



God's Song of Revelation: From Easter to Pentecost in the Apocalypse*

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A committee of interested people got together to look at six lectionary texts for the season of Easter.* Our first concern turned out to be: Will many take a second look at them? After all, they are from Revelation, and the majority of our subscribers are from mainline churches. And we know how these churches have avoided the Apocalypse of St. John. We wondered: Might it not be better to work on an article that would get some use? Well, we do want what we have worked on to be of use and so we begin with a kind of apologetic: We agreed that we think you ought to consider preaching on these texts this year.

WHY PREACH ON THESE TEXTS?

Why? First of all, because it will be a challenge. True, the familiar Gospel of St. John would require less effort. You already know what you need to know of the background. The rich imagery there is common ground for you and your hearers. Revelation, though, will probably force you to drag out some little-used volumes from your library to re-orient yourself into the strange but wonderful world of this late first-century seer. You are fortunate if you possess the now out-of-print *The Last Book of the Bible* by Hans Lilje (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg, 1957) which our group agreed is a classic. It was written by a German pastor,

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later bishop, whom Hitler imprisoned in World War II. A recent well-written popular commentary is *Revelation for Today* by Richard Jeske (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983). For something more comprehensive we agreed that George Caird's *A Commentary on the Revelation of St. John the Divine* (New York: Harper & Row, 1966) is excellent. Even the section on Revelation in a one-volume commentary like *Peake's* or *Jerome* will be helpful as will a Bible dictionary for researching the imagery.

But there may be more substantive reasons why you ought to consider preaching on at least some of these texts. The days in which we are living cause lots of people to ask: Who's in control of this world anyway? Is God involved? Revelation was written to people whose world was falling apart. Their faith was challenged, undermined, denied, even forbidden. In response,

the living Christ called the author to address them with words of assurance. People in harsh circumstances have over the centuries found themselves understood and upheld by John the Seer. His calls for faith and faithfulness seem to strike responsive chords in distressed saints. You too know people who are trying to make sense of the difficult world in which they are living. Revelation addresses this issue perhaps better than any other biblical book. Some of the people of our parishes who are having the hardest time of it are already interested in this book. They may even wonder why their church is so strangely silent about it when others are so confidently saying what it means. Without an alternative they may be drawn to look at Revelation as essentially a book of predictions of twentieth century events. We have the opportunity of helping people make better sense of the book than that, a sense which will not have to be revised when current events suddenly shift.

Revelation is proclamation, not prediction, we agreed, So it lends itself quite naturally to the pulpit. It addresses the church's new life in the risen Christ, precisely what we will want to be talking about in the Easter season. We find our liturgy and songs to be full of the language of Revelation. You have the opportunity of reinforcing that in the sermon. Such preaching will evoke response from deep down in the hearers. It will be appreciatively received, we think. Easter is our most glorious Holy Day. We need to do our most creative, inspiring preaching during this season. We will want to pull out all the stops and orchestrate our message as beautifully, as powerfully, as we can. The texts from Revelation provide the platform from which to launch something memorable.

Another way of going about one's Easter season preaching would be to utilize both the Gospel of John and the Revelation texts. They are appointed to be read together during this season. While we do not think that they were authored by the same person, there are close connections in their themes and theologies. The communities which produced them must have had a relationship. In our discussions quite a few common themes surfaced. Both books introduce us to a host of titles for Christ in the first chapter. In both, Christ tents (dwells) among his people, is the Lamb of God who is slain but who is also the Good Shepherd. He is also the exalted Lord who wins his victory and is exalted from his cross. If the same themes do not show up in the two texts chosen for the day, they can easily be found via concordance.

POINTS OF CONTACT WITH REVELATION

In the two hours our committee spent together we came upon a good number of points where John seems to address us so naturally. We have already alluded to the way he speaks to people whose world is falling apart. Our circumstances are hardly identical with those his people experienced. Few Christians in our Western world find themselves singled out for persecution just because they are Christians. But other pressures and feelings of powerlessness in the face of hostile forces may have the same effect. Our culture tends to force values on us which are alien to the gospel, so that calls for faithfulness and self-sacrifice sound like they are coming from another world. Yet the distinctively Christian witness of people like Mother Theresa echoes the message of the Apocalypse. The living Christ is walking among the churches looking for just such conduct, just such evidences of love and service. John's way of addressing fearful people, dispirited saints, is with gentleness and hope. All the power they will ever need to be victorious in their struggles against their enemies is offered them in the Lamb's presence with them.

