

“Can’t Keep from Singing”

Rev. Dr. Scott Paczkowski

Revelation is so difficult I think, in part, because we put too many expectations upon it. If somehow, we can figure out all of these different little symbolisms and numerology, and what the colors mean, and all of this, then somehow, we will understand everything about God’s coming kingdom. It isn’t quite about that. We can’t really figure that out just from this book of Revelation. And, from it, we expect God to give us this *grand* road map for how God has explained the world, and we expect to find it in these 22 small chapters written by this poor guy who had been kicked to an island called Patmos, off the coast of Turkey; kind of like if you ever saw the movie “Papillon” where they kicked all of those people who had been thrown in jail onto this island. That is where John was - kicked off onto this island - hopefully forgotten about and no longer a nuisance to the Roman Empire. But he became - and continued to be - a nuisance as he wrote and gave heart and life to the message for the people and the young church of Jesus Christ.

So, rather than being the one who describes it all, I remember a story that was written by a favorite writer of Bill’s and certainly one of mine, too: N.T. Wright. He wrote this marvelous book: “Surprised by Hope.” (He wrote a number of others; any one you grab is good.) He tells the story in “Surprised by Hope” about an architect who was building one of the great cathedrals in medieval time. He said the architect laid out the drawings and he pondered over and drew over them - and I mean everything was done by hand - and he gathered them up. He was the only one that had them [the drawings]. (You didn’t have copiers back then.)

He shared what needed to be shared with different people. He had stone masons. He went to the masons, and he brought them in, and explained what their part of the cathedral would look like, how they were to do it, and what the specs were for their piece. So, the masons ran off to all of their different sections of this enormous cathedral. Then they brought in their foremen, and the foremen were told what their part of that section, and what the masons’ part and tasks were. Then, the foremen went to each one of the workers and told them what their small, tiny piece of the cathedral’s building was. Then they got to work. They worked, and they worked - each one of the workers with their stones. Some of them were chipping away, making beautiful little pieces in the turrets. Others were working on gargoyles and different artistic pieces. Still others were cutting out pieces for sculptures either of Jesus, or Joseph, or Mary. You might have one of the kings or queens cut out and inscribed - everyone doing it in their own end. Then, when that worker was done with that piece, they just handed it over to the foreman, who handed it over to the mason, who then gave it to the architect, who instructed the mason to put it in its place. Though none of the workers, or the foremen, or even the masons understood the greater vision of what this cathedral would look like. Only the architect had the one set of plans rolled out and knew what the entire cathedral would look like.

Many of the workers would not live to see it completed - especially the foremen and the masons who were older. To give you an example, St. Peter’s Basilica was one of the fastest built of these beautiful cathedrals, and it took over 20 years to build. People didn’t live all that long back then. Many [folks] did not see it completed.

Dr. Wright said that is how you understand the work of God: God is the architect. God is the only one with the one set of plans, that knows the greater vision of what is going to happen. No one else. You can have clergy, and you can have elders, and you can have members, and you can have non-members, and you can have non-believers. No one else knows the whole picture of what is going to happen, and you will not find it in the book of Revelation. Your task, as people of faith, according to Dr. Wright, is simply to do your little piece of the job, and trust that the Grand Eternal Architect knows what is going to happen; that you can trust that Architect is going to get it right.

The architect who built St. Peter's Basilica got it right. He didn't have the workers, or the foremen, or even the mason sitting there second-guessing the architect - arguing and deciding. No, they didn't see the plans. They just did their job, and did it the very best way they could. Then they trusted the architect to get it right.

Now, folks, how much more are we to trust the *Divine* Architect? We don't know, in our little section, what our little job is. We are just called to do it the very best way we know how - to make our little thing beautiful, strong, faithful and then hand it over to the Holy Spirit to make of it what you will.

All of these saints [pointing to the lit candles at the front of the church, each one signifying a member who died in the past year] made all of their little part of the world as good, and as faithful, and as holy as they could. In all of these baptisms [for the past year, also listed in the bulletin] we are promising to help those young ones take their lives, mold them, and do the best - in their little part of the world - the very best that they can, to honor the Grand Architect, our Triune God.

It is not [about] questioning the Architect. It's not thinking we can do it better, or why didn't the architect do it this way, or I wonder if it's going to work out. No. Our job is to just do it - our little thing - the best way we can, and realize that this, in Revelation, was written when it was a very difficult time to do your little job - because when this was written the early Church was under great persecution.

Now, the Church had always been persecuted, from its earlier times, because you struggled with the Roman Emperors. You had Nero - but this is after Nero. This is after Nero had burned the city and then blamed the Christians for it. Now we are to Domitian and Domitian was even worse than Nero, this [the book of Revelation] was one of, if not the last book, in the New Testament written, and it was written at about 95 CE, during the time of Domitian.

