

A Glorious Vision

Scripture: Revelation 1:12-18

**By Pastor John H. Noordhof
Williamsburg Christian Reformed Church**

**January 24, 2010
Evening Service**

People of God: It might hard for some of you imagining your pastor tobogganing down the Winchester Hill, but that's what I did on Wednesday night with the youth. As a pastor, I have many different roles and sometimes it gets me doing stuff that even I would not have imagined doing, a few years ago.

Sometimes it is hard to see another person in a different context. Many of you are grandparents, even great-grandparents. It's hard for me to imagine you as young parents, having your first child. Maybe it's hard for you to remember that time as well. But you were. It has shaped who you are. The portrait of you as a young girl or a young mother is just as essential to who you are as being a great-grandmother.

What portrait do you have of Jesus? How do you picture him? What role do you give him? The gospels, of course, give us a portrait of Jesus: The vulnerable baby Jesus in the manger. The wise Jesus, on the hillside, speaking to the crowds. The compassionate Jesus, touching the unclean leper. The suffering Jesus, on the cross. These are all important pictures of our Savior.

But here in the Book of Revelation we are given a picture of Jesus, like we've never seen before. Throughout these pages of Revelation we get a glimpse into the heavenly side of Jesus. The gospels portray his earthly ministry, this book his heavenly ministry. In these visions of Jesus, we get to see Jesus in a new light, revealing what it means that through his death and resurrection Jesus has conquered the enemies of God—sin, death and the devil.

These visions of Jesus, of which this is the most elaborate, are

intended to keep Jesus front and center. As I have said before, and will say repeatedly, Revelation is not a blueprint about the future. Its primary focus is on Jesus. This vision of Jesus needs to sustain us, today, in our walk with God. It needs to under gird our understanding of the world, in the midst of tragedies and persecution.

The **context** of this vision is the church. John writes: *when I turned I saw seven golden lampstands, and among the lampstands was someone like a son of man.* At the end of this vision, we are explicitly told that these lampstands refer to the seven churches. Jesus is portrayed as being in the midst of the church. Even though Jesus ascended to reign over the entire creation, Jesus has a special concern for the church. Because it is the church that proclaims the message of Jesus. It is the church that molds and shapes the citizens of the kingdom of God. It is the church to whom Christ directs his attention, as revealed in the letters to seven churches that follow in chapter 2 and 3.

These letters reveal a church under persecution. They reveal a church going through internal difficulties as well. There were those who sought to undermine the ethical standards of God's law. Others questioned basic beliefs. In the midst of these struggling churches, churches facing difficulties from the outside and from the inside, in the midst of the church stands the commanding figure of Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ who comes with a word of warning and correction. But above all, Jesus Christ who comes with a word of encouragement and hope.

This commanding figure of Christ continues to stand in the midst of the church today. A church that is divided and splintered into a countless number of different groups. A church that continues to be plagued by wrong teaching and attempts to undermine the ethical standards of God. Yet Jesus has not abandoned the church. He continues to stand by her. He continues to be faithful to his promise given at his ascension: Behold, I am with you always.

You cannot separate Jesus from the church. Many people, including some Christians, won't mind having Jesus without the church. After all, the church is full of imperfect people, with committees and programs that struggle to fulfill their mission, so that one is tempted to find Jesus, without the church. But where is Jesus in this vision? In the midst of the lampstands. If you want to find Jesus, you need to deal with the church. Through our worship and witness, Jesus is made known to the world.

And what a figure this Jesus is. In this vision, we get to see Jesus like we've never seen him before. In this vision, he's described as someone "like a son of man." For us today, this phrase might seem to be underscoring the

humanity of Jesus. But for the first century believers, this phrase actually emphasized the opposite. The “Son of Man” was a commanding, redeeming, glorious figure. That’s because that phrase is used in Daniel 7 to describe a figure coming down from heaven, establishing a kingdom that would never be destroyed. It’s a title, Jesus often used to describe himself. Now it is used to begin this extraordinary description of Jesus.

A description that begins with his clothing: he was *dressed in a robe reaching down to his feet, and with a golden sash around his chest.*

Clothing reveals a role a person has. For example, my collar tells other people that I am a pastor (even if many of them think it’s a Roman Catholic priest; but that’s soon corrected.) So we can tell from what Christ wears what one of his tasks is. Christ is here described as an OT priest.

A priest acts as a mediator. A mediator acts as a bridge, bringing together two opposing parties. Priests do not protect God’s holiness from our sin by setting up barriers for us to get to God. Nor do priests protect us from a holy God. Instead, as priest, he removes the barriers to God, allowing access to God, but without endangering our lives. Jesus, as priest, brings a holy God and sinful humanity together again. He has done that through the cross.

After this description of his clothing, we have a seven-fold description of Christ himself. Of course, this is a symbolic depiction. While one ought not to get too carried away with the meaning of each of these items, these items do symbolize what Christ is all about.

