

**PENTECOST 5B 2024**  
**Immanuel Highlands Episcopal Church**  
**Wilmington, Delaware**  
**June 23, 2024**

I've mentioned to you some of what our recent diocesan clergy retreat was about. We gathered over a period of three days to listen and discuss a book written about the last book of the Bible, the Revelation to John, sometimes known as The Apocalypse. The author of the book about the book, Dr. Michael Battle, was with us to lead the four sessions we held during our retreat.

I'm not sure that the discussion went exactly as planned, as our gathered assembly had a wide variety of experiences with the words written by John in exile on the Mediterranean island of Patmos. Some confessed an avoidance of the book altogether, because, let's face it, some of it is quite strange and can be terrifying. Some of the milder, more assuring passages appear as our Epistle lessons during the Easter season. That will happen next year. Cue the theme from Twilight Zone.

A few months ago, a friend re-posted something one of her friends posted on Facebook. It said, "If the Apostle Paul could see the church in America today, we'd be getting a letter." At the beginning of our retreat, I met our bishop in the hallway and said that I wondered what John of Patmos would write to the church in Wilmington, Delaware. After all, you'll find he already wrote to the church in Smyrna.

Take a close look at what Paul wrote to the church in Corinth, a part of his second letter is today's Epistle lesson. Paul can't seem to emphasize enough the urgency of the time. "Now is the day of salvation! Now is the acceptable time!" "Get it now while supplies last!" Wait. Paul wouldn't have said that.

Contemporary readings of Revelation interpret John's writing as a threat, following up with an urgent "get yours now before time runs out" message. There's a whole series of books and quite a few movies based on the "Left Behind" interpretation. The real truth of that is it's best to leave behind those books and movies.

There is no end to wannabe prophets who look to every conflict, every suspicious act to point to a sign of the end of the world. I even raised the issue this past week in the context of trying to schedule an appointment with a doctor before that day arrived. I'm still waiting to see which comes first.

During our retreat, I commented on the section that talks about a war in heaven, with Michael fighting the adversarial angel, who gets thrown down from the heavens. Jesus, in an apocalyptic section of Matthew's Gospel, says something similar. In Revelation, the scene seems to occur at the same time as creation, putting the adversary, named Satan or the devil, on earth. To get revenge, those first humans, created in God's image, are tempted and lured away from God. But the work didn't end there.

The work of the adversary is to restore to chaos that which God called into order, and then said it was "good." The war John retells in Revelation is on-going. But, just as it was in the beginning, the battle is within us, and works from within to spread its message outside ourselves.

We do that in the choices we make. We reveal our inner thoughts, our presence of or our lack of faith, in times of chaos and uncertainty. We often find ourselves in the same boat with Jesus' disciples in stormy seas, as unsure of who we are even as we find ourselves in the presence of the one who says, "peace, be still." We forget that the Word made flesh spoke those same words "in the beginning."

That's who Jesus is for us. Yet, the master of chaos and destruction keeps challenging us to answer the question of his and our identity. Paul says it well when he states that we have died with Christ so that we might also live with him. Some think that's only in a time to come, ignoring Paul's "now is the time, now is the day" statements.

For those of us who need reminding, there is good news in John's Apocalypse. That comes interspersed with visions of throngs gathered with God, but ultimately at the end, when, in my interpretation, Eden is restored. God's dwelling place is on and with God's created world, with God's people, and finally, finally, chaos and destruction are themselves destroyed forever.

Heaven and earth are joined together as one. Perhaps Paul or John will write us a letter telling us how that might come about here in Wilmington. Then again, maybe they already have.