

**Rev. Seth D. Bode † Sermon 142, 06-10-2018 † Third Sunday after Pentecost**

“Lord God, you have appointed me as a Bishop and Pastor in your Church, but you see how unsuited I am to meet so great and difficult a task. If I had lacked your help, I would have ruined everything long ago. Therefore, I call upon you: I wish to devote my mouth and my heart to you; I shall teach the people. I myself will learn and ponder diligently upon your Word. Use me as your instrument -- but do not forsake me, for if ever I should be on my own, I would easily wreck it all.”

“Sir, I would see Jesus.”

**ST. JOHN VIEWS THE CHAINING OF THE DRAGON AND THE THRONES OF CHRIST'S PRIESTS**

*Second Lesson – Revelation 20*

Then I saw an angel coming down from heaven. He had the key to the abyss and a great chain in his hand. <sup>2</sup>He seized the dragon, the ancient serpent, who is the Devil and Satan, bound him for a thousand years, <sup>3</sup>threw him into the abyss, locked it, and set a seal on it, so that he could no longer deceive the nations until the thousand years come to an end. After this he must be released for a short time.

<sup>4</sup>Then I saw thrones, and those who were sitting on them were given the authority to judge. And I saw the souls of those who had been beheaded because of their testimony about Jesus and because of the word of God. They had not worshipped the beast and his image, and they did not receive his mark on their forehead and on their hand. They lived and reigned with Christ a thousand years. <sup>5</sup>(The rest of the dead did not live until the thousand years came to an end.) This is the first resurrection.

<sup>6</sup>Blessed and holy is the one who has a share in the first resurrection. The second death has no power over them. Instead they will be priests of God and of Christ. And they will reign with him for a thousand years. (EHV)

My name is Seth Bode and I am afraid of the dark. I admit it. I was once so afraid of the dark that

- I would sleep on top of covers for fear of snakes underneath.
- I would often wander to my mom and dad's bed at night, hoping this time they'd let me crawl in.
- I would ask my parents if they were actually aliens that were going to eat me.

Growing older, I have more reasonable fears. The darkness I fear now is the future. I fear for the future of the nation. I fear for the future of the NFL. I fear for the future of the church. Maybe you can relate to those fears. Maybe there are others. A daughter fears for the future of her mother's health in an assisted living center. An eighth-grader fears for the future of her reputation in high school. A father fears for the future of his child's safety in middle school.

I'd like to tell you that the book of Revelation answers many of those fears. But Revelation is a dark place in the Bible, because it's hard to understand. The first thing we need to do is grab a light. God gives us a light – His Gospel. When we see these verses, Revelation 20:1-6, in the light of clearer passages of God's Gospel,

- that the Father has not left us but has loved us;
- that Jesus has delivered his believers from death and sin for free, for nothing; and
- that the Holy Spirit has taken away stony human hearts and replaced them with fleshy hearts of faith

then we can interpret Revelation. When we do, this puts God in charge, because of

**How God Secures Our Years**

1. Satan is bound with a chain.
2. Believers are bound to reign.

We can get that kind of clarity out of God's Word for us in Revelation. It comes to us by the Gospel, the good news of great joy that is for all people, that Jesus is Christ the Lord.

### 1. Satan is bound with a chain.

The first thing we want to say is that we take the book of Revelation literally. I don't mean to propose that we make Revelation into a science fiction novel. I take Revelation literally because St. John, the writer of this book, *literally* says it's a vision. The key is, "And I saw." "And I saw." "I saw." He says, "I saw," 47 times. The apostle John is the last apostle left alive, but he's exiled on the island of Patmos. Here St. John writes his gospel, what we know of as the book of John; he writes three epistles (a.k.a. letters), 1-2-3 John. And he sees a revelation, "The Revelation of John," full of different visions, what he saw. These visions are full of figures and pictures and metaphors and representative numbers. So we can take Revelation literally without making it into a science fiction novel.