When we hear that *his head and hair were white like wool, as white as snow*, you cannot help but think of the words of Isaiah: *Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be white as snow, they shall be like wool*; or the psalmist: *wash me and I shall be whiter than snow*. Whiteness symbolizes purity. Christ is pure, clean and holy.

Christ is also purifying. *His eyes were like a blazing fire*. God is often described as a consuming fire, burning away sin and evil, leaving behind only that which is good. The gaze of Christ penetrates our heart. He knows what lies in our heart. Through his Spirit, he purifies us. He sends us through the refining fire so that we come out cleansed.

His feet were like bronze glowing in a furnace. Why bronze feet? Because they are a symbol of strength and stability. Bronze is a combination of iron and copper. Iron is strong, but it rusts. Copper won’t rust, but it can be twisted. Combine the two in bronze, the best qualities are preserved: the strength of iron and the endurance of copper. The rule of Jesus is set on this solid base. Nothing will be able to dislodge him.

His voice was like the sound of rushing waters. Stand by a large

waterfalls like Niagara Falls and you can't hear another person. The rushing waters drown your voice out. So too the voice of the Lord will drown out all other false voices. His voice echoes throughout creation, demanding a response of robust worship and hearty singing.

In his right hand he held seven stars. The right hand is a symbol of ruling power. The stars are identified for us in verse 20: the angels of the seven churches. Now there is some debate about whether these "angels" refer to the heavenly beings who serve God, or whether they are referring to the earthly messengers of each church, since angel can also be translated as "messenger." Regardless, the image is that of Jesus holding the messengers of the churches, whether heavenly or earthly, in his right hand. Jesus rules the churches.

We are also told that *out of his mouth came a sharp doubled-edged sword.* This sword is the Word of Christ. When Christ is preached, it produces a dual reaction; some respond in faith and therefore receive life. Others remain in the stubbornness of their sinful heart. The result is death. The word of Christ is a double-edged sword.

As a final description, we are told *his face was like the sun shining in all its brilliance.* Just as the face Moses shone brightly after he saw God, so Christ shines with the glory of God. His glory is as brilliant as the sun.

Such is the description of the Son of Man. It is a glorious vision. It presents a commanding figure. This is our Savior. This is a picture of Jesus like we have never seen before. This is the same one born in a manger, the same one who touched a leper, the same one who hung upon the cross. These earthly scenes need to be put together with these heavenly visions. Together they portray our Savior.

Given this vision, it's not surprising that the response of John was one of fear. He was terrified of what he saw before him. That's understandable. We too should be in awe of the scene described here.

But this scene was not meant to frighten us. Instead, this vision is recorded for us in order to comfort us who suffer for the gospel, to encourage us when we feel discouraged, and to strengthen us when we feel like giving up. As a result, Christ reassures John. He reaches out to him, placing his hand upon him, saying, "Do not be afraid."

But that is not all. Christ goes on to boldly declare who he is. As God revealed himself to Moses at the burning bush saying: I am who I am; so now Christ says: *I am the First and the Last.* Christ was there at before the very beginning of creation. Christ will be there long after the final judgment. Christ declares: *I am the Living One, I was dead and behold I am alive forever and ever!* The one whom we worship is not in the grave. Instead, we

serve a risen savior. Christ insists: *And I hold the keys of death and Hades.* Because of his resurrection, Christ has authority and power over death and its realm.

“Do not be afraid.” This is what Jesus says to the believer. This is what Jesus says to the church. This is what Jesus says to you and me. Do not be afraid.

Far too often, as believers and as church, we have a limited view of who Jesus is. We have a limited grasp of Jesus’ of what his death and resurrection accomplished. We have a too-earthly view of life in this world. That’s understandable, given our human limitations. But the Book of Revelation allows us to see things from the heavenly perspective. And in particular this vision allows us to see Jesus as we have never seen before.

Jesus says to us: Do not be afraid. I stand in your midst. You are one of the lampstands. I stand in the midst of the Williamsburg CRC, offering your encouragement to be faithful disciples in the midst of a secular culture. I stand in the midst of the ruined churches of Haiti, offering hope of a better world. I stand in the midst of the persecuted churches of northern Nigeria, offering the assurance that as the faithful witness, I guarantee your victory. Do not be afraid, because I stand in the midst of my church.

Do not be afraid. I am your priest. You can approach our holy and majestic God, without fear or hindrance, despite your sin and guilt. You can come in worship and in prayer, because I have made it possible. In the name of Jesus, come before your heavenly Father.

Do not be afraid. I am this commanding figure, offering these words of assurance. I am with you, as you go from this place of worship and go back to your homes, as you head into a work week, as you deal with your extended families, I am with you. This commanding figure. I offer you these words of assurance.

Go, then, with confidence. Go with the conviction that as you face the enemies of sin, death, and the devil, these have been defeated, because of whom I am. See me, as you’ve never seen me before.

Do not be afraid. Amen.