

Pastor Daryl Diddle

Sermon Series: *Looking Up*, No. 8

Visions and Dreams

February 27, 2022

Revelation 1:9-19 (NIV)

I, John, your brother and companion in the suffering and kingdom and patient endurance that are ours in Jesus, was on the island of Patmos because of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus. ¹⁰ On the Lord's Day I was in the Spirit, and I heard behind me a loud voice like a trumpet, ¹¹ which said: "Write on a scroll what you see and send it to the seven churches: to Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia and Laodicea."

¹² I turned around to see the voice that was speaking to me. And when I turned I saw seven golden lampstands, ¹³ and among the lampstands was someone like a son of man, dressed in a robe reaching down to his feet and with a golden sash around his chest. ¹⁴ The hair on his head was white like wool, as white as snow, and his eyes were like blazing fire. ¹⁵ His feet were like bronze glowing in a furnace, and his voice was like the sound of rushing waters. ¹⁶ In his right hand he held seven stars, and coming out of his mouth was a sharp, double-edged sword. His face was like the sun shining in all its brilliance.

¹⁷ When I saw him, I fell at his feet as though dead. Then he placed his right hand on me and said: "Do not be afraid. I am the First and the Last. ¹⁸ I am the Living One; I was dead, and now look, I am alive for ever and ever! And I hold the keys of death and Hades.

¹⁹ "Write, therefore, what you have seen, what is now and what will take place later.

We're in the book of Revelation today, the first chapter, beginning in verse 9. Revelation, Chapter 1.

The one with experience is the one with the strongest voice.

That's not to say the contributions of those without experience are not worthwhile. Often, they are.

But, there's a wisdom that comes with *living* a thing – living *through* a thing – that you can't get any other way.

For example, the voices of those who know for themselves the path of suffering: those are the voices that speak the strongest in times of suffering, aren't they? Isn't that who we pay attention to most closely when we're suffering: those who've suffered themselves? Those who've lived what we're living. Those who've been there before us.

There is a verse in the third chapter of Ezekiel where Ezekiel says, "*I came to the exiles who lived at Tel Aviv near the Kebar River. And there, where they were living, I sat among them...*"

Ezekiel lived where they lived and experienced what they experienced and felt the pain that they felt. He sat where they sat, and so they were able to hear what he said in a more profound way.

The one with experience is the one with the strongest voice.

I was helping out in a preaching class this week, and one of the students' messages was on persevering – hanging in there with Jesus when tough times tempt us away.

He was going along just fine in his sermon; all he said was well and good.

But his words took on much more meaning about halfway through when he let us know that he, himself, is an immigrant from Bhutan who's had family and friends reject him, and who has been publicly persecuted because of his trust in Jesus.

Knowing what he himself has experienced made his words about persevering much more powerful.

The one with experience is the one with the strongest voice.

The apostle John knew this. That's why he introduces himself as he does there in verse nine as "***a brother and companion in the suffering and kingdom and patient endurance...***"

John wants the suffering Christians to whom he writes to understand that he gets their suffering, because he sits where they sit.

Because of his own faith in Jesus, he'd been banished to the Greek Island of Patmos, so he knows what it means to suffer for Christ.

The one with experience is the one with the strongest voice.

His description of himself may sound strange to us though, because while we may get the idea of "suffering" and "patient endurance" going together, it may surprise us to find John included "Kingdom" along with them.

To many Christians today, just as to many Jewish believers in John's day, "Kingdom" would seem out of place next to "patient endurance" and "suffering," because of the belief that the Kingdom was a place of peace and security and plenty and all of that.

And in eternity, that's true.

But until Jesus returns, His kingdom, here, is never presented that way in Scripture.

On the contrary, Kingdom people – people who follow Christ in our day – are, as the Thessalonian Jews charged Paul of being, ones who turn the world upside down.¹

Followers of Christ often don't act the way the world acts. We often don't value what the world values. And so, as we live the ways of Christ and His Kingdom, those who feed on the world's values will not tolerate us.

That's what happened to Jesus, right?

He valued what God valued and rejected what the world valued. He was too good for the broken world around Him. He brought light to where there was darkness, but those who loved that darkness could not stand His light, so they had to snuff it out.

That's why Christ-followers, through the ages, have been martyred.

¹ Acts 17:6 (NKJV)

That's why they've been fed to lions and burned alive and made war on and everything else.

That's why John was on Patmos.

And that's why suffering and patient endurance and Kingdom do go together, at least for now.

That's why Kingdom principles and Kingdom participation very often mean persecution, ridicule, character assassination, and marginalization – and at times imprisonment and torture and even death.

