

Revelation
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Good morning! As we are starting let's begin with a word of prayer. Gracious God we come before you as you have called through the gospel. We pray that as we listen to the witness of the book of Revelation that its witness to Jesus Christ and him crucified may resound loud and clear for us. We pray that through the message of this book and the life giving power it has that you would instill new faith in each one of us. For we ask it in Jesus' name, amen.

Last week we introduced the study with looking at the popular stuff on Revelation with the books written about it. Today I thought I'd like to take a couple of minutes and talk about the Lutheran take on the book of Revelation. I know that when you've been doing Bible study here you've also been doing stuff on Lutheran theology/heritage, and today is Reformation Sunday. So I thought then we should at least talk about what Martin Luther had to say about Revelation and what we have within our own heritage in terms of reading it. Because so often I hear 'didn't Luther say, etc.' and I'm thinking that he probably did but it's not all he said. It's amazing what Luther in fact did say and some things people don't know about what he said. I'd like to give you a take on Luther's approach to the book of Revelation; and if you ever want to know what he thought well he was a Bible translator. And we celebrate Reformation Sunday near October 31 because that's when he nailed the '95 Thesis' to the church door in Wittenberg and started this reform in the church. Well as things began getting heated up after that (since Luther was a Bible teacher and he would

read scripture finding discrepancies with what was going on in the church and reading in scripture) and he kept going back to the Bible and pretty soon the conflict with Roman Catholic authorities grew quite intense with Luther eventually endangered. He was then placed in hiding and began writing Bible translating in the Wartburg Castle in Germany. Since he was hiding he had time on his hands to consider translating the Bible...I mean that's what you do in your free time I imagine. Laugh! That's what Luther was doing in his free time, translating the Bible. And when he did this he also put study notes in his Bible translating it into German so that people could read it for themselves and also put little introductions to various books in it; giving people clues as to what to read. Now as he was doing this things were happening in his home parish in Wittenberg; turbulence and chaos with the exciting idea that there would be a reformation of the church. Some people were going to extremes and thinking the end of the world was coming; getting direct messages from God through the Holy Spirit coming up with new prophecies that sounded flaky. And Luther said oh good Heavens. Now when he got the book of Revelation and being aware that people were sort of going off the deep end with some of this then he thought if that's what we are going to find then it's a good thing Revelation is at the end of the Bible. So this is often what people have heard Luther doing and saying about Revelation. In 1522 Luther wrote a preface to Revelation and it was his first attempt to do it and he said, "About this book with the Revelation to John I leave everyone free to hold their opinion but I miss more than one thing in this book; it makes me consider it to be neither apostolic nor prophetic." He goes on to complain about all the visuals/imagery in the book and says, "Why couldn't John, if really a prophet, give it to us straight!" But then Luther concludes, "My spirit can

not accommodate itself to this book and for this its reason enough to not think highly of it. Christ is neither taught nor known in it.” That was his resounding judgment on it in 1522; if your looking for Jesus don’t read this. Wow! Now of course what is interesting, and most people don’t know, is did that mean Luther totally wrote the book off? Well, not exactly and what is interesting is that if you flip the pages you’d find, interestingly, in Luther’s Bible of 1522, it was the only book he illustrated. So if you like to look at the pictures this is the book. Now last time I showed you a picture of Revelation 1 where you’ve got the majestic picture of Christ center with John in the front and seven golden lampstands representing the churches. It was drawn by Albrecht Durer and it was his most famous one done in 1498. Well Luther got his own artist and Chronike was his name. Chronike shamelessly stole Albrecht’s ideas with one little change of John bowing down instead of kneeling, and that’s what appeared in the Luther Bible. And he went page after page illustrating the book of Revelation. And what made it so cheeky is when you got to the great Harlot on the Beast; horror of Babylon riding on the seven headed beast. We are going to get to her in about two weeks. What’s interesting is on Harlot’s head is the Papal crown. So he doesn’t leave you any question as to whom is the great Harlot riding on the Beast; you’d look in Rome and find it! Laugh! So that became some adding fuel to the fire. As the next few years moved on Luther did something remarkable; he decided to give Revelation another try and he went back to read Revelation again. Now can you imagine to actually read something twice to get the hang of it? Laugh! In 1530 he wrote another preface that went on for page after page, etc. And this time with an entirely different thought on it; instead of dismissing the book he decided to try and decode it. I don’t know if this was a better idea because what he did was to

