

Holy Trinity Lutheran Church Des Moines, WA September 18, 2011

Revelation 6:12 – 7:8

Unraveling A Revelation Mystery

1. *Deciphering the vision*
2. *Learning the lessons*

**Hymns: 282 - 536 – Distribution: 538,
596 – 297**

All Scripture quotations from the NIV

Revelation 6:12 – 7:8 –

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¹⁵ *Then the kings of the earth, the princes, the generals, the rich, the mighty, and every slave and every free man hid in caves and among the rocks of the mountains. ¹⁶ They called to the mountains and the rocks, “Fall on us and hide us from the face of him who sits on the throne and from the wrath of the Lamb! ¹⁷ For the great day of their wrath has come, and who can stand?”*

¹ *After this I saw four angels standing at the four corners of the earth, holding back the four winds of the earth to prevent any wind from blowing on the land or on the sea or on any tree. ² Then I saw another angel coming up from the east, having the seal of the living God. He called out in a loud voice to the four angels who had been given power to harm the land and the sea: ³ “Do not harm the land or the sea or the trees until we put a seal on the foreheads of the servants of our God.” ⁴ Then I heard the number of those who were sealed: 144,000 from all the tribes of Israel.*

⁵ *From the tribe of Judah 12,000 were sealed, from the tribe of Reuben 12,000, from the tribe of Gad 12,000, ⁶ from the tribe of Asher 12,000, from the tribe of Naphtali 12,000, from the tribe of Manasseh 12,000, ⁷ from the tribe of*

Simeon 12,000, from the tribe of Levi 12,000, from the tribe of Issachar 12,000, ⁸ from the tribe of Zebulun 12,000, from the tribe of Joseph 12,000, from the tribe of Benjamin 12,000.

Two different reactions often occur when a person reads the book of Revelation. I’ve known quite a few people who are fascinated by the book. They can’t get enough of it. They read and reread the fantastic visions that God gave the Apostle John in the book. They can readily recount the pictures of the dragon, the beast out of the earth, the beast out of the sea, the bloody Lamb on the throne, the vision of the risen Christ who has a sword coming out of his mouth, the locusts with hair like a woman’s, and more. I’ve known some people who are preoccupied with this book as their favorite book in Scripture, and they want to know every interpretation of every mysterious picture (sometimes to a fault).

The other reaction that people have to the book of Revelation is avoidance. Since the book is chock full of these fantastic pictures and difficult visions, they choose not to engage in it. They’re content to read the Gospels and the OT narrative books, and they certainly benefit from these, but a trip through the chapters of Revelation confuses them. In fact, you might remember that two weeks ago our sermon message encouraged you to be a more devout reader and scholar in the Scriptures. For those of you who said, “I’m going to listen and read through my Bible this year,” I wonder if any thought “I’m going to start in the book of Revelation!”

I don’t know which reaction you have to this last book of the Bible, but today we have a text in front of us that will require us all to focus on part of the book together. Let’s not do this with any fear, but rather with the assurance that God has given us these pictures to strengthen our faith and that he will guide us to a right understanding of them. So let’s “Unravel a Revelation Mystery.” We’ll do this by:

1. **Deciphering the vision**
2. **Learning the lessons**

1 – Before we hone in on the verses in our reading, let’s remember a few guidelines to interpreting the book of Revelation. First, the theme. The book itself certainly has perplexing visions and pictures throughout, but you must always remember that the theme of the book is not difficult at all. The theme is, “GOD WINS.” Keeping this theme in mind in your Revelation reading will help you keep things in perspective.

Secondly, the language. The book of Revelation has been called “apocalyptic literature.” That’s a fancy way of saying “picture language.” The book was written by the Apostle John as an angel from God revealed what would happen until the end of time and beyond. The angel did this by means of picturesque visions John saw. Because much of what will happen until Judgment Day would be quite bad for God’s Church and for the history of mankind, the visions are often difficult to watch, even distressing and bloody.

Third, a comment about interpretation. Nothing we interpret in Revelation can contradict clear teachings of Scripture in other Bible books.

Fourth, the outline. The book has a short introduction and a short conclusion. The main part of Revelation contains seven visions that John sees. Our reading is in Vision 2, called “The Seven Seals.”