John's is not an escapist theology. He knew that his people might well face martyrdom. But their suffering and their faithfulness have meaning. They are a witness to the suffering love of the Lamb. It is this proclamation, this witness, which wins the victory. It may be that some of the most fascinating chapters—those which portray a beast rising up out of the sea or bowls of wrath being poured out—have been bypassed. But the good news of Revelation is well represented in the texts chosen. We are opposed to using the Apocalypse for scare-tactical purposes. Its basic message is one of comfort and assurance. Then people who have been assured of Christ's power and love can be called to heroic faith. When they see the true character of the Lamb as contrasted with that of the dragon there is no choice between them. The empty promises of political and economic powers can be seen for what they are. Our seer lets us in on the inner workings of the demonic world as well as of the heavenly world. Without such help we just might get fooled, but no more. John's scroll is very clear on this point. The Lamb who was slain is alive and victorious. The world's empires and tyrants are on their way to oblivion.

The conflict between God and satanic forces is for real. No mock battles these. Holy war which is such a continuing biblical theme is one way of talking about it. The books of Joshua and Judges in particular introduce us to Yahweh's victories over his and Israel's enemies. In Revelation the enemy is no longer the pharaoh or the Canaanites but a world empire and its provincial ruler plus demonic forces which manipulate them. With our world view we may have problems with either the identification of the supra-historical power, Satan and his fallen angels, or with deciding who the Babylon of our day is. Addressed as it is to the powerless, the Apocalypse can hardly serve as comfort to either of the super-powers of our era. Neither the USA nor the USSR comes off very well when measured by the criteria of justice and self-sacrificing love. But this book has a message for those whom these powers oppress. Nationally we can hardly claim to be the good guys we thought we were. There may be more than one message for us, depending upon which of our several corporate existences is addressed.

We talked too about preaching law and gospel and decided that preaching the one or the other isn't something one can plan. It is not easy to tell how a given person or audience is going to perceive a portion of or a whole sermon. We must be content to be faithful to the text and then leave the impact up to the Holy Spirit. In any case, it will hardly do to try to deliver ten minutes of law followed by ten minutes of gospel or some other proportion. What may be good news to one person or congregation may well be threatening to another. Those who are suffering through some tribulation should hear Christ's presence with them as gospel. Yet, like the souls under the altar, they may well ask regarding their tribulation: "How long?" (6:10).

Finally, we agreed that Revelation is intended to be addressed to communities more than to individuals. If each person only worries about being saved without regard for others, then the message which has been communicated is a kind of sanctioned selfishness. The desire to be "raptured" so as to escape the "Great Tribulation" is a kind of escapism which appeals to our natural selfishness. Unlike that, John was urging his congregations to imitate their Lord who gave himself in self-sacrificing love for the whole world. Faithfulness to him would involve many of his people in terrible suffering and martyrdom. That kind of living for each other is done in community, not in isolation. And it is in the community where the Lord promises to be present with his people.

Easter 2: The Living Presence of Christ in the Church, 1:4-18.

The church to which John addresses his message of hope does not consist merely of seven struggling first century congregations. Even in his day there were other neighborly flocks which were included, though not named, in spite of his choice of precisely seven of them. All saints, on earth and in heaven, present and future, as well as all nations of the earth, figure in this tremendous vision and proclamation. So we ought to have no hesitation in considering ourselves addressed.

What is said to us here? We are greeted by our loving, gracious, glorious Lord who is present with us and powerful for us now and forever. There are many dimensions to his life which we need to “see” and in which we can hope. He is the one whose blood was shed to save us, and so he is called the Lamb. But he is also dressed in garb which designates him as our high priest. In his earthly life Jesus witnessed to the Kingdom of God and to who he was, that is, the Christ. He was/is therefore the faithful witness (martyr). Now he is beyond death’s power to harm him. He is the first one to be raised from the dead with no further prospect of dying again. The one who is to be alive forever is the one who sends his greeting to his churches (1:4-8). They can expect to see him soon. But John’s message of grace and peace is from the Father and the Holy Spirit too, though in an idiom unique to him (“who is and who was and who is to come,” “the seven spirits before his throne,” 1:4).

