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Dr. Mark James Toone
Chapel Hill Presbyterian Church

**FOLLOWING CHRIST IN A FRIGHTENING WORLD:
COME LORD JESUS
*Revelation 22: 7-21***

Nine months and 32 sermons ago, we began a journey. Now we come to the end. On September 12, I preached my first sermon on this book, titled, "There is No "S" in Revelation." How many were here for that sermon? How many started coming to Chapel Hill since I began this series? How many of you came because you heard we were doing a series on Revelation?

Many people wondered why I would do such a thing. And at first glance, it appears pretty confusing to all of us, doesn't it? Myself included. But we were 110 days away from what was projected to be a global meltdown, Y2K. Everybody was thinking about the end of the world. It seemed a good time to find out what God's Word had to say about final things. Besides, as I pointed out to you at the time, this is the only book in Scripture that promises a blessing for those who study it.

A blessing? Dragons and demons, plagues and worldwide catastrophes...a blessing? It didn't seem very promising. But that was the promise. So we plunged in. Now, 32 weeks later, I ask you, was it a blessing? It was for me. It is the hardest sermon series I've ever preached. I read more and labored more over every text in this book than I have on any other set of sermons. But in the end, it was a tremendous blessing to me. I pray it has been for our church. Now...let us conclude. Our text this morning is the section of Revelation known as the epilogue...literally, "after the word." As you listen to the reading, I want you to listen for the recapitulation of themes that have been touched on throughout the entire book.

If you were to sum up the major themes of the Revelation in two points, what would they be? Let me suggest one major theme: **Worship**. The Book of Revelation is a book of worship. Have you ever read another book of the Bible that focused so much on the glory, majesty and power of our God? Some of our most beloved hymns are taken from this book. Many of our praise songs are taken directly from passages found in the Revelation. Handel's

most famous piece, the Hallelujah Chorus, is taken from Revelation. Think back for a moment.

The opening chapter begins with a doxology...which means to give glory. **"To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood, and has made us to be a kingdom and priests to serve his God and Father—to him be glory and power for ever and ever! Amen."** Do you remember chapter 4, the throne room in heaven? God is seated on his throne encircled by an emerald rainbow. He is surrounded by 24 other thrones on which are seated 24 elders. Four odd and amazing beasts surrounded the throne crying out day and night, **"Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty, who was and is, and is to come."** Every time the beasts speak these words, the elders fall to their faces, lay their golden crowns before his throne and declare, **"You are worthy, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power, for you created all things, and by your will they were created and have their being."**

In chapter 5, the Lamb of God appears. Once again, the heavens break out in worship, this time in song. First, the elders and the creatures sing his praise: **"You are worthy to take the scroll and to open its seals, because you were slain, and with your blood you purchased men for God from every tribe and language and people and nation."** That's not enough. Now the angels join in...an angelic choir numbering ten thousand times ten thousand. They sing: **"Worthy is the Lamb, who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and strength and honor and glory and praise."** But THAT'S not enough worship. Now EVERY creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and on the sea joins in and sings, **"To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb be praise and honor and glory and power, for ever and ever!"**

The 144,000 in chapter 7 worship God. And the angels and elders and creatures join in again. In chapter 11, after the two witnesses are martyred and resurrected, once again the elders and angelic voices worship God. Once again, in chapter 14, the 144,000 break out in praise to God. In chapter 15 there is worship. In chapter 16 there is worship. In chapter 19 is the great Hallelujah chorus of worship.

Revelation is one glorious chorus after another in the praise of the one, true, eternal, omnipotent, omniscient, omnipresent God.

And finally, in chapter 22, the book ends with John in worship. After this great vision of a New Jerusalem, John is so taken by what he has seen that he falls down to worship. But there's a problem. What is it? He worships the angel! He worships the messenger. What is the angel's response? "Do not do it! I am a fellow servant with you and with your brothers the prophets and of all who keep the words of this book."

