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Sanford, North Carolina

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The Lord's Day
August 30, 2009

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The Lord among His Churches
Revelation 1:9-20

Today I want to begin a sermon series that I think is very relevant to where we are in our life together as a church. Over the next couple of months we'll be looking at the first three chapters of the book of Revelation, focusing on the risen Lord Jesus' seven letters to the seven churches in the province of Asia near the end of the first century A.D. I'm calling this series "What the Spirit Is Saying to the Churches."

Before we look at the letters themselves, though, it's important for us to think about the one who sent them through his servant John.

After all, that's how John starts the book—he tells about the One who is giving him this revelation, this *apocalypse* (the Greek name of the book), and how he gave him this message and these letters.

So let's begin by focusing on today's text, Revelation 1:9-20.¹ Follow along in your Bibles as we hear the word of the Lord . . .

⁹ 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 His head and hair were 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 out of his mouth came 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 behold 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.

²⁰ The mystery of the seven stars that you saw in my right hand and of the seven golden

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, Scripture quotations in this sermon are from the *New International Version*.

lampstands is this: The seven stars are the angels of the seven churches, and the seven lampstands are the seven churches.

How do you picture Jesus?

Do you see him as the newborn Christ child lying in the manger?

Do you picture him walking the dusty roads of Galilee, with the twelve disciples following him?

Maybe you see him hanging on the cross, humiliated and suffering, dying for our sins.

Maybe you think of Jesus appearing to his disciples after his resurrection.

Or maybe you visualize him seated on his throne in heaven.

Do you ever picture Jesus the way this text describes him? We don't usually think of him this way—it's just *so different!*

A different kind of picture

John's picture of Jesus here in Revelation 1 is an *apocalyptic* picture, a picture that conveys a different dimension of reality. It's not a *literal* representation; but it is a *real* and *true* representation. After all, does something have to be true in a literal sense in order to be true? In this sense, apocalyptic is a lot more like poetry than a technical instruction manual.

Now symbols and numbers mean things, especially in the apocalyptic literature of the ancient biblical world. Pictures are not always literal representations, and apocalyptic pictures never are. But apocalyptic pictures *always* convey dynamic truth and eternal realities. They're more like portraits than photographs—you know, capturing the character and essence of the subject rather than the literal details. Or sometimes they're like children's drawings—psychologists often use art therapy to allow children to put on paper in drawings what they simply can't express in words.

Well here, John has shared with us a powerful apocalyptic picture of Jesus!

John's vision

John is in exile on the island of Patmos—a place where the Roman authorities often sent “problem people.” While he's there, something incredible happens. For a brief time, the curtain that separates time and eternity is pulled back so he can see and experience what's going on behind the scenes in that eternal realm that the natural human eye can't see.

It happens while John is worshiping on the Lord's Day. He describes himself as being “in the Spirit,” when all of a sudden, he hears a loud voice like a trumpet behind him instructing him to write what he sees in a book, and to send it to the seven churches in the province of Asia in western Asia Minor, what we know today as western Turkey.

John turns to see the voice who is speaking, and sees in the midst of seven golden lampstands “one like a son of man,” the heavenly figure described in Daniel 7:13. He is clothed with a long robe (a priestly garment, like those described in Exodus 28), and has a golden sash around his chest (a royal emblem, as described in the apocryphal book of 1 Maccabees in 10:89). He has white hair (in other words, he has a divine appearance, as in Daniel 7:9). His eyes are like fire and his feet are “like bronze glowing in a furnace” (a way of describing an angelic appearance, as in Daniel 10:6). His voice is like the sound of many waters. He holds seven stars in his right hand, and a sharp two-edged sword comes from his mouth (the messianic weapon described in Isaiah 11:4 and 49:2, as well as various other ancient writings). His face is like the sun in its full strength at midday; in other words, it has a heavenly radiance.

When John sees him, he's overwhelmed and falls at his feet as though dead. Who is he? Why is he showing himself to John? What else can John do but bow before him in fear?

Then this one like the Son of Man reaches out and touches him, and tells him not to fear. He identifies himself as the First and the Last, the Living One, who was dead, but now is alive forever, holding the keys of Death and Hades. He is the risen Lord Jesus Christ!

Now I have to confess—I think that if I had seen firsthand what John saw, I probably would have fallen at the Lord's feet as though dead, too!

But John's description of his appearance isn't all of the vision. The risen Lord is *doing* something. John sees him moving among seven golden lampstands. Though John doesn't state it, his description implies that he's watching the lamps, tending them, making sure their wicks are trimmed and that the oil is in ample supply. And in his right hand, he holds seven stars. John is puzzled, as we are, by the stars and the lampstands. What are they? What do they mean?

The risen Lord Jesus tells him, "Write, therefore, what you have seen, what is now and what will take place later." And then Jesus tells him:

"The mystery of the seven stars that you saw in my right hand and of the seven golden lampstands is this: The seven stars are the angels of the seven churches, and the seven lampstands are the seven churches."

Isn't this a picture of the risen Lord in all his messianic glory? Isn't it a picture of Jesus as he really is now, even if it's not what he literally looks like now?

Where is Jesus now?