As a seer John receives a call (1:9-11) somewhat like a prophet. But instead of being sent to preach, this time at least he will write a letter and an account of a vision. It may be that he is commissioned to write this letter-apocalypse because he is in exile on Patmos, and that, were he free to travel, he would have been

called to preach. On the other hand, an apocalypse is a written form, known from numerous examples outside the canon (4 Ezra, 1 Enoch, 2 Baruch, etc.) and one inside (Daniel). What John sees in his vision(s) suits the apocalyptic form very well, and his audience must have been experienced in understanding such writings. We are not, and so the one who preaches today has the opportunity of repainting the pictures for the modern audience. One aspect of this process of communication is easier for us to achieve. We know of people under internal banishment in Russia or forced resettlement in the homelands in South Africa. The way such people are able sometimes to get a message out to their friends resembles John’s success in sending his Apocalypse to the seven churches.

John’s initial vision (1:12-18) is a theophany, though it is a Christophany. The One he sees is human in form and clearly is Christ. But he has features which have, in other places in Scripture, been those of God. For example, “his head and hair were white as wool” (cf. Dan 7:9), and he says he is “the first and the last” (cf. Alpha and Omega, 1:8). John who saw this vision falls down faint from the experience. We are far too comfortable with Christ for such words to impress us very much, and our purpose in talking about it is not to try to frighten people into submission to the Lord. All this powerful imagery which John uses to describe the living Christ whom he has seen is not intended to create fear but hope. Our Lord is more powerful than any political figure of any day. The shows of strength which they make to cow people into obedience are nothing compared with the power which our Lord has displayed. We have nothing to fear from those who want to harm us. He walks even now among the churches. The saints who have passed on are in his hands. Heaven and earth are his domain. Our present and our future are his to

determine. John has seen him, and he has a kindly face.

Easter 3: The Song of the Lamb, 5:11-14.

What marvelous songs we have to sing at Easter! Many of the words go back to John's Revelation. Handel's "Messiah" is but one of them. Christians since the early church have been singing the praise of God who raised Jesus from the dead. But in Revelation 5 it is Christ himself who is worshipped. This is a bold step from the monotheism of the Jewish community. Other New Testament hymnic pieces and liturgies probably paved the way for John's extravagant words in praise of Christ. Did he only hear them in the heavenly world, or were they being sung already in his seven churches? John knew well those who forbade such worship. Political figures who took themselves with ultimate seriousness resented any loyalties their subjects might have to others. Yet John encourages his people to praise the Lamb. It may be dangerous, but it is fitting. In his vision he has seen what ultimately shall be. Universal praise of Christ from the lowest beast to the highest angel is on the way. Heaven (beyond space) and eternity (beyond time) are already filled with the worship of the Lamb who was slain. Since neither space nor time any longer pertains outside the physical universe, his vision has already become reality among the angels. Representatives of the saints too are at worship beside God's throne. Further, the whole created order, which so sadly now groans in suffering because of "the fall" (Rom 8:22), likewise will praise Christ once it has been set free. Already four

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representative living creatures are there (cf. Ezek 1). What they sing are songs variously composed of snatches and pieces of earlier hymns (cf. Ps 98). But there are brand new elements: what was previously reserved for Yahweh is now also shared with the Lamb. What once was sung by Israel alone is now the joy of all the nations. John may well have witnessed the way gentiles were filling the ranks of his congregations. It is the church's priestly task to rehearse the songs and to teach them to the nations so they too may sing to the Lord. The Lamb's blood has purchased for God people of every nation, tribe, tongue, and color. So even now they may sing together about the Lamb and to the Lamb.

The two songs of our text contain seven specific contents. Four have to do with acknowledging what Christ's sacrificial love has already won: power, wealth, wisdom, and might. Any king worth his salt was praised for these qualities in the ancient world. David and Solomon were. They had demonstrated these qualities to their subjects and to their enemies. But the Christ whose kingdom is not of this world (John 18:36) does not exert coercive power as they did. He displays wisdom which this world considers foolishness (1 Cor 1:18-27). And what have we seen of Christ's wealth in this world's sense of the word (Luke 18:25; 2 Cor 8:9; Rev 2:9)? The latter three contents of the song (honor, glory, and blessing) are really the attitudes and recognitions of the worshippers. In our day considerably greater numbers sing their songs of praise than in John's day. Yet the exploding population of the world is outstripping our capacity to teach the nations the song.

