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Dr. Mark James Toone  
Chapel Hill Presbyterian Church

## **FOLLOWING CHRIST IN A FRIGHTENING WORLD: HERALDS OF THE HOLY HARVEST**

*Revelation 14: 6-20*

Some time ago I was flipping through the channels of the TV looking for something interesting when I came upon *Riverdance*. I love *Riverdance*. (I took Cyndi to see it for a Valentine's present two years ago up in Vancouver.) It was being run on one of the public television stations during a pledge period. When it came to a break, I kept surfing the channels...and discovered *Riverdance* on the other public television station! It was running a few minutes behind the first station. So, for the rest of the evening, I got to flip back and forth between the two stations: getting a foretaste of what I was going to see again on one station; rewatching a song or dance that I had particularly enjoyed on the other.

Now, imagine if every single station on your TV was showing *Riverdance*. And all of them had started at a different time. On one station you could catch the very beginning; on another, the end; on another some part in the middle.

That is exactly what is going on with Revelation. As I have told you several times before, if you try to read Revelation from start to finish as a continuous timeline, you will be completely frustrated. It is not written that way. It is written in circles, in cycles. And it jumps around chronologically from time to time. One moment, you are looking at the Great Tribulation. The next moment, you see a scene of the final judgment of God. The next moment, you are back to plagues and tribulation again. Do you understand? This morning's text takes a leap forward in time once again, a leap to the final judgment. On the face of it, it appears to be a vision of wrath and judgment. And so it is. But there is something else wonderful hidden within this story. See if you can spy it.

The text begins with three angels. In Greek, the word "angel—*angelos*" means, literally, "messenger." The three angels have three messages of warning about judgment to come. By now you should have seen two major, recurring themes in Revelation. One theme is

this: God's patience has an end. One day he will judge all that is in rebellion against him. The other theme is this: God still desires to save everyone who wishes to be saved. Again and again we have noticed how, even in the midst of plagues and judgment, there is always a chance to change one's mind; always a chance to repent of idolatrous behavior and turn to the Lamb.

These three angels offer the same message. Judgment is coming and you had better act now while you have a chance. The first angel admonishes us to worship the one, true God, creator of heaven and earth. The second angel warns about Babylon. Remember, Babylon is code for any government that sets itself up in opposition to God (Rome was the "Babylon" of John's time). The second angel warns that Babylon, which appears unbeatable and eternal, will in fact, be defeated and fall. The third angel offers a warning to those who have been tempted to receive the mark of the beast mentioned in the earlier chapter. "If anyone worships the beast and his image and receives his mark on the forehead or on the hand, he, too, will drink of the wine of God's fury, which has been poured full strength into the cup of his wrath."

Here we are reintroduced to a subject that many find very difficult: the wrath of God. We don't like to hear about the wrath of God. We don't like to imagine God as angry. One of the best-known sermons ever preached in this country was a sermon by Jonathan Edwards entitled "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God." In that sermon, he described us as a spider dangling over a fire by a single strand of web in the hand of God. We are that close to destruction.

Now that's the sort of imagery that we don't hear very often today. We just don't want to think of God as angry, as wrathful, do we? But why not? We experience wrath and feel justified about it, don't we? When we read about mass murders in Uganda, doesn't it make us furious? When we read about a schoolteacher that seduces one of his students, doesn't it make us furious? When we read about a molester of children or an abuser of women who goes free because of a legal technicality, doesn't it make us furious?

There are things in this world that ought to evoke wrath. Terrible, horrible injustices that ought to call forth all of the

righteous indignation we can muster. We should hate to see babies killed and villages ethnically cleansed and women systematically raped as a form of military torture.

Wrath against evil and injustice is the appropriate response for us as human beings. Why should it not be all the more appropriate for God? If we who are sinful know what it means to feel outrage against heinous and inhumane crimes, why should we be surprised that a holy God who made us in his image and finds us to be precious finds such acts to be even more repulsive? When we read in scripture of God's wrath being poured out against the world, we should understand it in this way: Sin matters to God. Justice matters to God. The pain and fear of oppressed people matter to God. The horror of a child that is mistreated by the one who should protect her matters deeply to God. And he will bring judgment against these acts and against the perpetrators of these acts.

Sin makes God furious. Sin evokes God's wrath. The sin that causes us to turn our worship towards the Beast, towards idols of our own making, makes God angry. Do not ever underestimate God's hatred for evil.

But you say, "Pastor Mark, I don't want to hear about that stuff. I want to hear about the God of love. I want to hear John 3:16: 'For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son that whoever believes in him should not perish but have everlasting life.'" I don't blame you. So do I. But read on in that same chapter. Listen to John 3:36: "He who does not obey the son shall not see life, but the wrath of God rests upon him."

