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## Road Trip! Great Journeys in the Bible X. Run After God

Revelation 3:14-22 The Message Write to Laodicea, to the Angel of the church. God's Yes, the Faithful and Accurate Witness, the First of God's creation, says: "I know you inside and out, and find little to my liking. You're not cold, you're not hot-far better to be either cold or hot! You're stale. You're stagnant. You make me want to vomit. You brag, 'I'm rich, I've got it made, I need nothing from anyone,' oblivious that in fact you're a pitiful, blind beggar, threadbare and homeless. Here's what I want you to do: Buy your gold from me, gold that's been through the refiner's fire. Then you'll be rich. Buy your clothes from me, clothes designed in Heaven. You've gone around half-naked long enough. And buy medicine for your eyes from me so you can see, really see. The people I love, I call to account-prod and correct and guide so that they'll live at their best. Up on your feet, then! About face! Run after God! Look at me. I stand at the door. I knock. If you hear me call and open the door, I'll come right in and sit down to supper with you. Conquerors will sit alongside me at the head table, just as I, having conquered, took the place of honor at the side of my Father. That's my gift to the conquerors! Are your ears awake? Listen. Listen to the Wind Words, the Spirit blowing through the churches."

Well that was a pretty unpleasant scripture, wasn't it? St. John's phrases there in Revelation concerning the church at Laodicea make us wince, don't they? "*You're stagnant,*" he says. *You make me want to vomit.*" "...*you're a pitiful, blind beggar, threadbare and homeless,*" going round "*half-naked.*" We are tempted to think, perhaps: Uh, couldn't we instead do one of those "nice" passages from the Bible? Maybe one of those passages about lillies and lambs and letting the little ones – preferably nicely dressed, well-behaved, quiet children – come to Jesus? Why this scripture with its stern admonition to "run after God" for our next-to-last sermon in this summer's series on "Great Journeys in the Bible" and what can John's strange and even offensive words, written so long ago in such a different context, have to teach us today about our lives, our church, our God?

So many good questions. But let's begin by talking about what the Book of Revelation is and is not; let's dispel a few misunderstandings and then we may be able

to see more clearly how this passage might indeed speak to us. First, though, the most important misconception to dispel is this: **the Book of Revelation is not a book of predictions written for us.** Those who think this way almost invariably make a subtle but important error when they mistakenly talk about “Revelations” - plural. That verbal mistake tends to reinforce a point of view that sees John’s letter more like a basket of fortune cookies out of which you can pluck a prediction. But the complex and complicated symbols and imagery in the book – like “the Seven Headed Beast” and “the Whore of Babylon” – are not about modern events or people but are code words meant for John’s recipients around the year 100 C.E.

You see, many scholars think that this letter was written near the end of the Roman Emperor Domitian’s reign and during a time of terrible persecution of Christians. And like those African-American spirituals which use all sorts of code-phrases that other slaves would have understood but that their owners would not, so too John uses imagery meant to be understood by the churches he is writing to and **not** to be understood by Roman officials who might get hold of the letter. Modern-day scholars also think that there is a second motif at work in the letter: John’s urging the churches receiving the letter to stand firm in their Christian convictions and to not become like the culture around them. And you’ll perhaps recall from my previous sermon that there were many Roman cultural practices of the day that Christians should be rejecting, such as the common practice of killing female babies. When we put those two motifs together, we might say that John’s Revelation was meant to give **comfort** to those undergoing persecution, and to **exhort** those who were tempted to become like the Empire to stand firm against such accommodations. The overall theme of the Revelation is a **great struggle of good versus evil** with repeated *exhortations* to his readers to stand firm for the good and repeated *assurances* that in the end the reign and rule of God will overcome all evil and hurt and pain, and that God’s love is stronger

than even the might of a too-often-evil empire.