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Not included in our text, but in the context of chapters five and six, is the sealed scroll

which only the Lamb is worthy to unseal. He is worthy because he is the victorious Davidic King (the lion) and the sacrificial Lamb. A resounding song welcomes the discovery of one who is worthy to unseal the scroll. But when the scroll is unrolled it is found to contain not only good news. As one seal after another is broken, a bitter tune is played out on a cosmic scale. Judgments of human and superhuman evil shake heaven and earth. They must happen if God's redemption of the world is to take place. So, God be praised! At long last the reasons for which the cosmos and humans were created will be achieved. So, sing a new song to the One who made it possible! The song is being taught. Any who are willing may sing. It is not being forced. Any who will not, cannot even learn it (14:3). It must come from the heart of those who have experienced the Lamb's salvation.

Easter 4: The Song of Victory, 7:9-17.

This text, like the previous one, is full of singing. But this time it is not angels but the saints who are involved, thousands and thousands of them. An angel's question helps to clarify the situation for us. It seems that, in advance of their persecution and martyrdom, John sees and hears the triumphant heavenly choir made up of the very members of his churches he loves and misses so much. He thus learns that his encouragement of them to be faithful in their time of trial will succeed. They need to hear that too! By putting the words on his scroll for them these beleaguered folk can even now set to music and sing the hymn they ultimately will be singing in the heavenly world.

The fierce battles raging as God seeks to secure his reign over the anti-godly forces in this world catch Christians in the crossfire. True, God's involvement in history is via the self-sacrificing love of the Lamb, but it is also by way of war, murder, famine, and death—things which God permits to stalk the earth (the four horsemen, 6:1-8). Our text is but an interlude (7:1-17) in the seven seals cycle whose horrible events, both happening and yet to take place, are portrayed (6:1-8:1). Tenses and sequences are difficult to follow in such a scheme as this. Are heavenly realities already what they will be, or are they only so certain to take place that they can already be "seen" by one gifted with special sight? Some who have died are already in God's presence, but in the year 95 it is doubtful that they are so many as to be innumerable.

We too address congregational members who will one by one eventually join the heavenly choir. Some will be there quite soon, some even sooner than they expect. Christians are already among those purchased for God (5:9), but it is not yet clear that they will be faithful until death to the One who is faithful and true to them (3:14; 19:11). Testings of various kinds have yet to determine that. But we now know that many saints will make it to glory and a place in the heavenly choir. There the choir gowns are all white because they have been washed in the blood of the Lamb. No one will make it into the ranks of the choir on the basis of talent or accomplishment. Yet they must have, through God's help, remained faithful in this world's struggles for their loyalty. That is why there is so much encouragement to be faithful in the letters to the seven churches (chapters 2-3).

The most difficult ordeal for the faithful will come at the very end of time, John tells us. Did he live in the last times? Do we? In some circles those times have received a technical name, "The Great Tribulation." Followers of John Darby and now of the Scofield Bible believe that true

Christians will be “raptured” so as to escape all or half the anticipated seven years of this traumatic end event. For them chapters 6 through 19 of Revelation are devoted to this Great Tribulation when only apostates and unbelievers will be living on the earth (except for those converted too late to qualify for the escape to the clouds provided by the rapture). We do not believe that this is a correct view of the end times or of these chapters. But we need to take seriously the warning that the world will become more hostile to Christians as history progresses toward its conclusion.

We can expect persecutions and martyrdoms in the future more numerous than in John’s day. He holds martyrs up for special praise and promise (esp. 20:4, 5). Nowhere does he hold out exemption from that fate. But he does make the precious promise that all who keep the faith in the face of temptations to unfaithfulness will sing in the heavenly choir. When they have experienced even a transient victory, and surely when they have won the final one, they will want to sing a hallelujah or a whole stanza of praise such as verse 7. Or how would hymn #314 (*Lutheran Book of Worship*) do?

God is tenting with and leading his people during their dangerous wilderness wanderings. There will be more of this next week. Someone must lead the flock to the water (cf. John 4:10-15). The shepherd who comes to do so, it turns out, is the Lamb. What a mixture of metaphors! (cf. John 1:29; 10:11). The wilderness is a hot, barren place, but the flock need not worry about lack of water or too much sun (cf. Isa 49:10). There will be no tears—in Asia Minor in the 90s? In America in the 1980s? Well, John never intended to go that far. This text, remember, is an interlude in the savage ravage of life on the earth going through one horror after another (6:1-8:1). In this interlude we are viewing things as they should be, could have been, and will be when the final victory comes. Calvary has assured us of that outcome. The Lamb who is alive through bearing death wounds is our guarantee of it. But it is only when you get an occasional glimpse into heaven that you know it already has taken place.

