

Revelation  
Dr. Craig Koester  
Presentation  
10-19-08

Pastor Holm: Welcome everyone I'd like to begin today with the distinct pleasure and honor of introducing Dr. Craig Koester, Professor of New Testament at Luther Seminary. Some of you may not know this but every year before we confirm the tenth grade class there is a three-year program of confirmation to prepare. The confirmands come to my office after they have written a three-page paper which is a statement of their faith and confession. We have time to pray together and share the faith and encourage them to make a testimony and bare witness to Jesus Christ going forward as adult members of the congregation. Yesterday I had a young gentleman in my office and he began his time with me by reading this passage in Revelation 21. He began this meeting with reading from the Bible to the pastor. Reading verses 1-6. Are you ready for this, because next he said to me, "I have been studying post apocalyptic paradise and what this would be; could it be that the alpha and omega will be brought together in unity and there will be a whole new day." This young man in not yet 16 years old and speaking this. I mean what kind of kids are we raising in this parish? Laugh! How wonderful that our young people are in the word and the book of Revelation to this confirmand, because he has lost his grandparents, said it would be a wonderful day with no more suffering, tears and death. Craig Koester a wonderful passionate teacher of the word, and a blessing to every student who has him in class. You are getting an opportunity to also purchase his book, Revelation and the End of All Things, and in a church

where I think Revelation is so often sensationalized or made to be something else other than it is. Let's give a warm welcome!

Craig: Thank you and its great to be back. In terms of what is going on with adult education in the Twin Cities I think Normandale is probably one of the flagship congregations as far as making a concerted effort to do adult ed. I get around to lots of churches and it's hard to beat what you folks have got going on because there is much passion/commitment. And it's a pleasure to be part of this.

You have been sort of reading your way around the Bible for awhile and now you're sort of ready for the grand finale? Laugh! What is going on with the book of Revelation? We've got a few weeks to try and figure it out. Now with a lot of books in the Bible it's a case where you can just plunge in and start reading. With Revelation it's a little harder to do because people aren't quite sure about it and maybe curious. Revelation is this radio-active book that even if you don't go to church you've heard something about with perhaps having a very strong opinion because in church we often don't read it much. So the question is then where do all the strange impressions come from? With Revelation its one of the books that actually makes it on the covers of news magazines like Time. But the apocalypse makes it and what is interesting is that word is simply another form of the word Revelation. The Greek word is apocalypses and so sometimes the last book in the Bible is known as the apocalypse and Revelation, the same thing. But what is interesting when it makes it on the cover of Time you can tell the editors know this word is radio-active and know this book is too. They are actually giving you a sense of what is in Revelation and what you expect to find. (Talking about the illustration on the cover of Time and it giving some impressions on what you might find when reading the Bible. Such as

bleakness and a sense that things in the world will be destruction, terror and horror.) Certainly that is the sense you get from looking at what you find in popular media. Now in terms of what is actually happening in the world in the last few weeks with the economy, when you hear the term apocalypse in the news media (to make sure I was scientifically bearing up my facts on this I Google-d in preparation), well sure enough now we are hearing ‘financial apocalypse.’ Laugh! Wall Street goes down the tubes and we know we are living Revelation, right? When your 401K is now disappearing that is what Revelation predicted apparently according to some of this hear-say. You get the sense then that whenever you’ve got terror and horrors then things are going down the tubes and that is what the apocalypse is all about.

Now as we are thinking about this sense of things and how it goes one of the factors that contributes to this sense of what Revelation is all about is a lot of the popular treatments of it. Here are a couple of writers and they are the most popular with having made it on the cover of Newsweek. They are the authors of The Left Behind novels. Have some of you read these? How many have heard of these books? Okay most have heard and some have read. Well it talks about the new prophets of Revelation and now you’ve got that word leaping out against the page. The Biblical novels have sold 62 million copies and that is a lot of copies of anything. The sales are phenomenal. For those of you who have not read it just a couple of quick things about it and then will talk about this approach to reading Revelation thinking more about it. In Left Behind it’s a series of novels in which you start off in the modern world with an airplane pilot named Raeford Steel flying across the Atlantic. Now with the dark side he is having lustful thoughts over a flight attendant (already this book has your attention!) We don’t get a chance to find out whether he is faithful because all of a sudden

there is a mass disappearance in which people have vanished from the airplane. And there is chaos because passengers' clothes and eyeglasses are still there. On earth there are car wrecks because drivers have vanished. Well pretty soon then you've got news media in the story trying to figure out what is going on and explain the mystery. Then you've got plots in the United Nations with leaders trying to consolidate everything under one government. Then there are terrorist's threats and all these things coming together. I mean there are Biblical passages quoted all the way through, but if they don't sustain your interest then adultery and that will keep you're interest going. It's sort of like eating potato chips and once you start eating its hard to stop munching. Laugh! That is what Left Behind does I've found. Laugh!