Some would say a literal interpretation of our Scripture lesson sounds like this: *The devil will stop tempting for 1,000 calendar years, when governments will finally become Christian.* We can say instead that a literal interpretation is that it's a vision and we want to shine a bright gospel light on it to get the right meaning. These thousand years are better understood as a figurative time **between** Jesus **and** the Judgment, His first coming and His final coming. You might say it's Jesus' first advent, ministry, death, resurrection, ascension and then extends to the end of time as we know it. These thousand years then would be the New Testament period. Taking the Bible literally doesn't mean 1,000 years have to be literal calendar years. Ten is a number of completion.... 1,000 is 10 x 10 x 10, or really, really, really complete. The Bible does this with numbers. In Psalm 50:10, the cattle "**on a thousand hills**" belongs to the Lord. Do we think that on hill 1,001 it's different? Or that on hill 1,002 the cattle don't belong to the Lord? We do this in our human reasoning from time to time and say that 1,000 represents something. "*If I've told you once, I've told you a thousand times!*" When parents say that, it's emphasizing that you have really told this child to get this room cleaned up. God is really emphasizing that these thousand years are sure and certain and a focal part. Why not the New Testament era?

*"But Revelation is all about the future!"* Who says? It doesn't have to be in the future. For example, Revelation 12 is clearly all about Christmas. In that vision, a Child, a baby, is clearly born of a woman, which some people call Mary, but the woman may be better understood as the body of Messiah-believers. But the point is that Revelation can be about the past and present as well as the future.

With this present understanding in mind, that the 1,000 years is a complete time, and by opening up the possibility that it could be past or present time, let's look at the dragon of Revelation. The dragon is big and very powerful and has seven heads and ten horns. He finds his way into several pictures of the book. In previous chapters, the dragon whips his tail and sweeps a third of the stars out of the sky. He brings war to heaven. Then he stands under the woman giving birth to the Child, ready to devour the baby. When that doesn't work, he persecutes the woman by spewing a flood. He gives power to evil beasts coming out of the land and sea. There's even a wicked lamb-shaped beast, a false prophet, that speaks like the dragon. The dragon is a terrible figure, but our text instantly reveals why that is. He is "**that ancient serpent, who is the devil, or Satan.**" So when we speak about this dragon-Enemy, or Satan, even if we are speaking about a figurative picture God paints for us in the Bible, we are speaking literally about a spirit who brings evil plans and purposes and who seeks to bring suffering, sin, and sadness. The dragon is a serpent sometimes. The dragon is a roaring lion elsewhere in the Bible. He is pictured as a morning star in Isaiah. We get closer when we hear that he is a fallen angel in the words of Jesus, Job, and Peter. There's more than one picture for this evil spirit, but **he is our Enemy.**

Yet something powerful happens to that dragon. Satan, the Enemy, is bound with a chain! An angel, whom St. John apparently hasn't seen yet, comes down from heaven with a heavy chain to bind the

devil in the abyss. He puts the devil under arrest, you might say. Now that is a mighty feat, and difficult for any angel to achieve, but we know that with God's power, it can be done. Satan can be placed under arrest and do his time. Jesus Christ has hindered the devil's work in this world: Hebrews 2:14-15, **"He too shared in their humanity so that by his death he might destroy him who holds the power of death—that is, the devil—and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death."** Jesus drove the devil out so he can't stop the gospel spread: John 12:31-32, **"Now the prince of this world will be driven out. But I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to myself."**

Hence *Satan is bound with a chain*. He has been for years and years and years, since Jesus. Because of Jesus, Satan is limited in his ability to tempt and cause suffering.