Easter 5: God’s Dwelling (Tent) Is with Us, 21:1-5.

John expected the dissolution of the Roman Empire and the fall of its capital city. Many people were attracted to its culture and to its economic and political power. Rome’s vast seductive capacities (17:2) tended to lure Christians too into its life. Emperor and empire played an insidious religious role particularly in provinces such as Asia. Loyalty to the state often demanded emperor worship. This was something God could not condone, and so the state and its capital were doomed (17:1). Soon they would fall, much to the consternation of many in the world (18:9-19), but to the joy of persecuted saints (18:20).

It may be hard, but we need to put ourselves on the other end of this equation. We are so accustomed to think of ourselves as blessed by God in our prosperity and power. God must be with us for us to have accomplished so much. Yet many in the second or third world accuse us of gaining our prosperity

at their expense. We may be the new Babylon (Rome), for undoubtedly many such Babylons have arisen since John’s day. Our victims too would rejoice at our fall, but meanwhile they long for a world in which more goods, justice, comforts, health care, jobs, and money will be theirs. So it is not just the threat of nuclear holocaust which hangs over us. We may well, like ancient

Rome, suffer an eclipse of power, influence, and wealth which others, if not we, will consider a divine judgment upon us.

Most of us express little interest in a new heaven or a new earth. For the moment, in our affluence—and despite a mounting national debt and other problems—we already have what we want. We may even lay claim to God’s presence and favor. Success seems to need that justification in the face of so much worldwide misery. We can and do affirm God’s presence in this present world. The biblical assurances of this divine presence provide us with rich imagery to reflect upon. God walked with the first pair in the garden (Gen 2). God tented with Israel in the wilderness (Lev 26:11). God dwelt with Israel in Palestine (2 Kings 6:13) and particularly in the Jerusalem temple (Ps 68:16). Isaiah promised that the name of the royal prince of the coming blessed era would be “God with us” (Immanuel, 7:14). John’s Gospel asserts that this tenting of God on earth came to a climax when the Word became flesh (John 1:14). So we are assured over and over again of God’s presence with his people. And we are his people, so God is among us, right? We need have no fear of God abandoning us to our enemies, right? Well, if the experience of Jerusalem is any precedent, no! The prophets, Jesus, and John tell us that God’s presence is by no means a guarantee of success and blessing for powerful, oppressive people. Does a new heaven and a new earth begin to sound more attractive?

John announced that, in spite of God’s tenting with his people, the universe was passing away. He threatens (promises) a complete demise of this world through the removal of seven of its most distressing features: the sea, tears, death, mourning, crying, pain, and the former things in general. This list strikes us as curious. Why remove the sea? Is it because of the danger of travel there in small boats? Shades of Jonah! Is it because the sea in mythology was a symbol of the chaos which God overcame at creation? Probably. But perhaps it is even more John’s focus on the political tyranny and economic exploitation of the Mediterranean world. Rome did that by ship. Other things which would pass away include physical death and bereavement, ills and accidents which cause pain, disappointments and frustrations, or anything else which causes lamentation and crying. Note that this puts the emphasis on those things which make life unbearable for all people sometimes and for many people all the time. He is not forgetting “nature red in tooth and claw” or earthquakes and violent storms. Such as these have already done their worst via the seals, the trumpets, and the bowls of wrath. But the main reason we need a new heaven and earth is that evil and its results are here so entrenched that they make life a travesty of what God intended it to be.

So John’s good news is: God is sending down a new Jerusalem from heaven. The old Jerusalem already foreshadowed the central feature of the new: God’s special relationship with his people. Jeremiah promised that too, even after 587. The Sinai covenant had guaranteed it earlier. But now in a very special

way the people of Israel will be God’s people, and he will be their God. Marriage language says it wonderfully. This people is preparing for a wedding—theirs. And the spouse is none other than God’s Lamb (19:7). In this text the groom is not specifically mentioned. But here the One who will be with the people, that is God, speaks for the first time in the book. His is a word of truth and faithfulness. Indeed, God tells the seer to write it down on a scroll so that his harassed congregations and ours can read it or hear it proclaimed. Maybe you, like a new Moses, can

describe this new land and its city for those who are still on the other side so that they will have courage to “pass over Jordan.”