try and make a link between everything he was reading in Revelation with here you've got some horrible angel pouring plagues on earth and say that was some heretic back in the ancient church and there we've got origin with a philosopher/theologian who corrupted the gospel with philosophy. And then we get Arias who was corrupting the notion of who Christ was saying he was a creature and not fully divine. And then he would go on all the way through coming down the great Beast of course finding that to be the equivalent to the Papacy. You've find Gaug and Maguag (the great adversaries) coming roaring their way to do battle and Luther said those must be the Turks because the Turkish armies were rolling their way to Vienna. Figuring if you've got this Gaug/Maguag they must be the armies of our day. So he went through the whole book with this elaborate decoding of Revelation and you think perhaps Luther would have done better to just leave it alone. Laugh! But that is where it gets really interesting; after he has gone through this long convoluted attempt to try and decode it and as I'm reading my copy of Luther's preface there is a little blank line and then a few paragraphs at the end of this preface. I think that blank line is really important because it says catch your breath and now let's take one more look at what is almost a third attempt to read it. And when Luther read it one more time and commented on it he finally gets down to cases. It's sort of after all this convoluted attempt to decode it I suppose you are wondering what it's all about. Yes indeed, can you tell me what is the bottom line? Luther said it was a great question and that Revelation is good for two things; comfort and warning. Comfort and warning? This is the Luther I know. He says, "Are there warnings in the book? Of course because it talks about the powers of evil working in the world that even infiltrate the church that also seek to undermine our faith and corrupt it; to take us away from the

God who has created us and the Christ who has redeemed us. The book of Revelation lifts it up so that we can see them.” But then he also says there is the second thing which is that Revelation is book of comfort and so in his final sentences here is what he wrote. Luther said, “If only the word of the gospel remains pure among us and we love it and cherish it, we shall not doubt Christ is with it even when things are at there worst. As we see here in this book that through and beyond all plaques, beasts and evil angels that Christ is nonetheless with His saints and wins the final victory.” That was Luther’s parting shot and if anyone ever ask you what did he think about Revelation this is it; through all plagues Christ is with His saints and wins the final victory. And you see what happened to Luther is that in his first preface saying Christ is neither taught or known in it not finding Him in the book. In his second preface he said that no indeed it’s all about Christ and it took him two tries to get there. I find that encouraging. Luther did not find Christ the first time...he gave it another try and the second reading he said that he missed what Revelation was all about, which was Christ. Now will have to see and test this out...what he right. As we get into the book will have to see if that holds up.

Last time we noted in our own reading of the first chapter and found the picture of Christ present among the churches. That is where Revelations begins. Then in Revelations 2-3 we took a look at ourselves before moving onto the beast. So we look at church after church after church, etc... saying what is going on because we find some struggling, falling asleep, some muddling along in between finding every church facing challenges of some kind which may not be so different than what we face today. So then in chapter 4 we are taken into the presence of God; before John takes us any further we are brought into the presence of God where you have the hosts

around the throne singing ‘Praise to the One true God, Lord of Heaven and earth, the God who brought all things into being.’ We were singing, ‘Holy, Holy, Holy, Lord God Almighty’ which was nothing more than a paraphrase of Revelation 4! And as we continued to make our way we took a look at who is God, who is Christ and who we are. Now there are lots of other hymns based on this chapter so maybe that is where we will pick up. The hymn ‘Love Divine All Loves Excelling’, does that ring a bell? Yes. Did you know it was a shameless paraphrase of Revelation? See, last week I told you I would reveal these secrets to you and that’s one. Laugh! The last two verses of this song ‘praising God above’ is what they are doing in Revelation 3 and 4. And then ‘till we cast our crowns before Thee’, anytime anybody is casting crowns in any hymn ever composed in the history of the planet you are in Revelation 4! That is the one place it occurs in the Bible. So when you are singing that, that is your cue where you are in the book of Revelation. Let’s take a look at these verses and then will move ahead in Revelation 5. Singing, “Come Almighty to deliver...”