What is the chain? A steel chain? A new rope? A mighty dog leash? Links of iron? You can't bind a spirit with a steel chain under lock and key. A new rope or a steel chain would be as powerless against the devil as they were against the Spirit of God within Samson. No, we are not talking about a literal chain. Instead, that chain is the Gospel of God. Wherever the good news of Jesus and God's love is preached, the devil is on a leash. The more widely and the more purely the Gospel is proclaimed, the shorter Satan's leash becomes. Wherever the Gospel is despised and denied, twisted and scorned, the devil is let loose **"for a little while"** or **"for a short season."**

You can test this Gospel of God as the chain or leash of the devil. In Matthew 28:18-20, Jesus gave the Church His Great Commission, **"All authority ... Therefore go ... and teaching them ... Surely."** God gives this Great Commission to the Church because it has everything the Church needs to carry it out. There's Word and sacrament (**"baptizing ... and teaching"**); there's truth and purity (**"teaching them to keep everything"**); there's the promise of God and the power of God (**"all authority" ... "surely I am with you always"**). With this clear passage of the Bible, we can quickly learn how God secures our years against the devil.

This chain is God's grace and peace. He has not let the devil free to roam and torment as he might. This chain is God's mercy, since this is also part of His Gospel. Satan's chain should have been a tether to hell, intended for us. Our sins against the perfect, holy God merited a chain in the abyss forever. We deserved the punishment of death, to be put under arrest for our crimes. Each of us knows what specific sins of the past week makes us guilty. We each know how we have hated and lied, cheated and hurt, wronged and doubted not only our neighbor but our God. We earned the wages of sin, that is, death. We have reasons to fear the future with trembling. Bonds and chains were all we deserved.

*Transition: But instead, what does God do with broken souls, assailed by the Enemy and sick to their own stomachs with their own sin? They get to reign with him.*

## 2. Believers are bound to reign.

I love this part. John again says, **"I saw"** (again, vision) **"thrones ... and I saw the souls of those who had been beheaded because of their testimony about Jesus and because of the Word of God."** These eternal souls of people are thoroughly connected with Jesus because they didn't practice idolatry or listen to the lies of antichrists. One more testimony to the fact that this is picturesque vision; they didn't receive the mark of the beast on the head or hand. How can you tell if a headless soul has a mark on his head? For that matter, how can you talk about a headless soul? Unlike human bodies, human souls have no place and no space. In visions of Revelation, one can see things you might not ordinarily see. That's further testimony that we take each description of a vision as a point of emphasis.

Verses 4, 5, and 6 say, **“They came to life and reigned with Christ for a thousand years.”** It seems to me that the first good question here is what information might be new. We aren’t told anything new about Jesus Christ. Christ reigns here, there and everywhere always. He’s the same yesterday and today and forever. What’s different about the 1,000 years here?

Again, often you hear this kind of interpretation for verses 4-6: *Christ will come and set up a kingdom and reign on earth with a return to high morals for 1,000 calendar years, before a judgment day that will result in a heavenly kingdom instead.* This is simply a careless reading of the words of the Bible. Nowhere does Jesus reign for 1,000 years. Subject = ‘we,’ verb = ‘reign,’ rest of the predicate, ‘with Him.’ If Matthew 28:18a, **“All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me,”** is true, Jesus doesn’t start to reign. He is always reigning. In other words, if I came to stay at your house for 3 days, it says nothing about how long you have stayed at your house. So if believers come to reign with Jesus for 1,000 years, it says nothing about His setting up a kingdom in a different way than He has already established. If Jesus intended to set up a kingdom here, why did he say, **“My kingdom is not of this world,”** to Pontius Pilate?

Instead, we may understand the change that took place when witnesses of God’s Gospel were persecuted, in some cases beheaded, in the early Church as well as the current Church. They were insulted, harmed, and they died because of God’s Word. These are those whose bodies were taken, but their souls never died. This is further testimony of what we Christians already know: **“Whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life.”** But Revelation pushes us further; God tells us that those who are faithful, even to the point of death, get to join his reign. You might say, “We’re not reigning.” But you have the gospel promises. You are a royal priest in Christ by faith. He has called you out of darkness into His wonderful light. He has enlightened you with His gifts and turned you from your sin. He has sanctified and kept you in the one true faith. Think about it; when are souls without their body as in Revelation 20? In heaven and hell after Judgment Day, soul and body are together. This millennium must take place during the New Testament period.