As we look at this book and ones like it they are books that have really put a lot of the popular way of thinking about Revelation for the general public consciousness. Things like rapture which is being caught up to to Heaven before the end of the world comes. Tribulation and Armageddon are popular language in American culture. But what is interesting is that Newsweek tells us that when we are reading about the authors of Left Behind they are all about Revelation. So of course if Newsweek says so then it must be true. Or is it? Now I know some of you have come here looking for secrets, and I will reveal some along the way. One of the things that is often unknown to most folks is that books like this along with The Late Great Planet Earth, etc. are not actually based primarily on Revelation. They are actually based on a theological system which was developed a couple hundred years ago by John Nelson Darby (1800-1882.) He was a British clergyman of the Church of England who got bored with ordinary church life and he started piecing together different parts of the Bible to try and get some grand system as far

as how the end of the world would look. He took some of Daniel, little Ezekiel, little Revelation, some 1 Thessalonians and some 1 Corinthians putting it all together by lining up the verses and saying this is how he thought the end of the world would look. Darby was the one who popularized the idea that Christians would be caught up to meet the Lord in the air before the end of the world comes. Now Paul had mentioned that in 1 Thessalonians 4. For 1800 years people thought Paul was talking about the final resurrection and Darby said that was not right. What Paul talks about is this escape hatch before the end of the world comes in which he calls the rapture. Now Darby brought his system to the U.S. in the middle 1800's. Through much of the early part of our history the Americans tended to be rather optimistic (during Colonial period and early 1800's) reading Revelation and assuming things were going to get better and better; looking forward to the coming of the kingdom of God with that being the American approach. But Darby said that no rather things getting better and better they will get worse until the very end with the great cataclysm and then your best hope is God will pull you up out of the earth before the real bad stuff happens at the end of the age. The system was popularized by the evangelist, Dwight L. Moody. He was sort of like Billy Graham but in the 1800's and he evangelized cities in the north. It was later taken up and put in the footnotes of the Scofield Reference Bible and is still there today. Sirus Scofield was a confederate war veteran and he took the system putting it in the footnotes of a study Bible so that people could read it there with the idea that if you couldn't make head or tail of what the Bible said you could try and read the footnotes making it clearer. He made the system popular. Then Hal Lindsay picked it up and wrote a book The Late Great Planet Earth and made headlines to The New York Times and Washington Post. Then

these writers of Left Behind novels. (Showing PowerPoint timeline on what the system looks like just to give a sense.) A good place to actually start is in Daniel 9 where he talks about the unfolding history of Israel one period after another until you finally get to the end of the age. He continues to talk about these weeks of years/periods that continue to unfold all the way down to the point in which he talks about the anointed one being cut off and the city of Jerusalem being destroyed. Darby said that what happened there in Daniel 9:26 is that all these prophecies were being fulfilled, down to the time of Christ and after Jesus was crucified, (and then the Romans came and destroyed the city of Jerusalem a few decades later), what God did was to act like a referee at a basketball game; He called timeout. And that image is helpful because the whole notion with a referee calling time out with a big clock actually means life does not stop; we get up to get a soda, popcorn, go to the bathroom, the players visit with the coaches and life goes on. But what everybody is waiting on is for the referee to call time in and the clock to start moving with the rest of the game to be played. That is what happens according to the system, is that God has called time out of the last 2,000 years and not fulfilled any prophecies. That's a long pause in a game. So what we are waiting for is that God will call time in so that the last few years and the great cosmic clock of prophecy will play themselves out. How will we know that? According to Darby you've got to jump between chapters in the Bible (showing the PowerPoint timeline and reading it very quickly.) Darby said in Daniel 9 you get the great prophecy of the end of the world, Matthew 24 with the great rising of the beast connecting that with the anti-Christ (one world government) which is usually identified with the United Nations or European Union, etc...! All of which accumulates in Revelation 19 which is the battle of Armageddon, etc...! Questions before we go on?