Well maybe we can let it go. After all, John just got carried away, right? It's just one time. Wrong! He did the same thing back in chapter 19, verse 10. The exact same thing: "At this I fell at the angel's feet to worship him. But he said to me, 'Do not do it!'" And in both cases, the angel concludes his rebuke with the same words to John: "WORSHIP GOD!" Worship ONLY God.

Humankind was created to worship. That's a great thing. We have it in our souls to worship. Here's the bad thing: We are prone to worship everything BUT the one who deserves our worship. Like John, we find ourselves falling down and worshipping, not the creator but the creation. Whether it is an angel in heaven or an angel on earth; whether it is Britney Spears or Michael Jordan or In Synch or the person in the mirror...we are prone to worship the wrong thing.

We run into that even in our study of this book. Too many people become so focused on the message of Revelation...the timetable, the predictions, the prophecies...all their complex theories about how it should be interpreted...they become so obsessed with the Revelation that they neglect the Revealer. I think Eugene Peterson says it marvelously well:

*The way St. John's Book of Revelation has been treated by many of his readers is similar to the way he himself treated the revealing angel...It is difficult to worship God instead of his messengers. And so people get interested in everything in this book except God, losing themselves in symbol-hunting, intrigue with numbers, speculating with frenzied imaginations on times and seasons, despite Jesus' severe stricture against it. The number of intelligent and devout people prostrate before the angel, deaf to his rebuke, is depressing and inexcusable. **For nothing is more explicit in this book than that it is about God.** It is the revelation of **Jesus Christ**, not the end of the world, not the identity of antichrist, not the timetable of history...Nothing in the book is comprehensible except through faith in Christ. Nothing has*

meaning apart from his lordship...But...because we are always attracted by the spectacular and the emotional, in the Apocalypse we generally become interested in what is only an envelope.

If our study has accomplished only one thing, here is what I hope it is: Through imagery, vision, color, pictures...it has brought us into the presence of the Holy One and the Lamb of God seated upon the throne...and having entered their presence, we have been so overwhelmed by their glory that we had to fall down in praise and worship. If we have learned better how to worship God this year, John has accomplished his major goal.

That's the first great theme. **Worship.** Here's the second: **Expectation.** We the Church, the Bride of Christ, ought to live in a joyful expectation of the return of our Lord and Savior, Jesus. It is captured in one word which you heard repeated again and again in our text. What is it? "Come!" The book started with this theme. In chapter one, we hear the word "come" three times in the first 8 verses. Now, as John draws to the end, the word plays out like a drumbeat. It is Pastor Stuart on the congas, slapping out a cadence: "Come...come...come...come...come...come...COME!"

Look at your text and read it with me. Verse 7: "Behold, I am coming soon!" Verse 12: "Behold, I am coming soon!" Verse 17, three times: "The Spirit and the bride say, Come!" And let him who hears say, "Come!" Whoever is thirsty, let him come." Verse 20, " He who testifies to these things says, "Yes, I am coming soon." Amen. Come, Lord Jesus." Do you think he is trying to make a point?

Jesus' clear teaching, and that of his disciples, was that Jesus would return again. Listen to the words of the angel as Jesus ascends into heaven: "**This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven.**" And what was the consistent theme that characterized Jesus' discussion of his return? Expectancy. Urgency. He would come like a thief in the night. He would come like the bridegroom in the middle of the night. He would come like the master who returns unexpectedly after being gone for a period of time. What are we to do? Be ready! Expect him. Be prepared for his imminent return. The bridesmaids must have enough oil in their lamps. The servants must have wisely invested the money that was entrusted to them.

For two millennia, we have awaited the fulfillment of Jesus' words in the Lord's prayer, "...Thy Kingdom come, Thy will be done." For two millennia, the Church has continued to pray the prayer Paul wrote in his letter to the Corinthians: "Maranatha: Come, Lord." For two millennia, we have longed for the consummation expressed in the Apostle's Creed: "He shall come to judge the quick and the dead."