If we do not have the courage to say that our righteous Heavenly Father hates sin, we are not telling the whole truth. If we talk only of the love and grace of God and the death and resurrection of Jesus, we have left out the reason that Jesus died in the first place: to pay the horrible price for our sin which we could never pay ourselves. One day God will judge all that is evil in this world. We need saving from that judgment!

In fact, as we continue with the text, we catch a glimpse of God's coming wrath in the final judgment. It is portrayed to us in the imagery of a harvest. The harvest of wheat seems to represent the harvest of the righteous. Remember how often Jesus spoke

of wheat as a metaphor for the righteous? “The wheat fields are ripe unto harvest,” he said. “Pray that God will send the workers.” We all know the old hymn, “Bringing in the Sheaves.” This vision in Revelation looks to a time when all of those who have loved Jesus will be gathered up in a final fruitful harvest.

Ah, but there is also a second harvest. It is as horrible as the harvest of wheat is glorious. This is described as the harvest of grapes. The sharp sickle is swung and the grapes are gathered and thrown into what John calls the “winepress of God’s wrath.” The imagery of the harvest of grapes as representing judgment is found elsewhere in the scriptures. Listen to the words of Joel: “Put in the sickle for the harvest is ripe. Go in, tread, for the wine press is full. The vats overflow, for their wickedness is great.”

The image becomes downright gruesome in verse 20. As the grapes are crushed, it is not wine that pours out but blood. And such a flow of blood as you have never seen. It is a river of blood so deep that it reaches a horse’s bridle. And this horrible river flows for a distance of 1,600 stadia...about 184 miles. As George Ladd puts it, “this is an image of radical judgment that crushes every vestige of evil and hostility to the reign of God.”

And certainly it is that, but I believe there is more. In fact, I believe there is a wonderful vision within a vision contained in these last verses. A vision that turns even this merciless destruction of evil into God’s greatest act of mercy. First of all, look at verse 18. The angel is told to gather the grapes from the earth’s vine.” Who described himself as “the vine?” Hold onto that thought. Now, look with me at verse 20 one more time. Do you see it? Where was the winepress located? Outside the city. Why does John include the location of the winepress? What would John’s first century readers have thought when they heard the words, “..outside the city?” Where was Jesus, the Vine, crucified? Listen to Hebrews 13:12:

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“And so Jesus also suffered **outside the city gate** to make the people holy through his own blood.”

There is no doubt that this harvest speaks of a coming judgment. But I am led to believe by the work of wonderful commentators, that this is also a word of salvation and grace. I believe the winepress “outside the city” is the cross of Jesus. It was on the cross of Jesus that God’s wrath was expressed against the sin of the world. That is why Jesus uttered those most horrible of words: “My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?” When Jesus took the sins of the world upon himself on that cross, he experienced something he had never known before: utter separation from his sinless Father.

Suddenly, the language about the blood that was so horrible becomes beautiful. Suddenly, the ghastly river of blood described in this text becomes a fountain, pure and clear. Do you remember how high the river flowed? To the horses’ bridle. Five feet deep. And how far did the river flow? 1600 stadia. Remember, numbers always mean something in Revelation. 1600 stadia was the traditional length of Palestine from its northern to its southern border. Enough blood to cover the entire land. Do you get it? The blood that flowed from the wounds of Jesus was adequate to cover the sins of every single soul that would repent and turn to him. Blood enough for all!

Suddenly the most gruesome passage becomes the most gracious passage. Suddenly, a horrible harvest becomes a heavenly feast. For that is what we celebrate today. The wheat and the grape...the bread and the wine...the body broken for us and the blood poured out for us...to wash away our sin...to make atonement for our evil...to appease the wrath of a holy God...blood enough for all who would repent and turn to Jesus.

## SERMON DISCUSSION QUESTIONS FOR *HERALDS OF THE HOLY HARVEST* *Revelation 14:6-20*

2 April, 2000

Pastor Mark Toone

- Remember the context of chapter 14. Review what occurred in 13. In 15, there are more plagues to come. Why does John give us a sneak preview of the final things at this point? In what way does 14 “overcome” what we saw in 13?
- What are the three messages of the three angels? In what way are they different? The same? What words of encouragement are offered to the saints, ones we have heard before? Do you find verse 13 comforting?
- What indications do you have that suggest that the two harvests mentioned are, in the first place, the harvest unto salvation and, in the second place, a harvest unto judgment? In several places, the text speaks of the wrath of God. What is God angry at? Does it bother you that God is spoken of as “wrathful?” Why or why not?
- Pastor Mark suggested that there might be a deeper understanding of the meaning of the “winepress” in verse 20. What was his suggestion? What can you find in the text that might support that interpretation?
- What does this text stir up within you? What should you do about it? Pray for each other.