There's far more that could be said about Revelation<sup>1</sup> and we could spend literally years studying it, but please hear what all of these weird and complicated images **don't** mean: they are not about President Obama or President Bush. They are not about the Middle East or the Twin Towers or "the Muslims" or Hurricane Katrina (all claims that I have heard, by the way). We do the Bible no honor – and we look to those who are already skeptical of Christianity like we are driven more by our politics and ideology and whom we fear – when we treat this or any Biblical book as if it were a collection of predictions meant to match our own predilections. Moreover, it's worth noting that most of the time those who seem to delight in such prediction-mongering almost always focus on some person, some group, some allegedly sinful folks being punished. Those who use the Book of Revelation to claim that somehow only "the elect" (and they always seem to know they are among those) will be "raptured" leaving behind to be tormented by God others who aren't as allegedly "faithful" tell us more about themselves than they do about a God of love who, Revelation says, will wipe EVERY tear from EVERY eye. So, let me gently suggest that when Hal Lindsey or Nicholas Cage portray in books or movies God seeming to delight in hurting people at the end of time that **you do not buy it**, for such portrayals are at odds with the Savior whom we follow who came that ALL – all – might have life, the God whom I Timothy says wants ALL to be saved.

So, if those are some of misconceptions about the Book of Revelation, how can John's words that we read this morning connect with our lives as ones who would follow a God of love and grace for each and all? Let me begin, though, again with a place that it does **not** connect. There are those who are tempted to say that the connection

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<sup>1</sup>While hardly a scholarly source, the Wikipedia article on Revelation is fairly presented: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Book\\_of\\_Revelation](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Book_of_Revelation)

between the Book of Revelation's situation and ours is that we too are being persecuted for our beliefs. But to this, I have to gently but clearly say that if you are an American Christian in the 21<sup>st</sup> century you are **not** "persecuted." Those who on their blogs or radio or tv shows or Facebook postings want to claim that that is so, or that there is, for example, an alleged "war on Christmas," just show how historically misinformed they are. There **is** persecution of Christians in our world today, *but not here*. In China there are those who are imprisoned because of their beliefs. In parts of Africa and the Middle East Christians are being cruelly tortured and killed for their beliefs. Barbara's missionary parents in what was then Northern Rhodesia in the 1960s were told they could not preach or teach a gospel that said blacks and whites are equal both in God's eyes and in the law's eyes. All those things are persecution. But the fact that someone says "Happy Holidays" to you instead of "Merry Christmas" is not evidence of persecution, it's evidence of someone who wants to wish you well. The fact that the U.S. Constitution says that people cannot be forced by a teacher or a principal to pray in school is not evidence of persecution but of the deep respect we want to have as a nation for the rights of all people, AND of our realization that if the shoe were on the other foot, **we** would not want ourselves our children being forced to pray to a very different understanding of God. Not a one of us this morning faced arrest for coming to church and not a one of us will leave this place under threat of being killed for having attended worship. There are folks today to whom those things are happening – as they were for the people John was writing to – *but we are not them*.

So what *does* connect John's words there in Revelation to our situation? Well, what I am most struck in this passage and throughout the whole book is the **urgency** in John's words and tone and his frustration with those who seem **indifferent** to the plight of their neighbors. The church at Laodicea, John writes with disturbing and unpleasant imagery, had become too satisfied with itself, too turned inward, content to muddle

along. The urgency in John's words are because of his frustration with that church and the fact that they don't see that all around them are hurting people. Have you ever stopped for a moment to listen to the man who regularly preaches on the street at the corner of Pikes Peak and Tejon? I reject his theology but admire his sense of urgency. He believes – as do those others who knock on your door and mine from time to time – that those who don't know Jesus Christ will be damned to hell by God. **He** is not indifferent, **he** is not who, as John says of the Laodicean church, "is neither hot nor cold"; no, he is passionately convinced that there is a world around him in desperate need of something. I reject his theology but I admire his willingness to act on his sense of urgency.