When those things come to us because of Christ, John says, we're called to endure them patiently, just as he was doing there on Patmos.

You see, John wasn't preaching some sermon here that he'd found in a book. He was explaining the life he was living – with Christ.

The one with experience is the one with the strongest voice.

But that same one also, here, announces to us that we are not alone in our Kingdom suffering and endurance – a reality he had also experienced.

You see, the very Jesus who also suffered for the sake of God's Kingdom – that very Jesus appeared to him.

"A voice came from behind him," verse 10 there says.

Which, I might note, is just like God, you know?

So often, we're either not looking for God at all, or we're looking for Him to come in this certain way or from this certain direction. And yet God does not always approach us from the direction we expect, and so, in order to see Him and hear Him and to live in harmony with Him, we very often have to change our point of view and adjust our expectation.

We have to look up to Him in a way that's maybe different from what we've known in the past.

John was able to do this and so was able to hear the voice (that we later learn belonged to Jesus) tell him, *"Write this down, all this that you're going to see. Write it down and send it to the seven churches."*

So, John wrote it down: twenty-some chapters' worth of amazing sights and sounds and warnings and promises.

We'd prefer a video of it, but we don't have one, so we have to settle for John's written description here.

And is this description for us?

Yes, it is. We conclude that for several reasons. Here are two: the number *seven* in the Bible is always the number of completion, and the churches named here are in the order in which a traveler from Patmos would reach them on the road. Thus, we presume that this message is not just for those individual congregations, but for all the Church, for all of Christ's Kingdom, for us.

And what is the message?

Actually, verse 19 gives us something of a map of this book of Revelation, where Jesus says, *"Write what you have seen, what is now and what will take place later."*

Chapters 2 and 3 talk about the condition of the Church at present.

Chapters 4 and 5 talk about what is real and true about God and Christ and redemption.

And then the rest of the book describes what will take place in the days to come.

It's a message filled with promises and assurances to which followers of Jesus can look forward with great relief and joy.

There are also, though, stark and frankly severe warnings and cautions and corrections to which the Church must pay attention, if she's to continue to live in ways that please Jesus.

But it all begins with this tremendous image of hope – for John and for every Christ follower and especially those who are suffering, who are, as John was, being beaten and battered by this broken world.

John describes the one he saw, and honestly the words and descriptors he uses seem strange to us with our scientific, industrial ways of thinking. But all of these details meant something to him and to the ancient world.

We're told that the one he saw was *someone like a son of man*.

"Son of Man" was Jesus' favorite title for Himself, and the Church came to equate it essentially with "Messiah," primarily because of a passage from the prophet Daniel (which we see all through this encounter) in which the Son of Man received the Kingdom and power and dominion from God Himself.²

The One John saw also had a *robe reaching to his feet with a golden sash around his chest*. This is almost exactly the description of the dress of the Jewish high priest: the only one who had both access to God and the ability to open the way for others to come to God.³

At the same time, robes like this were also worn by royalty – princes and Kings – as we see in Jonathan and Saul and others.⁴

So, this One John saw was no longer a criminal on a cross, denounced by the religious professionals of His day.

He was now both priest and King.

John says *his hair was as white as wool – as white as snow*. The Jews revered those who were white of head for the wisdom that comes with age. In this case, since the whiteness is described with a double comparison, we're to understand that He is doubly wise.

God the Father is actually described in just this way in Daniel.⁵

John says *His eyes were like blazing fire*, which revealed his great discernment in judgement. He could see all and through all. Nothing escaped His notice, and so He could judge rightly.

John says *His feet were like glowing bronze*. This sort of language was used for all messengers of God, to describe their strength and power over all their foes.

And then, *His voice*, John says, *sounded like the rush of waters*. This is the description of the sound of the voice of God Himself in Ezekiel. It was not confined to

² Daniel 7:13-14

³ Exodus 28:4; Leviticus 16:4

⁴ 1 Samuel 18:4; 24:5

⁵ Daniel 7:9

one note or pitch, as our voices are, and so it was a beautiful, yet nearly overwhelmingly powerful, sound.⁶

This is the best John could do without his video camera, you see, and it was very vivid to his original hearers. In fact, this is one of those passages that contributes to the Christian understanding of Trinity: God being three persons but one essence, because this is clearly both a description of God the Father and of Jesus.

This is John seeing and trying to describe the truth of Jesus' words back in John's gospel, "***I and the Father are one.***"⁷

And, this is why John says there in verse 17, "***When I saw Him, I fell at His feet as though dead.***"

That is the human response to coming face to face with God.

But for the humble and repentant, we also see, here, God's response to that reaction. John says, "***Then he placed His right hand on me and said, 'Do not be afraid.'***"

Do not be afraid.