But perhaps we are inclined to say, "So ...when IS he coming? Two thousand years and no sign of him. When will Jesus return?" I don't know. Even Jesus didn't know. And he warned us against those who would tell us that **they** know. And why **didn't** Jesus give us more hints? Why **didn't** he give us a detailed timeline? For at least one very important reason: Jesus wants us to live as if he were coming back this very moment. He wants us to live in the eternal present. The now. Jesus doesn't want us to live in the past...either in the guilt and shame of our failures or in the arrogant pride of our successes or in the gilded memories of a bygone era. And Jesus doesn't want us to live in the future. Wondering about the future, worrying about the future, speculating about the future, predicting the future. No...Jesus wants us to live right now. Today. **He wants us to be present to the present.** Not looking or leaning toward some distant date...but resting in the glorious gift of this moment.

Jesus is not just the one who was and the one who is to come. Jesus...the Alpha and the Omega...the Beginning and the End...is the One who Was, **the One who IS** and the One who is to come. Jesus' kingdom is not just something in the future. Jesus' kingdom is already. It is now. It is present in his people, the Church. It is present in his Spirit. It is not complete but it is real right now. And we are to live right now. It is the other great theme of Revelation. Jesus is coming, coming, coming soon. Be ready!

You'll recall a few months ago I told you about our new "free" kitty which ended up costing us hundreds of dollars in vet bills because she had a herniated diaphragm. Well, against all odds, "Kit" made it and has become a beloved member of our family. Two weeks ago, however, Kit disappeared. In the first couple of days, we continued to hold out hope for her return. Perhaps she was lost. Perhaps she was becoming more comfortable with the beautiful outdoors. But as one night became two and three and four, frankly I lost hope. I think a dog or a raccoon probably got

her. Perhaps in typical male fashion, I am ready to face facts, close the door on that chapter and move on.

But every morning for the first week, when I went out to the garage to come to work, I found the same thing: the garage door was open six inches, just as it was when Kit was still with us. That was her access home. No matter how late it was, that doorway was always open to welcome her back to her bed. And when I saw that cracked-open garage door seven days after her disappearance, I was reminded of the enduring love and hopefulness of my beloved wife. Against all odds, with all things appearing hopeless, Cyndi was out every night, opening that garage door on the chance that Kit might return.

Finally, however, even Cyndi gave up. The garage door stayed down. Kit was gone. We were certain of it...all of us adults, I should say. Because every night, still, Rachel prays the same prayer: "Please bring Kit back." We have planted a flower in Kit's honor to help Rachel deal with it. But it doesn't matter. Every night... "God, please bring Kit back." Even after all this time, even after the flower has been planted and the words of remembrance spoken, Rachel is still waiting. Still hoping. Still expecting. Still praying for Kit's return.

We adults call it denial. Maybe the Bible calls it hope. Now...I wish I could live my life with the same fervent expectancy about the imminent return of Jesus. What difference would it make in my behavior today? What difference would it make in the choices I made about how to spend my time? What difference would it make in my family, my business, my spending habits, my language, my thought life ...if I knew, any minute, that Jesus was going to make his appearance.

In addition to teaching us how to worship, here's the other thing I hope our study of Revelation has accomplished. I hope it has cracked open our garage door. I hope it has transformed the words "Jesus is coming soon," from a being a creedal statement into being the drumbeat of our life. Coming ...coming ...coming ...Jesus is coming soon. May it be! Maranatha! Come, Lord Jesus. Amen!

Pastor Mark Toone
**SERMON DISCUSSION QUESTIONS FOR
Revelation 22:7-21**

- *Read the text. Pastor Mark identified at least five themes that recur in the epilogue which were first introduced earlier in the book. Can you identify any of them? Why are these the themes to which he returns in the conclusion?*
- *Pastor Mark chooses “worship” and “expectation” as the two main themes of the book. Do you agree? Would you choose others? Why?*
- *This is the last in our Revelation series. Reflect together on the series. What were the themes, ideas, images that stuck out for you? In what way was your thinking changed or refined? In what way was your faith deepened? In what way was this the “blessing” that John promises it will be?*
- *Please pray for Pastor Mark and his family on their sabbatical. Pray, too, for Pastor Stuart and the session as they continue to lead the church throughout the summer.*

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