We find now in Revelation 5:1, reading. That’s enough for the moment. Laugh! We’ve got a picture of God seated on the throne with a scroll in His hand. And presumably that scroll says something important; presumably it’s the Will of God and why He would hold it (written on the front and back.) The question is going to be in verse 2 (reading.) In other words who is worthy to take that scroll and open it up; make the Will of God known? That is where we are in the story. Who is worthy to let us know what it is in the scroll because for goodness sakes I want to know what is the will of God! I mean we seem to be living in a planet that is spinning out of control, so God what is Your Will for us/for the world...please who is worthy to make the Will of God known? When whenever you’ve got a major question

like that what do Lutherans do? Form a committee. Laugh! So they conduct a global search in order to find the right person for the position. Reading verse 3. The search committee came up blank. If any of you who have been at this point in a committee know you really feel bummed out at this. It's crummy and John says the same in verse 4, reading. We are left here then wondering what the Will of God is and who is worthy to make it known; how are we supposed to know if no one can disclose it to us. Reading in verse 5, and discovering encouragement. It's an important moment in the book of Revelation because when this elder introduces hope/promise of the Lion of the tribe of Judah he does so using picture language. Its worth asking about because will be meeting a lion and that gets us to thinking about the characteristics. They are fierce, strong, mighty and powerful. And fall into the animal kingdom as King of the Beast. All of your grandchildren know this with Disney's The Lion King; you've seen it with images of power/might. So we don't miss the point it's the Lion of the tribe of Judah; a lion is a mighty figure, Judah is the royal tribe (David's tribe and one of which all the kings would come) and the Root of David (David was the mightiest of kings and one who the Messiah was supposed to come, etc.) It's really a pictorial summary of the Old Testament hope; the coming of the Lion of the tribe of Judah. Now what is important here is this is what John has heard about, this Lion and what he wants to do is get a good look at the Lion because he hasn't seen him yet. Reading verse 6. "Then I saw" are key words. He saw what? A Lamb. I mean is this a typographical error in the Bible? John was looking for a Lion turns and sees a Lamb standing as if it had been slaughtered. Now you start thinking then the characteristics of a lamb; gentle and innocent. What were lambs used for in the Bible? Sacrifice and you've got that here. This is a huge problem

because John was looking for a ruler with great big strength, power, might and would come in with a great big roar in order to overcome his foes! He turns and what does he see, “Meeeee” (making the sound of a lamb.) Laugh! I mean this is crazy stuff, but okay who is he talking about? Jesus Christ. Yes, was this real hard to figure out? No. Okay so this far has Revelation been hopelessly difficult to interpret? No. But this is the interesting point in the story because John hears about the Lion, but what he sees is the Lamb. So who is Jesus then the Lion or the Lamb? Both. Yes and this does things to your mind you know; I mean is Jesus the one who God’s promises are fulfilled and is Jesus the one who God’s sends to rule with strength, power and might? Yes. And how does He come to rule with strength, power and might? How is the power of God unleashed? Through Jesus own self sacrifice; the power of God is unleashed through the death of His Messiah. The power of God and the way in which God builds His kingdom and unleashes power is through the death of the Lamb. The question is not whether He will keep the promise, but it’s how He will keep it. God keeps the promise of the Lion by sending the Lamb because it will be precisely through the death of Christ that the power of God is revealed as the self giving love of God and that will be the way in which the kingdom of God is built. From this point on in Revelation Lamb is the principle way in which Christ is identified. Again and again, Christ is the Lamb and it takes back to this point in the book. We find that when we realize that it’s through the death of Christ that the power of God is unleashed, we find that the Lamb now goes and takes the scroll in verse 7. Reading verses 8, 9 and 10. Yes that is the way God’s kingdom is built; through the love that comes to human beings through the death of the Lamb. That is the power of God’s love and how it builds the kingdom of God. When you realize this then in

verses 11 and 12 (reading/singing) you are aware that some of you have been memorizing Revelation. Laugh! So when you are singing this, I mean did you know you were singing Revelation 5? There are other hymns too. Reading verse 14. So far we've read five chapters of Revelation and do you realize that? We've been taking a look at who God is, who Christ is and who we are. Does that sound different than some of the popular media stuff on Revelation? I mean we are reading the book aren't we...I mean if we never made it any further we'd still have a pretty good idea of what Revelation is all about. But I'd suppose we'd better keep reading because we have quite a way to go.