Now, later on in the vision, Jesus gives *some* – the *unrepentant*, the *rebellious*, those who *reject* Him, the ones who choose paths of *evil* in our world – *much, much reason to be afraid*.

But to John and to all like him who suffer for the sake of Christ, Jesus – the one who sees all and judges rightly, the one who overpowers all His foes, the King of all kings and the Highest of High Priests – says, "Don't be afraid."

With His hand on our shoulders, Jesus says, "Don't be afraid."

Why should we not be afraid?

Because in addition to all Jesus is, He also declares two other truths about Himself here.

First, He tells John, in verse 18 there, "***Because of all I have experienced, now I hold the keys of death and Hades,***" or in our language, we might say, "***death and the grave.***"

You see, the one with experience is the one with the strongest voice.

Jesus wants those who belong to Him – those who are members of His Kingdom and yet are now enduring suffering and trying to do so patiently – to know, "***I've been where you are, but now I control the outcome.***"

Jesus holds the keys to the afterlife. There is nothing anyone on earth can do to us that will change that – and so we have no reason to fear.

But you know, that's not all.

John says there in verse 12 that in his vision, he saw seven golden lampstands, and Jesus was *among them*.

What are the lampstands?

John is told in verse 20 there that they are the churches – or rather, the Church – the complete Church.

This means that here, Jesus is reminding His Church here that He is among us.

We are the lampstands – the holders of the light.

He is the light that the Church displays.

And He is among us. He is reminding us that He is with us – He is with His Church, His bride, His people.

No matter where we are.

John was on Patmos, banished there and patiently enduring suffering for the sake of Christ and His Kingdom.

There was a lampstand sitting on Patmos, but Jesus sat with him.

The churches at Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia and Laodicea: in all those places there were lampstands, and the people of Christ were, to one degree or another, patiently enduring suffering for Jesus sake. And Jesus wants them to know that He is with them – He was in their midst, no matter what they were going through.

The Church – the Church *complete*, the true followers of Jesus in Wilmore, in Lexington, in Washington DC, in New York and Atlanta, in Chicago and L.A. and Seattle: there are lampstands. And in every place where the people of Christ are patiently enduring suffering for Jesus' sake, Jesus wants them to know that He is with them – He is in their midst.

The Church in Ukraine – the Church at Senkivka, at Chernihiv, at Hostomel, at Kharkiv, at Mariupol, at Rivne and Kiev and at every other place in Ukraine – and around the world where people of Christ, Kingdom people, are patiently enduring suffering: Jesus wants them to know that He is with them. He walks among them. His is in their midst in the midst of battle, and He sits with them in their basements and subway stations.

The Church – Christ's Kingdom in our broken world – may well be in the midst of conflict and woe, *yet Jesus is in the midst of His Church*.

Jesus – the One who holds the keys to death and the grave – *is in the midst of His Church*.

That's why His people need not be afraid.

Jesus gave this vision – Jesus brought these words of assurance – for John, but also for us and for all followers of Christ whenever and wherever they are.

Jesus brought these words for you today. If you're following Him, but you're weary from patiently enduring suffering, and you wonder where He is:

He is near you.

He suffers with you.

He sits with you on the shore of your grief.

But He promises it will not be this way forever.

Look to Him. Look up to Him. Turn and see Him – see His *royalty*, His *wisdom*, His *judgment*, His *overwhelming strength*.

See Him in your suffering – in your patient endurance.

And *hear* Him. Hear His *voice*: its *beauty*, its *power*, its *assurance*. He's the One who's been there. He's the One Who, Himself, knows suffering and the One Who is with us in ours.

See Him here in our midst. Hear His voice today, and keep on. No matter what happens around us, keep on. Keep on.

⁶ Ezekiel 43:2

⁷ John 10:30

Closing Prayer:

Jesus, our battles rage all around us and though circumstances may threaten, let us, this day, know that we know that we know that You are in our midst – and that one day, Your Kingdom will come in its fullness and Your will will be done on earth as it is in Heaven.

And all will be well. And yet, until that day, let us know that you are near. In your name we pray, Amen

Closing Song: *Be Still, My Soul*

Benediction:

Notice that John tells us right from the start in this passage that he was, at the same time, suffering on Patmos and also in the Spirit.

To suffer and to experience the presence of Christ are not mutually exclusive. We can experience suffering, and in the midst of it, we can experience Jesus with us. In fact, that's typically when He seems closest to us.

Whatever our exile, whatever our burden, whatever our suffering, may we look up and may we see Christ and see that He is there in our midst. Thanks for coming to worship. The Lord bless and keep you.