

Form follows function, so we begin our series on Revelation which will take us through the month of April with a focus on the form of Revelation as an introduction to the function of Revelation:

*Revelation 1:4–5 (NRSV) [Pastor Dave to the universal church and to the particular church that is Pennside Presbyterian Church in Mount Penn, PA]: Grace to you and peace from him who is and who was and who is to come, and from the seven spirits who are before his throne,<sup>5</sup> and from Jesus Christ, the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth.*

In the beginning, we see that Revelation is a letter written to the church, and like most letters, it is an occasional letter, that is, a letter written on the occasion of some circumstance; it is written from John the Divine (by which is meant “theologian,” which is “someone who talks about God”) to the entire church in what is now Turkey.

John, we will later learn, has been exiled onto the Island of Patmos for witnessing to Jesus Christ. He is in the midst of difficult circumstances. The church in Turkey is also in the midst of difficult circumstances. Trouble is heading their way. The choice of being faithful to Jesus Christ or of conforming to the practices and prejudices of their society is becoming more and more direct; the consequences of this choice more severe. Do they “go along to get along,” or should they take a stand? And if they take a stand how will they be able to pay the price for that stand?

Revelation is a letter to folks facing an uncertain and uncomfortable future; it is not a prediction, so over the course of this series, you will not learn when *Revelation 1:7 (NRSV) Look! He is coming with the clouds; every eye will see him, even those who pierced him; and on his account all the tribes of the earth will wail. So it is to be. Amen.*

You will not learn when the Rapture will occur; the Rapture being what Paul promised: *1 Thessalonians 4:14–17 (NRSV)*<sup>14</sup> *For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have died.*<sup>15</sup> *For this we declare to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive,*

*who are left until the coming of the Lord, will by no means precede those who have died.* <sup>16</sup> *For the Lord himself, with a cry of command, with the archangel's call and with the sound of God's trumpet, will descend from heaven, and the dead in Christ will rise first.* <sup>17</sup> *Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up in the clouds together with them to meet the Lord in the air; and so we will be with the Lord forever.*

You will not learn this because Revelation is not a prediction; it is a prescription; it's not a way out of this world; it is a way for us to get through what we have to get through in this world, from beginning to end and then some.

Thursday night offered ample proof that we the people are searching for such a way through this world. Along with a standing-room-only crowd, I attended State Sen. Judy Schwank's Town Hall meeting, and as the Reading Eagle reporter put it: "This year there's a lot of different things going on at the same time," the Ruscombmanor Township Democrat told a crowd of nearly a hundred. "The issue of privatization of the lottery, the issue of liquor store privatization. I know you want to talk about property tax elimination. There's a whole host of other things that are probably on your mind."

Were there ever.

Education. Transportation. Gun control. The economy. And property tax reform.<sup>1</sup> There were many discouraging words; one speaker said that he feared for the future for his children; would they be able to make a good living and live the American dream?

Let me be clear: God's promised future is not America's future. To equate God's future with any nation's fate is to commit the blasphemy that the Barmen Declaration so boldly spoke against; that equation is the faith of the Nazi's; God forbid!

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<sup>1</sup> *Reading Eagle online*. April 5, 2013.

That said, God's promised future is a promised future; a promise given by the One Who spoke to Moses from the burning bush and said, "*I am who I am,*" and Who is described in Revelation as "*him who is and who was and who is to come.*"

And the temptation that we face here and now is the temptation to surrender our hope in God's promised future because of the challenging circumstances we find ourselves in.

This isn't new. The people of God faced this challenge in Exodus under Pharaoh, with the prophets during the Babylonian exile, and ultimately, on Calvary as the Son of God submitted to the will of God and for the sake of love - God's love for us, was the perfectly obedient Son of Man, who suffered and died on the cross so that we could be "*freed from our sins*" and God's promised future could begin. That future began on Easter morning when God raised Jesus from the dead.

That's a future we can believe in. That's the future we must believe in - God's future which is in God's hands, from beginning to end and then some.

Revelation doesn't take us out of this world; it sends us into this world to be what Jesus made us, "*a kingdom, priests serving his God and Father.*" In the beginning, God created us and said, "*Very good.*" At the end of history, God will welcome us and say, "*Well done.*" In the meantime, "*we are sent to serve.*" We are meant for this world; we show the way by engaging the challenges of our time with grace that is given us by God so that we can be instruments of God's peace in this world and for this world; this world that God loves so much that *John 3:16 (NRSV) ... he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life;* or, as Jeremiah put it so long ago, so that we may have "*a future with hope.*"

Revelation doesn't offer us an escape from the frustrations of our time; it isn't the easy answer for life's hard questions. It is a summary of all that the Bible teaches us about living our faith in the here and now. John the Theologian knew his Bible and the allusions are woven throughout this Book. John applies the Bible to the tough times that churches he knew and loved were facing; he offers real pastoral care to real people who were facing real problems.

That pastor then, and this pastor now, offers the church God has sent us to serve these words of pastoral care: We do not know what the future holds, but we do know who holds the future; the God who is, who was, and who is to come; the God who was crucified and is risen; the God who is resurrection and life. He is with us always; He has the scars to prove it. Come what may, and what may will come, we have a future with hope, because our future is in God’s hands. Until that future becomes a reality, we are sent to serve with real faith that engages real problems in this real world; we are sent to serve with the hope that what we do makes a real difference because this world is in God’s hands from beginning to end and then some. Amen.