jesus need your invitation to come? Why do you find that difficult? Pray for each other about these matters.*