And that is exactly where we find our connection to this ancient scripture. Something that our former Disciples of Christ General Minister and President Dick Hamm once said many years ago has stayed with me and continues to sometimes haunt me; listen to his words: *"We know about the transforming power of relationship with... Jesus Christ. [And] If we allow ourselves to become aware of the fact that many of those around us are experiencing a living hell, how can we not share what we know?"* If we put this in terms of John's words to that church at Laodicea, how can we not "run after" such folks, sharing with the good news of a God of grace and love for each and all? Precisely because most of us in this room DO know that God and DO know the love that can be found in the Church, we may find it hard to realize that there are so many people outside our doorsteps who would be very skeptical of what we have to share. In fact, it's increasingly the case that for many folks around us, it's not that they don't like the church but more and more that they are simply **indifferent** to it, they see it more and more as **irrelevant** to their lives. They believe – often, sadly, with too much evidence – that "the church" spends its time on things that don't much matter

and focuses its criticisms on things that are irrelevant.<sup>2</sup> But, my friends, every day in our individual lives and in our lives as a church, through our words, our actions, our money, we have a chance to “run after” such folks, in John’s words, and tell them why we are different, how we understand God differently.

And even though admonitions to go running usually remind me of Professor Robert Hutchins’ remark that “whenever I feel like exercising I lie down until the feeling passes,” I am nonetheless struck by St. John’s words and by our need to run in our day just as that Laodicean church had the need to run in its day. For our situation is also urgent, and running is indeed exactly what is needed. Slowly sauntering may be appropriate for museums, but running is appropriate for the urgency of an emergency room. And surely we don’t want to be museum Christians in an emergency room world. When Hurricane Katrina devastated New Orleans ten years ago this weekend, one of the things that I was most struck by was the thousands of people that responded to try to help, who came as FEMA workers and Church World Service volunteers, who kept coming even years later – this congregation being among them on more than one mission trip. And none of those who were helped ever first asked: “*Wait a minute – What’s your position on abortion or marriage equality?*” And not a one of those who helped those countless survivors Katrina’s fury first stopped to check out whether those they were helping had the “correct” views on whether it was new songs or old songs that should be sung in church.

Now, please don’t misunderstand: I use this dramatic example not to say that views on sexuality or music or gun safety or the host of other things that we contend about are not important. They are; and we’d better keep thinking well together and assiduously avoiding the tendencies to play power politics on any of these things at the

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<sup>2</sup>Cf., for example, <http://www.christiantoday.com/article/rob.bell.says.church.will.become.increasingly.irrelevant.if.it.holds.to.words.of.the.bible.on.marriage/48377.htm>

expense of good theology. And yet my point is the same, I think, as John's: in a world where so few have so much and so many have so little, we **must** run to do the work of justice – even if we don't always exactly agree with everything that our fellow runners think. The point is that in a nation where one out of five children go to bed hungry at night, walking at a museum's pace is an affront to God. The point is that in a nation where every 100 minutes a child under the age of 15 is killed with a handgun,<sup>3</sup> where we have come to wake up each morning matter-of-factly wondering where the next mass shooting will occur, it is a moral imperative that we run to deal with this urgent public health crisis. The point is that in a culture where child pornographers and those who lure children as young as eight into sex trafficking now enjoy the greatest financial success of anytime in history we cannot afford not to run when so many of the "least of these" are menaced by such wickedness.

Now, make no mistake: our fellow runners will always have some beliefs that we don't like and don't agree with, but to divide or, worse, to use such disagreements as an excuse **not** to do those things we **can** agree on, is an affront and an offense to the God who has made us for one another, who has gathered us about a Table that unites us far more than anything should divide us, and Who weeps at so much of a world gone so badly wrong and in such need of folks like us to run indeed to offer it a saving word. So, are you ready to run? Are you ready to show an increasingly indifferent world that Christianity doesn't mean, as someone once put it, "majoring in minors"? Are you ready? Are you ready?

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<sup>3</sup>Physicians for Social Responsibility Los Angeles [www.psrla.org/gunviolence.htm](http://www.psrla.org/gunviolence.htm)