Laugh! This is the simplified version you understand. Laugh! That is the system upon which the popular Revelation books are based. Now I don't want to go into more detail on this system but at this point what's important is to pause for a second and consider where do we go from here. Because as I am looking for this the overall question that comes to mind is what happens if a few of those pieces are in the wrong order and the whole system changes if you got a few out of place? So I begin to wonder what would happen if, instead of bouncing around from Daniel to 1 Thessalonians and back to Daniel then over to Revelation, we simply read Revelation? You're giving me a real blank look. Laugh! Does this sound really weird to you? Okay, if your willing to read Revelation as a whole then your going to be doing a couple of really important things; your going to be doing something Lutherans do not do (which is read Revelation at all), and your going to not be bouncing around pulling verses trying to connect them. Instead your just going to simply consider that John had something to say or needed to communicate, and if that is the case then why not just read what John has say with it being a book of its own integrity. And how do I give it a fair hearing? That is what we are after. So if you're asking me about where exactly the rapture happens I can't tell you because it is not in the book of Revelation, you've got to pull it in from someplace else. If you're willing to do that then let's take a look at Revelation itself.

It's the last book of the Bible and let's begin in chapter 1. *The revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show his servants what must soon take place.* That's probably enough for now. Laugh! The first couple of words; the revelation. It pays to pause because when you think about what is a revelation it is a form of communication. It is designed to communicate something to you and make something known to you. It's a way of

imparting something to you and that is what a revelation is designed to do. Now if you stop and just think about that it takes you to a radically different point than most people. So you ask what is the book of Revelation? And most people would say it is the hopelessly and convoluted book that nobody has ever been able to make head or tails of for the last 2,000 years. The trouble is that is not what John thought he was doing; he thought he was revealing something and communicating something. So I am assuming that is what Revelation is designed to do; communicate something to me. That John's got something he wants to make clear. That is a radical idea. Now after a little bit more introduction in chapter 1 there is a blessing in verse 3 (reading.) Blessed? I mean you're not supposed to be trembling in your boots and watching the world go up into flames thinking about the alienation of civilization as we know it. But rather if you read this book it's designed to be a blessing for you? Really? I think that is the case, but you sure would not know it by the way most people talk. Let's keep reading in verse 4 and see what John is giving us. (Reading, John to the Christians in North America...) Some of you have different text, is that right? Laugh! What does yours say? John to the seven churches that are in Asia... Oh, I guess I was just reading it the way most people read it! Interestingly you come across (understanding you are Bible scholars now) if your reading something like that it's from this person to that person consider where you normally find that in the Bible. It's in the letters; Paul to the church at Corinth 'grace to you and peace', Paul to the church at Philippi 'grace too you and peace', John to the seven churches in Asia 'grace to you and peace.' If you ask most whether Revelation is a letter what do you think they would say? No! But John thought he was writing a letter to actual living and breathing human beings within these congregations. The question is do we actually assume

he had something to say to them? In other words was John serious when he said, "To the seven churches that are in Asia." That he actually thought this would be meaningful? What a concept! Now what's more is that he is going to go on; if you read verses 9-11 you will see what he is to put on the envelope. The apparent idea was that this would actually be meaningful to breathing human beings living in congregations. Now does that take all the fun away? No! Does it make Revelation less interesting to think that it might have actually been meaningful to people from day one? Or might that actually make it more interesting! To think it was meaningful to people in congregations from day one. That is what John thought he was doing; giving them something meaningful. Let's read in verse 12 because as John is writing he is out there on the island of Patmos. It is the modern day of Turkey and the lay of the land then as John get his first vision which he reports to them in verse 12. Reading verse 12-13. (Showing a PowerPoint picture of a famous illustration of Revelation drawn by Albrecht Dooer and he lived in Luther's time about 500 years ago. Dooer did woodcuts in which he put Revelation into a vivid form. Luther cribbed a lot of these illustrations for his German Bible.) In verse 13, Son of Man who is he talking about? Jesus Christ. Was that hard to figure out? Okay, so far so good. Then he says there are seven golden lampstands and if you read down to the very last verse 20 you can figure out they represent churches. Now think a little bit about what John is giving us; if the big figure is Christ and the candleholders are lampstands are churches where is Christ in relationship to the churches? Center. Has this been real hard so far to figure out? So far you are doing great at interpreting Revelation I think! Sometimes interpretation is the science to the obvious and when you say where does Revelation start, you answer it starts with a vision of Christ who is present