Now if we're going to see Jesus this way, we'd expect it to be in heaven, wouldn't we? He's there at the Father's right hand, reigning as the exalted sovereign Lord over all. He has won the victory over death, and his faithfulness has brought salvation to his people. After all, the disciples saw him ascend in the clouds into heaven, didn't they?

But his followers, his people, his churches, are still here on earth.

The seven churches in the ancient province of Asia were facing pressure from both inside and outside. My teacher Charles Talbert helps us see this in his little commentary on Revelation, *Reading the Apocalypse*.²

Outside, there was the looming threat of persecution, sometimes from some of the Jews, sometimes from Roman officials. The renewed emphasis on emperor worship that was taking place in the late first century would test their faithfulness.

But there were also pressures from within the churches—pressure to give in to and fit into the pagan Greco-Roman culture around them and its values, including a mild form of emperor worship. You know—so they could get along, so they wouldn't suffer economic hardship or persecution. After all, there was no need to let their faith interfere with their business! Several of the churches had false teachers in them that were leading people astray. The reality was that they were facing some very significant difficulties. They could use some help. But wasn't the risen Lord far away in heaven, while they here on earth?

² I have relied heavily on Charles H. Talbert's *The Apocalypse: A Reading of the Revelation of John* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1994), 1-16, throughout my interpretation of this text.

Or was he? Do you see where John saw him? In this part of his vision, the Lord is not on his throne in heaven, nor is he on the cross. He's not ascending into heaven in the clouds, nor is he walking the dusty roads of Galilee. Where is he? He's walking and moving around in the midst of the lampstands! *The risen Lord Jesus is among his churches!*

Not just for them

This apocalyptic vision John has isn't just for those seven churches in ancient Asia, you know. In ancient apocalyptic writing, using the number seven raises the particular to the general, so that the message is for *all* the Lord's church throughout the world—not just in ancient times, but for us as well. As we'll see in the coming weeks, the risen Lord Jesus says to each church, "Let the one who has an ear hear what the Spirit is saying to *the churches*."³

Now Jesus did have some specific words for those seven churches, as we'll see over the next couple of months—words of commendation for some, condemnation for others, and a mixture for most. He knew the good, the bad, and the ugly about them.

He knows it all about *us* as well. And just as he was with them, *he is with us*, walking among his churches, tending our lamp, trimming our wick, supplying our oil.

Doesn't knowing that he's with us as his church give us confidence, encouragement, and power in our trials and conflict with the world? Though in our situation, we don't face the threats of torture and martyrdom that the early Christians faced and that Christians in some parts of the world today face, we *do* face the challenge of a pagan secularism in our culture, one that tries to devour the church, and that some in the church seem eager to fit into. The difference of this challenge is in its intensity, not its kind. In our struggle, we remember that Jesus has conquered the powers of evil, death, and Hades by his cross. He calls us to be faithful as he was, and promises that those who are will share in his victory!

Sometimes as a church we face challenges that bring with them a sense of uncertainty or even fear. It's important for us to remember that no matter what the situation or challenge, Jesus Christ is *still* the risen Lord of the church, the head of *his* church, the head of *this* church, the One who is with us, tending our lamp, trimming our wick, supplying our oil.

But knowing that he's among us also challenges us, doesn't it? Doesn't this reality call for our total, whole-hearted, exclusive commitment to Jesus Christ as Lord of our lives and Lord of this church—what Charles Talbert calls "first commandment faithfulness"? When we go on to read what Jesus tells the seven churches through the letters he gives to John, we're reminded that he knows all about *us*, too—our strengths *and* our weaknesses, our faithfulness *and* our failures, our loyalty *and* our lack of commitment.

And yet, in the midst of it all, whatever his churches are going through, whatever we're facing, whatever the opportunities or challenges, no matter how well or how poorly we're doing, there he is—tending our lamp, trimming our wick, supplying our oil—*the Lord among his churches*.

He is with us

About seven years ago on a family trip, we were staying at the same hotel as my wife Jo Ann's younger brother Fletcher and his family. The next morning, Fletcher and I were out in the parking lot talking as we were waiting on our families so we could go to breakfast.

³ My translation.

Out in the middle of that part of the parking lot there was a huge square drainage grate, about four feet by four feet. Fletcher had his little daughter Lauren with him. I guess she was about eighteen months old at the time. As we talked, she walked over to the grate and looked. She was amazed at how deep the hole beneath it was. It must have seemed so big and so scary for such a little girl. She would step to the very edge and peer down the hole, then step back and look at her daddy. She did this three or four times, getting as close to the edge as she could, without stepping out onto the grate.

And then something wonderful happened.

Fletcher walked over to her, then walked out onto the very middle of the grate. He didn't say a word. He just looked at her.

Lauren looked at her daddy standing there, and without a second thought, with that amazing faith that a little child has in a daddy she thinks can do no wrong and would never let her down, she stepped out on the grate, walked out to her daddy, and stood there with him, looking up and smiling at him. Her daddy was there, and everything was okay.

You know, I don't know all the challenges and opportunities that lie before us, or where God might lead us as a church in the coming years as we continue to serve him as his people and follow him into the future.

But brothers and sisters, one thing I do know. *The risen Lord Jesus is among his churches!* He is *with us!*

Will we have an ear to hear what he is saying to us through his Spirit?

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