Any baseball fans in here? What does it mean when a player has a batting average 1.000? It’s a complete thing, isn’t it? That player achieves first base on every at-bat? It’s incredibly impossible, you’d have to be God Himself to achieve it (not really). But batting 1.000 would be incredibly complete. Revelation is God batting 1.000. He does this in His New Testament Church as He secures our years.

Why is that so comforting? *We don’t have to wait around.* The fulfillment of the ages didn’t have to wait for a future millennium. We get to reign even while soul and body are separated in death. The first resurrection is when we are brought to life and washed in baptism. What else does that but the Gospel? That reign on thrones is also the Gospel, the good news of Jesus. Revelation is this beautiful picture of Jesus winning, the victor, the Gospel giver and sharer. God is batting 1.000. His Word will not return empty. It always accomplishes the purpose for which God sent it. Revelation is God batting 1.000. That is how he secures our years. **“Whoever lives and believes in me,”** Jesus told Martha, **“will never die”** (John 11:26). That is only possible because they have already been brought to life in the first resurrection, by water and the Word. Colossians 2:13, **“When you were dead in your sins and in the uncircumcision of your sinful nature, God made you alive with Christ. He forgave you all your sins.”** Colossians 3:1, **“Since then you were raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God.”**

The millennium battle is not some later time. The battle is not on the pages of Revelation in a mysterious science fiction world. The battle is now. It is you. It is me. It is the devil, the world, and our own inner sinner waging against us. The battle is the pressure to cave in; it is the neglect of Word and sacrament; and it is the prayerfulness as well as the prayerlessness of believers. The battle is this

ministry here at Bethlehem. I already promised last week to pour myself into this work. You promised the same, as God gives you strength.

So won't you join me in the battle? Won't you prepare your hearts? Won't you join me in this cause? When we figure out how to move forward into this future as visible church, won't you fight the good fight alongside me? The millennium battle is also this: that hour of the day when you follow the narrow path of Jesus Christ, the Way the Truth, and the Life. That hour of the day when you respond to God in renewed, sanctified living; that hour of the day when you choose not to curse in front of your children and in front of your God; that hour when you volunteer for a selfless act of service; that hour when you fill out your time and talent sheets; that hour when you get involved here. And yes, the millennium battle is that hour you and others repent of the smallest sin; that hour when you find mercy at the foot of the cross, knowing you cannot fight alone without the help of God. The millennium battle is that hour when you trust God's protection in the face of all would-be mass shooters. It is that hour when you wrestle in prayer with God on behalf of your mother in assisted living. It is that hour when you don't give up and take your own life, as they do in the world of mourning and faithless despair, but entrust your sufferings and your future to your Lord. It is that hour when you take comfort in God that high school isn't really going to be that bad, because Jesus is with you, and you are with Jesus. That's right, it's not just a millennium battle. It's a millennium reign, a throne that is for those who live already now and will never die the second – the eternal – death.

**“If God is for you, who can be against you?”** Someone in the world? The dragon? Some fallen angel? Some unseen power? No. God is for you; the point being that no one can be against you. **“Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? ... Neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all the world can separate you from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus.”**

*Though devils all the world may fill, all eager to devour us.  
We tremble not, we fear no ill. They cannot overpower us.  
Do what they will; hate, steal, hurt or kill. (Take they our life, goods, fame, child, and wife.  
Let all these be gone, They have yet nothing won.)  
The kingdom's ours forever.*

My name is Seth Bode and I am a broken soul. I admit it. But I have the Light to shine. I take hold of the chain. In faith I am bound to reign. And you are too! Amen.

*Now to Him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to His great power that is at work within us; to Him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus from generation to generation both now and forever. Amen.*