among His churches. Is that fair enough? Is that the way most people talk about what Revelation is about? No they say it's all about distant asteroids hitting earth to destroy the end of the age, etc... But John says wait a minute we are going to start not with distant asteroids or plots from the Middle East (or something else like that), rather we are starting with Christ who is not absent, but present! With a Christ who is present among His churches and that is where the whole book starts...with Christ who is present among His people. It is so radically obvious that most people overlook it and yet it seems to be right there. John wants there to be no mistake; he's not getting on with anything else until he talks about this encounter with Christ who is present among His people. And what happens in the next chapters is that he is taking a look at things in the churches from Christ perspective. So in Revelation 2 and 3 John is taking a look at what's going on in the churches. Here we get this interesting sense of looking at what's going on with the people of God. Now there are seven of these churches and every one gets a paragraph or so in what follows. We are not going to have time to deal with all seven, but I'd like to take a look at a few to give you a feel for what is there and hope you read the rest on your own. Let's take three different kinds of churches here and start off with Smyrna in chapter 2 verse 8. Because here we find a church that is persecuted and if you ask most people what was going on when Revelation was written they will say persecution and Smyrna gives us a little glimpses into that. Reading verses 8-10. Persecution at Smyrna. And three elements in the persecution which seem to have been very typical for the first century; it started verbally and Christians are being denounced/slandered, then John warns some may be put in prison and then he says be faithful unto death.

Persecution in the first century. Now it's significant that the persecution started verbally; the Romans did not go door to door throughout the Roman Empire asking for Christians then hauling them off to the lions. They had other things to do such as fixing streets, etc. and were not interested in going door to door. On the other hand Christians were kind of odd ducks, which sounds strange to us because most of us are well adjusted human beings, but in the first century at least the church included a lot of folks who were odd or seen as odd because they didn't really fit because they weren't exactly Jewish because they had Jesus going on and the Romans just didn't buy it. But these folks were not exactly average Greeks either and in places like Smyrna Greeks were religious with lots of Gods/Goddesses for everyday of the week. And Christians said yes we know you've got Gods/Goddesses and we don't worship any of them. And so the Smyrnites thought oh perhaps a bunch of atheist. Christians were sometimes called atheist because they did not worship the Gods everybody else did. What's more Christians had this really annoying habit of calling Jesus Christ their Lord. Yahoo, talk about subversive! Jesus Christ as your Lord...really? Well we've already got a Lord and he sits on the throne in Rome and calls the shots/runs the world. You're saying you have a higher loyalty who has the ultimate claim on your faith and devotion? Sounded subversive to the Romans. What are you some kind of terrorists cell and strap explosives around walking in the local shopping center? We don't know what to make of you Christians? Your odd, weird and don't fit in. So sometimes they would be denounced as a bunch of misfits and hauled in to be put to death. That was persecution and it was happening here and there when Revelation was written. But there was different problems in other places and let me keep reading to just get a sense of what was going on there. Let's keep reading in verse 12 and go to

Pergamum briefly. Reading verses 12-13. So there had been persecution in the past, one person, but that was not the problem in the time when Revelation was written. Here is where He gets down to business, reading verse 14. Okay that is a mouth full; eating food sacrificed to idols. Let's start there because it's a problem that is hard for most of us to identify with I think. Why? Some of you may have a roast in the oven and were you really worried about whether it had been offered in sacrifice to Zeus when you picked up at the local grocery store? Do you ever do a background check on the chicken you buy and make sure it hasn't been offered in sacrifice? Probably not. But for early Christians that was just the tip of the iceberg and the big issue for them. This was the symptom of the issue; to what extent does your faith set you apart from a wider non-Christian culture? That was the issue and simulation is the word I use for it. I mean it's not that these early Christians were desperate to go running out to find something offered in sacrifice, buy and eat it. That eating food sacrificed to idols is just the way life was and the way things were in Pergamum. People in Pergamum loved to have a good time and it was just a sort of social thing to do; during the Year of Pergamum there would be lots of occasions where the whole town would get together for community festivals, etc. We can relate to that in Minneapolis/St. Paul with Winter Carnivals, Aquatennial, Lumberjack Days, etc. We do this! The whole thing is that people will turn out and have a fun time expecting everyone to show up. What you would find in Pergamum is that they would gather downtown and have a parade. Did you think we invented Hollidazzle...I mean they had parades way back then and loved them. So what would happen is you would find your way downtown to the heart of Pergamum and when you arrived you would know were close because of your nostrils. All you had to do was