Finally, the numbers. The numbers in the book have symbolic meanings. Basic guidelines to remember:

- 3 – The number of God
- 4 – The number of the world
- 7 – God’s interaction with the world
- 6 – The number of failure (one less than God’s actions)
- 10 – A number of completion that God knows and sets
- 12 (3 x 4) – The number of the Church, God’s believers

With this in mind, we read the verses in front of us today:

¹² *I watched as (the Lamb) opened the sixth seal. There was a great earthquake. The sun turned black like sackcloth made of goat hair, the whole moon turned blood red, ¹³ and the stars in the sky fell to earth, as late figs drop from a fig tree when shaken by a strong wind. ¹⁴ The sky receded like a scroll, rolling up, and every mountain and island was removed from its place.*

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In this vision, the Lamb (Christ) has been given a scroll sealed with seven seals. He is the only one who is worthy to crack open the seals to reveal what will happen in future times. He opens them one by one. The first four seals reveal what will happen until the end of time, most of it distressing. The fifth seal reveals martyrs in heaven who have lost their lives for the faith asking God, “How long will you wait until you avenge our blood and bring justice to the world?”

The sixth seal is what we’re considering today. Let’s consider the first part of the seal. Signs in nature come after the martyrs ask God “How long?” Earthquakes. Signs in the sun, moon, and stars. Signs in the sky.

This is not difficult when we realize that other places in Scripture say the same thing about the very end of the world:

- Isaiah 13 says, “*See, the day of the LORD is coming... The stars of heaven and their constellations will not show their light. The rising sun will be darkened and the moon will not give its light. I will punish the world for its evil, the wicked for their sins.*”
- Isaiah 34: “*All the stars of the heavens will be dissolved and the sky rolled up like a scroll; all the starry host will fall like withered leaves from the vine, like shriveled figs from the fig tree.*”
- Joel 2: “*The earth shakes, the sky trembles, the sun and moon are darkened, and the stars no longer shine.*”
- Jesus in Matthew 24: “*The sun and moon will be darkened, and the stars no longer shine, the sun will be darkened,*

and the moon will not give its light; the stars will fall from the sky, and the heavenly bodies will be shaken."

Every earthquake and storm that our world experiences now is a foreshadowing of what will happen at the end of time.

Then we read about the lament of the people of this earth when they see these things. "Fall on us, mountains! For who can stand in the day of God's judgment?" Again, this is exactly what Jesus predicted in Luke 23 when he said, *"The time will come when you will say, 'Blessed are the barren women, the wombs that never bore and the breasts that never nursed!' Then 'they will say to the mountains, 'Fall on us!' and to the hills, 'Cover us!'"*

The firmest, most permanent things in the world will give way, even the sky itself. And this will be distressing and unnerving to unbelievers who know that the end is coming.

We then read that four winds were prepared to blow on the earth, monitored by four angels. These winds are the last destructive forces that will bring an end to the present world. The angels were holding them back until they would get the signal to release them.

Another angel suddenly appeared in the east. He had the seal of the living God, and he called out – literally, "screamed" – that they should not release the winds until all the servants of God have received the seal of God on their foreheads. They were marking those who are the Lord's.

What does this mean? In ancient times, the seal was an important facet of society. In very ancient times, a person had a cylindrical seal around their neck that they could roll into soft clay and make their personal impression. As time moved on, rings and other methods could be used. You might remember that Pontius Pilate sealed Jesus' tomb with his own seal. Seals had two purposes:

1. **They identified something** – They could identify property and claim it as a person's own.
2. **Therefore, they protected things.** Things that were stolen could be identified and returned.

The same two things can be said of God's people in our reading. God identifies and marks his believers as time ends.

Finally, we have the mysterious picture of the 144,000 that are sealed, and who will be pictured in heaven in the next chapter of Revelation. What is meant by this number? Your friendly Jehovah's Witness who knocks on your door will tell you that this is the exact number of Jehovah's Witnesses that will be in heaven. They take this number literally. Since they would acknowledge that more than 144,000 people are believers in God, they will tell you that the additional people after the 144,000 is filled up will not live in heaven, but in another place like the earth that's perfected by God also.