Now Nero was an awful guy, but Domitian was the first emperor to say that anyone who did not bow down and worship the emperor as a god was committing treason. Nero did not demand that. Domitian did. And when, in the book of Revelation, it talks about the antichrist, it isn't some devil way off yonder. Even Martin Luther talked about the pope as the antichrist. Antichrist - I wish it had been two words. Stick a hyphen in there maybe. It isn't one word like it is this demon. It is "anti-Christ." It meant someone who acted in opposition to or different from Christ. It could be anybody. When we sin, we are acting like an anti-Christ; we are living in a way that is not Christ-like. But, poor John of Patmos - he

was writing to give comfort to those who were being abused by the Roman Empire; he was writing to speak out against Domitian, who was *terrifying* the early Church.

Not only was he speaking to them, he was warning the early Church to not act as “anti” to Christ. He was asking them to be faithful, to take their little part of the world and do it the very best they could, against very difficult odds.

Now in the book of Revelation there is a whole lot of numerology and I will do it very briefly: Numbers had meaning. Numbers = numerology. And so, you had perfect and imperfect numbers. So, for example, 4 was a perfect number. 3 was a perfect number. That is why you had triune “3.” They had the 4 corners of the universe: 4 was a perfect number - not just in Christianity or Judaism, but in a number of ancient religions. So, all of the people knew numerology,

12 was a perfect number. That is why you have the 12 tribes of Israel; that is why you have the 12 Apostles - that is why they raced to fill from 11 to 12, because 11 was an imperfect number. So, if you have 12 times 12 that means total perfection: that means everybody, everything. So how many people get to go to Heaven according to the book of Revelation? What is 12 times 12? 144. And, how many people go to Heaven in the book of Revelation? 144,000. Boy those poor Jehovah Witnesses - they had a real problem when they go to 144,000 and 1. [Laughter] Now, you had to say, “Well, the best Jehovah Witnesses are going to Heaven and everybody else will be in the new earth, if you are a good Jehovah Witness. You and me, we’re really in trouble, folks.

Just as there were perfect numbers, there were imperfect numbers - 6 was an imperfect number. So, 3 is perfect; 6 is imperfect. With 666 you have complete perfect imperfection: the antichrist: anyone who doesn’t do what is Christ-like. That’s what John was trying to get the people to understand and help them through - struggling to help them understand. 7 was a perfect number. You had 7 seals, you had 7 trumpets, and you had 7 flags.

In chapter 7 of Revelation, they are opening the 6th seal. This is the time when they are addressing the persecution, and they are struggling with that pain. And, how does the writer give us this hope? By saying that all of those who had died, all of those who had been martyred, what has been shed on them? Now, don’t worry. Now your robes are glistening white. There is no blood anywhere. God had healed them.

Now somebody said, “Why didn’t they just say that.” Well you can say that: “Don’t worry, they are up in heaven. They are fine.” But that doesn’t mean a whole lot. Oh, sure, well that is your idea. But when you paint it in beautiful imagery, it begins to speak to you in a more profound, powerful, spiritual way - than just telling somebody the bare bones of the story. You need that alliteration. You need that symbolism, to make it feel and act spiritual, along with having the coded words that help, so the Romans wouldn’t understand.

The symbolism is powerful in helping us realize and speak a language beyond human words. Human language can never truly speak to the awe and the eternal aspect of God. Sometimes the only way to do that is to do it in symbols, and imagery, and painting, and song. That is why throughout Revelation there is singing, because words can’t always express images. So, you get a feeling from all of the imagery that speaks to us in a different and even more meaningful way.

And so, the Great Architect, speaking in the book of Revelation, is telling the people, “do not be afraid, I have a greater plan.” You do your job no matter how difficult that job. If you just keep the faith and do your little part of the job, and you let the Divine Architect work it all out, you will see a heavenly mansion that will be so great. Even if you are the one who gets stuck with the awful life here on earth; if you do your job you will have done the greatest work on earth; and, you will still have a wonderful place in Heaven, where your white robe is washed clean, and there is hope and life. And, you will walk into your heavenly mansion - your heavenly cathedral - made for you by the Grand Eternal Architect, who has built it all for you and for me, and for our loved ones.

That is what this story is about. It is about reassuring us so that we do not give up, so that we keep doing our little bit, so that the grander heavenly mansion can be built to the Architect’s specifications.

I hope as you receive Communion today you remember your Baptism. And, we have honored the Saints who are now walking in their white robes in God’s Heavenly Kingdom and, that we will remember that as long as we do our work and our part, the grand cathedral in God’s Heavenly Kingdom will be strong, whole and beautiful for all eternity.

That is our prayer. That is what we work for now and always. Amen