breathe in to find barb-que grills from one edge of the city to the next with Zeus burgers. Smelling grease and onions farther than the Minnesota State Fair and this was going to be the greatest eating opportunity of the year courtesy of the great Zeus! Of course you've got speech makers, priest accepting offers and thinking let's just get on with it because the food is smelling fabulous! I mean I'm standing here under the banner thinking we give thanks to Zeus and waiting for a brat or something, thinking I really don't believe in any of this I'm just after the food...eating it anyway! Thinking, uhm, now I don't believe in Zeus and just after the food yet by doing this it sort of looks like I am believing giving mixed messages. I'm doing what I don't believe I should be doing yet everybody is doing it (and I want to be like everybody else.) Thinking it's so crummy yet everybody is doing it so what am I to do? Do you want faith to get in the way of your social life for goodness sake? That was the problem. And to what extent does your faith set you apart from a wider non-Christian culture? Let's go to the end of chapter 3 because we are running a little short on time. Reading verses 14-19. The problem in Laodicea is that life is not so bad, but that it was really pretty good. They were not worried about getting hauled off to the lions they had a really well diversified financial portfolio and doing well. I mean the stock market may have had its ups/downs but they were doing okay. They had a fairly low rate mortgage and planning to pay off the house and put the children through college perhaps doing some traveling. Life was okay at Laodicea and they wanted just a little religion of course, but just don't let it get too heated. I mean you get heated up and makes it uncomfortable; and that's no fun because being comfortable is what it's all about because that's what I've worked my whole life for. Thinking you want your faith to keep you comfortable too so keep it room temperature

neither cold nor hot. Not wanting to be uncomfortable and that was kind of the issues you see. Some Christians are really feeling up against it and some Christians have it way too easy and some are muddling along in between. My question is can you imagine Christians in the modern world ever having these kinds of issues? And if you can then Revelation is a book that still speaks. Revelation is a book for people who feel pressed, for those who are falling asleep feeling comfortable and everybody in between who is muddling along trying to figure out how to live as a person with integrity in a real messy world. If you can see yourself at any point along that spectrum then Revelation is a book for you. So the question is where does it take you? And there is where chapter 4 gives us an answer. Because instead of getting on to the dragon and beast 666 and international product codes along with everything else John says I've got somebody I want you to meet before we get onto the rest of it and He is God. Reading chapter 4 verses 1-6. What happens here is John really blows the lid off of the universe of these folks and says he will not let them live in a one-story universe where that all you see is those folks harassing, making life complicated, must keep happy, etc. What he does is blows their roof off the one-story universe and brings them into the presence of the living God. And that is a startling moment where you think wow if I'm feeling harassed that's pretty good news because you know there is a God who reigns, lives and made me and upholds me and that is really good news! And if your feeling just content and complacent then having the roof blown off your universe is really enough to startle you into thinking there is way more here than I every imagined. What is interesting is the passage keeps inviting and drawing us in. See the middle of verse 6 and 8 the living creatures sing. They sing, "Holy, holy, holy, the Lord God the Almighty, who was and is and is to come." Reading verses 9 and 10.

How many of you knew that when you sang “Holy, Holy, Holy” that you were doing Revelation 4? Well I think we’d better actually do the hymn. Singing!

I told you that I would share a few secrets and here is another really well kept one; there are lots and lots of Lutherans who don’t read the book of Revelation at all, but they sing it all the time. And they don’t even know it! Laugh! “Holy, Holy, Holy” is simply a paraphrase of Revelation 4 and anytime you’ve got people casting down crowns in any hymn you know your in Revelation 4 because it’s the only place in the Bible. It’s that kind of thing and what is so important is that Revelation is one of the most sung books in the Bible. The hymn writers are absolutely shameless when it comes to raiding it because they delve all the time. But I don’t object in the least because what happens is that when you join me in singing you are no longer just a spectator, you became a participant. You are no longer just watching what is happening in Revelation, you are doing the book. And when Revelation moves you from just being a spectator to a participant. When it moves you and draws you inviting you to the circle of those who gather around the throne who sings praise to the one true God and Lord of Heaven and earth, the God who created you and Hands who uphold you where you and your future rest. When Revelation moves you to sing praises to God the book is having the effect for which it was written. There maybe points in our study of Revelation where you think you didn’t get the point or maybe didn’t quite understand getting a little confused all you need to do is close your eyes and sing a verse of “Holy, Holy, Holy” thinking I might have missed that point but I got this; that when Revelation moves me here to the presence of God who made me causing me to lift my voice and praise to Him the book is doing what its meant. You’ve got a good starting point

from which to read the rest of Revelation, and will have to keep singing in the weeks ahead to be sure because there are a lot more songs! If some of you want to study along I wrote a book to go with this course we did the first couple of chapters today. Next week will be looking at Revelation chapters 5-7. I'll look forward to seeing you the next few weeks ahead!

Applause!