Easter 6: The Vision of the Lamb’s Bride, 21:9-14, 22-23, or The Vision of God’s Dwelling, 21:10-14, 22-23.

We speak of the church as the Body of Christ, as the branches of which he is the Vine, as the flock of which he is the Shepherd. But John here adds a new picture: The church is Christ’s Bride (21:9). One might expect the description of his bride to be rather like that of the woman in chapter twelve. He does begin that way at 21:2, describing her wedding gown, but nothing like that appears in verse 9 or subsequently. When the bride does appear, she comes not from earth, where we know the church now to be, to meet Christ in the clouds. Instead, she comes from heaven to earth. And when we see her, she is not a woman but a city. What a switch of metaphors! Is that why the folks who decided where the pericope should begin cut off verse nine? One could well make a case for a lost section of the book at this point, one describing Christ’s beautiful bride. Further evidence that something may be wrong with the text could be provided from the two descents of the city from heaven (21:2 and 10). But such an approach is not profitable. Rather, let us pursue the possibility that all the images for the church emphasize the close relationship of Christ to his people. The bride-bridegroom imagery certainly does that. We’d really like to go with that if only John did not drop it as quickly as he picked it up.

What can one say about the Holy City imagery which is provided in such splendid detail? We know how favored Jerusalem was both to the people of Israel and to God, according to the Bible. The beauty of the city was proverbial, and one can still fall in love with it today. Its elevation, its walls, its gates, and its buildings which change color in the varying light of the day all make deep impressions. There was once also a palace, and twice there was a temple there too, to add grandeur we can scarcely anymore imagine. It became the Holy City also, particularly because God chose it as the place to dwell among the chosen people. No wonder then that the hoped-for end time reunion of God with humankind is not to be in the Garden of Eden, but in a restored Jerusalem. And Jerusalem is generally personified not because of the buildings or the walls, but because of its people. As the daughter of Jerusalem, it is the people who will lament or rejoice, depending upon their fate (Isa 1:8; 62:11). Jerusalem is really not Jerusalem when its people are away in exile. But it is so again when they return. We would expect John then to describe the people thronging in the squares or rejoicing during festival. Yet, for all the precedent for personal and relational language and imagery, John describes instead the streets, the walls, the gates, and the building materials. What is going on? One has the notion that

he may be describing a theophany since, at various places in the Bible, God is described via light and precious stones (Exod 24:10; Ezek 1:4, 26-28; Daniel 7:9-10). Is there such a thing as a cityophany? It seems that John has seen a glorified Jerusalem, one unlike the one of any era of the illustrious city’s history. John has seen the heavenly counterpart of the earthly city. It is almost too wonderful to describe. That is because God and the Lamb are there lending it their particular glory. We remember how this glowing presence of Yahweh appeared in the wilderness (Exod 16:10), at Sinai (Exod 24:16), in the Tabernacle (Exod 40:35, Lev 9:23-24) and in the Solomonic Temple (1 Kings 8:11). These were but glimpses of the full light and glory of God to

be seen in the New Jerusalem.

Would you live in a city without a church, street lights, or electrical service? Even if it had walls 200 feet high? No? Such a place, we suppose, would lack the moral and physical security we like. Yet, would you believe it, that is what we are all headed for if one takes John's vision literally. One ought not to do that, of course, and it is fortunate too, else we might be riding elevators to the 800,000th floor in a city 1,400 miles high. Its length and width are the same. It is a cube, and where was such an earlier but much smaller cube to be found? In the centermost part of the old holy city at the holiest part of the temple (1 Kings 6:20). It was Jerusalem's most sacred spot. There God was present at the heart of his people as nowhere else. So one gets the idea that John is trying to tell us something: The New Jerusalem is an enlarged holy of holies. No one ever lived in the old holiest place. It was visited but once a year by but one human, the high priest (Lev 16). There he made atonement for himself and all Israel at the mercy seat, the lid of the ark. It was a dangerous place to visit and the high priest had to prepare himself in every way possible for each occasion. But now in the New Jerusalem one can forget the fear, forget the exclusiveness, forget the restrictions. Everybody will be in there with God and the Lamb. It won't be pitch dark there even though nothing is said about windows. Lamps will be superfluous, for all the light of the universe will be in there. The gross sinners who once tried to build a tower to reach into heaven were on the right track (Gen 11). But in their perverted thinking they could not realize that the direction of such construction must be from top down, from heaven earthward. They wanted a city in which God would dwell, not realizing that they could not humanly achieve it. It would have to be God's work and God's gift.