In chapter 6 now the seals are going to be opened and we are going to get a series of seven of them. This takes us through some challenging images. Reading verses 1-2. Let me use another PowerPoint illustration by Durer which can help us talk about what we are reading. We've got these four horsemen and it's interesting that when we come to this vision and the apocalypse (its one of the more famous visions in the book) it's a question of how we read this. When you are reading something like Left Behind its very clear about how you are supposed to read the Bible; it will say that we must read literally, literally, literally. Now these four horsemen are symbols of course and I'm thinking how interesting that we have to read it literally yet this is symbolic. Thinking more yes this is probably right because not even the most literistic interpreters assume that we are waiting for CNN to pick up these four horsemen in camera. I mean I say that because sometimes its well you folks read it literally and we read it metaphorically or something. That is absolutely not true; that even the most literistic interpreters of Revelation say these are symbols. That nobody is waiting for CNN to go down to someplace like Washington D.C. having an excited reporter filming a man

charging a white horse on Pennsylvania Avenue. I mean nobody is waiting for this. Laugh! Everybody assumes the four horsemen represent things. The question is not whether they are symbolic, its what they symbolize. That is the issue and now I suppose the best place to start is by asking what do they say? He came out conquering and we assume the horseman came to conquer. That's an interesting place to start and here I think Durer can actually help us. Durer illustrated these in a way that is not only interesting drawing, but fabulous Bible reading. You will notice he has four horsemen and the first one (mentioned first) has a bow and its one drawn farthest away from you (and the one in the back.) I think that is exactly right because conquest is what happens at the border; it's where you get one Nation overrunning the borders of another Nation and it happens out there. And in this vision it raises this unsettling question about how secure are you in terms of your own Nations borders/people? Then in the drawing things come a step closer to you. Let's read verses 3-4. So that people would slaughter one another. Durer's second drawn horseman has to do with the violence that people do to one another and it just doesn't leave the issue out there at the border, rather it has to do with violence that people do to one another and brings it a step closer. Intruding a little closer and you start thinking wow, what would all of this had meant for people back in John's time? John's readers and those seven churches were living in the most powerful Nation on the planet, the Roman Empire. Rome had the biggest military budget, sophisticated technology and advanced tactics. And you think then why would they be worried about conquest? Perhaps was it because they felt so secure or was it because they maybe didn't. This is what the first horseman does is to raise the questions of our security, really. The second horseman with the violence upon each other allows the threat to

come more closely. Would people back in John's time ever worry about violence? Were there places streets in Pergumum where you'd rather not have your children going unless a parent was with? Were there things that happened? What is the violence that people do to one another? This brings us the third horseman and the one moving largest, in Durer's drawing, in the center of the picture. I'm reading verses 5-6. In the drawing you can see that he is holding scales in his hand and normally we think of the criminal justice system. For people in John's time the scales were found in the marketplace because you wanted to buy so much grain, etc. and weigh it first. Its saying we've got a vision of economic insecurity; the threat of economic insecurity. Because its not absolute starvation and you find there is still food on the shelves, but its going to cost you a day's pay. So the end of the day you get your pay going down to the marketplace and it costs you every dollar to buy a quart of wheat. Now if you picture that quart of wheat and think about taking it home to grind up perhaps to make bread. I'm sure some of you are better bread makers than I am so how many loaves could you make? 1 or 3. I guess it depends upon how big the loaf is, but you'd probably make enough that you wouldn't absolutely starve. I'm sure you wouldn't have to go to Weight Watchers very often on this diet. I mean who cares if there is olive oil and wine on the shelf you can't afford it anyway just to put bread on the table. That is that threat of economic insecurity. (Pause.) Did people in John's time every worry about that? Did the people of Smyrna ever worry about putting bread on the table; losing their pay, worry about inflation and food shortages? Were those threats real for them? And that brings us to the fourth horseman and its probably not the one your going to see ride off because when I look at this picture I always see the horseman in the middle (in perhaps shows that Durer was a good