However, if you want to take this number literally, you must take the entire picture literally. We also hear about this throng, both here and also in Revelation 14 where they're pictured again:

- They are all males
- They are all Jewish
- They are all virgins

These details are left out by the Jehovah's Witnesses.

Others today mistakenly say that this must mean there will be a mass conversion of the Jewish people right before the end of time. Why is his not correct? The NT tells us what it means that "all Israel will be saved." Paul writes in Romans 11: *"Not all who are descended from Israel are Israel. Nor because they are his descendants are they all Abraham's children... It is not the natural children who are God's children, but it is the children of the promise who are regarded as Abraham's offspring."*

And in Galatians 3, *"Understand, then, that those who believe are children of Abraham. The Scripture foresaw that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, and announced the gospel in advance to Abraham: 'All nations will be blessed through you.' So those who have faith are blessed along with Abraham, the man of faith."*

So what does the picture mean?

- Remember that 12 is the number of the Church and that 10 is the complete number that God knows. We have multiples of these numbers, 12 x 12,000. This is simply the perfect number that God knows, who are in his Holy Christian Church.

- Why males? Because you are all firstborn sons in the picture. You will all receive the firstborn's inheritance from our heavenly Father.
- Why Jews? Because we are children of Abraham by faith.
- Why virgins? Because Scripture pictures unbelief and following false gods as spiritual adultery. These are God's people who put their faith in him!

2 – Those are the pictures that God the Holy Spirit has given us in this brief picture of the sixth seal in Revelation. What will you take away from this? What will you learn today? I'd like to submit that you should remember three lessons from this unique account.

First, the end is surely coming. It's no secret that in our times, many believe that this is not so. Jokes and uncomplimentary comments are often made that "The end is near!" This was even predicted in 2 Peter 3: *"In the last days scoffers will come, scoffing and following their own evil desires. They will say, 'Where is this 'coming' he promised? Ever since our fathers died, everything goes on as it has since the beginning of creation.' But they deliberately forget that long ago by God's word the heavens existed and the earth was formed out of water and by water... By the same word the present heavens and earth are reserved for fire, being kept for the day of judgment and destruction of ungodly men. But do not forget this one thing, dear friends: With the Lord a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like a day. The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance. But the day of the Lord will come like a thief. The heavens will disappear with a roar; the elements will be destroyed by fire, and the earth and everything in it will be laid bare."*

We've had another rash of signs and foreshadowings of the end this year, signs in nature and storms. Again, these are reminders that the end is surely coming.

Second, by nature we should be afraid and despair. By nature you should be one of those kings of the earth, free men, or slaves who are hiding in the caves and asking the hills to fall on them.

Has there been a time when you were caught unprepared and by surprise and YOU WERE NOT READY? Perhaps it was a time when your parents left you at home and returned earlier than they said. And the house was not in a condition that you were proud of! Perhaps there was some scurrying around, trying to get things in order? Maybe there was a time the boss returned unexpectedly to check in on the work crew or the office workers. Perhaps this stirred panic in everyone, including you!

By our own nature and effort, we shake in our boots to meet the holy God who has made the heavens and earth. Your sinfulness cannot presume to stand in the judgment on the Last Day. He should send you away forever to eternal destruction.

Our third lesson is: Fear not. We see why we should not fear later in the book of Revelation, when it's revealed what the believers of God are sealed with on their foreheads. Revelation 14 says that the 144,000 *"had (the Lamb's) name and his Father's name written on their foreheads."* You are marked with Jesus Christ's name on the most prominent place on your body. What a good reminder, as Paul wrote in 2 Corinthians 5: *"God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God."* You are marked with your Maker's name proudly on your forehead, for you are his and you have his protection. Your Savior Jesus has died for your sins and has washed you clean of them. Your sin and guilt has been paid for!

Also, you will not be left behind now. You will not be forgotten. You will not be neglected in getting his seal because of God's lack of time or attention. You will make it! God will find you. And God will preserve you in the faith until the end of time. GOD WINS! And because of that, you win!

This has been a brief look at one small part of the book of Revelation. For those of you who don't gravitate to the book, I pray this has been a comforting message from this book, which is deep, but clear.

May we remember that the end is coming. Yet despite the fears that this would cause in us due to our own sinfulness, rejoice in your Savior who has given you the assurance of your salvation and preservation. God wins! Amen.