Easter 7: Alpha and Omega Is Coming Soon, 22:12-17, 20.

John opens the floodgates again, as in chapter one, and name after name honoring Christ pours out. Who is he? He is Jesus, a particular man who was born of Mary, lived in Nazareth, called fishermen as disciples, and died on Golgotha. He is also of the rootage of David, is a descendant of that illustrious but grossly sinful king of Israel of 1,000 years earlier. There is claim to royalty in this name. Isaiah and other prophets spoke of such a descendant as the ideal coming king (11:1; cf. Jer 23:5), and the New Testament ties these promises to Jesus (Matt 1:1; 21:9). We still pay much attention to his life, ministry, and sacrificial death in Palestine 1,900 years ago. Christ will never lose his identity as a first century Jew, both orthodox and observant, and a scandal to neo-Nazis and other anti-Semites of our day. Some may hear "Jew" and think "Israeli."

So our continuing devotion to a first century Jew who was put to death on a cross is a scandal to many. But he is nonetheless the central focus of our Christian confession of faith. The incarnation is a fact which provides great particularity to our faith. Christianity is an historical religion.

Who is he? He is clearly also God, for names elsewhere even in this book used for God are here applied to Christ. He is, like God, eternal, not ephemeral, though he was mortal, died, and was buried. The prologue of John's Gospel acclaimed Christ's role in creation and his presence with God in the beginning. What more do Alpha and Omega, or first and last, or beginning and end, mean? Caird (p. 301) is surely correct in asserting that now we know that the

End is not an event but a person. We have good reason then not to try to calculate the date of the end, for he has been, is, and will be. He has come, is here and will come soon. Thirty-three years of humble life in Palestine serve to focus his life for us, but that is a very small slice of who he is, has been, and will be. It is very important for us, but there is much more than we yet know of him. The name Bright Morning Star serves to tie the human and the divine together for us. He comes from the heavenly world but he is also the ruler of Judah (Num 24:17).

This is the one who is coming soon. It would not be good news to be able to say there once was a Jesus, a martyr, a Shoot of David. It is good news to know that he is now alive and coming soon. Those who wash their robes in his blood, who are made clean by his atonement, can enter the Holy City to be with him. There they will find the tree of life, transplanted from Eden (Gen 2:9) from which humanity has been forbidden access by angels (Gen 3:24). Now it is available for all whom the guardian angels permit to enter the city. Life can be prolonged forever by eating of this tree. The olive orchard at Gethsemane was outside the walls, but this one is inside the city where the Lamb is. And access to him is perpetual, since the gates are forever open.

Yet there is still an outside, a world as yet unredeemed, composed of various types who show by their conduct that they have not and will not wash their robes. They are like the sailors I knew long ago who were not allowed weekend liberty in the city because their uniforms did not pass Saturday morning's inspection. Solomon's and Herod's temples too forbade gentiles from entering any but the outermost court.

Now that the whole city is the Holiest Place, only the redeemed will be permitted to enter. There they will celebrate the wedding feast of the Lamb. Will water again be turned into wine as at Cana? It may be that the water is so pure, so refreshing that no one will wish for anything else. The invitations are sent out. The town criers are in the central square. The Holy Spirit and the church, Christ's Bride, are urging all to come and celebrate. Every Lord's Supper is a foretaste of it. There our ultimate thirsts and hungers are satisfied by the One who created and redeemed us.

The church and Christians for 1,900 years have been praying, "Maranatha, Our Lord Come!" (22:20). He promised to come soon. Yet the centuries have gone by. Now mainline churches slip over the words which allude to it in the creed and elsewhere. They do not talk about it. Adventist groups meanwhile count the days, and some of them set the date. It will probably be even more the case as we approach the end of this second millenium of the church's

history. Our embarrassment becomes their opportunity. People who need to hear it affirmed that he is coming again leave us to join them. Has he come already, perhaps repeatedly as he welcomes martyrs and faithful saints into the Holy City at their deaths? Has he been coming in the living words and in the bread and wine of our proclamation and communion? Yes, but there is more to it than this. He is coming again as disciples once saw him leave from a hill outside Jerusalem. We need to be alert for his coming lest we be among those caught napping when he comes.