psychologist) because when it comes right down to it what do most people worry about more than anything? Money and food. But then there is also this other one and comes right up in front in the picture, it's the horseman that represents death. Let's keep reading, verses 7-8. The horse of a different color and you think about pale green...it's probably been lingering too long. In the drawing Durer has this horseman named Death below the black horse and now Hades is following. It's this creature with the large mouth coming into the picture. You will find places in the Old Testament where it will talk about Sheol. It's the Hebrew name and Hades is the Greek name. It talks about the realm of the dead; Sheol has opened wide its mouth. The prophets will often say. So Sheol is this great monster/creature that swallows up everybody because finally here you've got some sort of king/noble being swallowed up and it doesn't matter if you're rich or poor because death comes to all. So what happens again and again the threats come a little closer raising the prospects one after the other asking these disturbing questions; how secure are you as a Nation, how secure are you in terms of safety, how secure are you in terms of your abilities to make a living, how secure are you in terms of your life and health? One after another these questions keep stripping away these pretensions that things are fine in the world, etc. These horsemen keep saying, oh really! They are disturbing images and do they represent things that are real? Are the threats real? Were they real for people of John's time? Did those people worry about safety, economy and death? Sure and they are real for people of our time. Do Americans every worry about National Security? Do any of you ever worry about the economy? Do you ever hear candidates talking about this in the National campaigns? No. Do any of you every worry about death? Yes. What these visions do in stripping pretensions and as you

continue to read in chapter 6 things just get more intense, let's read to the end of the chapter. I mean who can stand this stuff? Do you see that again in the last verse? Who can stand? It's a question you're going to ask if you've been tracking with everything that's been said throughout this whole chapter. Threat after threat who can stand in the face of such things? For people of John's time and our's the threats are real and what Revelation is vividly show them so we can see that who can stand. It's at this point that something remarkable happens; we've had 6 seals opened and there is 1 to go. As people now are asking the question 'who can stand' it's as if we can't think of opening another seal because it's a good question. If you're asking a good question then you deserve a good answer. John continues in chapter 7, reading verse 1. In other words cut the earthquakes, sunamies, hurricanes and tornadoes...hold it! Reading verses 2-3. In other words stop the destruction we have people to claim/seal/protect...don't go any further with this because there are those that must be redeemed. Reading verse 4. The 144,000 who are they of course? The Jehovah's Witnesses. Laugh! Sorry for you folks. Laugh! Its interesting with this number because its one of those famous numbers. Do you remember that whole thing with David Koresh in Waco, Texas and you find other groups who have tried to do this. What is interesting at this point is what most people don't realize is that when your reading Revelation is that this is actually your first pop quiz to see if you're paying attention. You didn't know you'd be quizzed? Has John seen the 144,000? What does it say in verse 4? I heard. Has he seen them yet? What's interesting is that John is hearing about the 144,000 who are going to be redeemed and claimed out of every tribe of the people of Israel and the promise of redeeming. He wants to get a good look at them and see what happens with the language in verse 9. Reading. How many

people were in it? No one count them. Where did they come from? All nations. It's the same kind of thing that we saw earlier where John heard about the Lion and how God will keep the promise of the Lion by sending the Lamb because that's the way in which the power of God will be unleashed. John hears the promise by redeeming the 144,000 of the 12 tribes; the question is not whether God will keep the promise, but how. Will God save 144,000? Yes. Will He stop there? No. Will He save them of the 12 tribes? Yes. Will He stop there? No. I mean God is on a roll for goodness sake! I mean why not save some of the tribes of the New Zealanders, Australians, Norwegians, Swedes and French? I mean maybe some Canadians and Americans are in there...the possibilities are endless! That we've got a countless multitude from every tribe, tongue and nation who is brought before the throne of God. It talks about the way in which the power and death of the Lamb calls every person of every nation to find life in Him, and a future in the presence of God. That's what all this is about. This vision of 144,000 is really an expansive vision of what is the magnitude for whom Christ died, and when you realize that in chapter 7:10-12, reading. Amen! We are back in the Heavenly throne room and we need to sing again realizing that is where we've been going. There are lots of hymns based on Revelation 7 and this one "Are you servants of God your Master proclaim" which maybe familiar to some. Singing. And only when you've gotten the sense of the redemptive power of God and the Lamb can we open the seventh seal. Chapter 8, verse 1 (reading.) We don't have that in our handout so I will trust you will do that on your own sometime this week. But that is where it brings us back to; once you've gotten the vision of the redemptive power of God and the Lamb the whole series ends with a graceful and worshipful silence.

We've made our way quickly through 7 chapters with a pretty good sense of how the book is moving. Next week will move to the center parts of the book looking at the dragon and beast, etc. So if you want to read ahead, will be especially in Revelation 12 and 13 next week. If you want copies of the study book, Revelation and the End of All Things that goes along with the course we have copies available to purchase. I look forward to seeing you then! Applause!