

Setting the Stage
Luke 4: 1 -13
Revelation 1:1 – 8

Years ago I worked at Queens College in Charlotte, before I went to Seminary. While there I met Dr. Charles Hadley – a larger than life character who taught literature and linguistics. He was often flow to Los Angeles or to some other location to help actors work on Southern accents. I once asked him how his results were, you know getting the LA crowd to say “y’ all” the right way, “Are they good when you finish with them? How are the results?” “Mixed,” he said.

Once I heard him lecturing on the connection between Elizabethan English and the accents spoken on the North Carolina Coast and in the deepest hollers and valleys in the Mountains of North Carolina and East Tennessee. In these lectures I learned two things – 1) Shakepeare probably sounded more like he was from Okrakoke Island than Raleigh Durham, and 2) many of our most endearing Southern expressions come from this period.

For example – “Set the Table.” You and I know this means to place knives, forks, dinner plate, napkins, and all the other necessities out in a proper order in a proper fashion, in order for the meal to be shared. But why is it set the table? Why not, “dress the table,” or “set the plates,” or “place the utensils.”

Well, according to Dr. Hadley, the idea of a dining room table or of a dining room, a space inside where only meals would take place, a room for nothing but eating, was a luxury only for the wealthy. This meant that most people’s eating tables were squares or rounds of wood leaning up against a wall near the stove. “Set the table” meant to go get the saw horses or the blocks that served as legs and literally, set the table on top of them. That is where is comes from.

What it also suggests to us is that doing even the simplest task takes effort and planning. The table top, the legs, the blocks, the chairs, all had to be there in a prescribed place or there was no table to set.

Ever had to paint a room? It doesn’t take long before you realize all the work is in the preparation – taping, scraping, covering, mudding, sanding – and very little is in the painting itself.

Most sermons, most programs, most lesson plans, most road projects, most builds that we see are 90% preparation and 10% presentation.

If you haven’t thought it through from the beginning, you are already in trouble once it begins and the feeling that comes in that moment, “My God how could I have forgotten that detail?”

The stage manager who sees an actor reach for a prop that is not there.

The boss who needs a certain report to present to the board.

The missing slide on the graduating senior’s power-point project. All planning problems.

It turns out that setting the table, setting the stage, is really important. And I make mention of this because Lent requires some stage setting. Specifically I need to set the stage for our worship in Lent this year.

So I am asking a lot of you as listeners to this sermon today because there is nothing stranger in our Bible than Revelation, nothing most recently more misunderstood

than Revelation and nothing more wondered about in the mind of most Christians than the mysteries contained within Revelation and its claims to the end times. What is going on in this book of vision and dreams written by this strange character John of Patmos? Better yet, I want to try and answer – what does it have to say to the church today?

Our good friend Brian Blount, President of Union Presbyterian Seminary in Richmond, has just written of Revelation, “In the literary storm that is the book of Revelation, John writes in anger. Teleported into its passion by the Holy Spirit, he is caught up like a broken kite jammed into the limbs of a avaricious tree. His fanciful flight of faith aborted by what he sees as evil projecting out in every direction, he fortifies himself while he holds on for the God he believes is coming to his rescue.”

I know, Brian Blount is good writer! But he gives us a piece of staging – something is wrong in the world so Revelation is angry. Something is wrong that must be confronted and named – silence is no longer acceptable, something must be said!

Who is this John of Patmos – the writer, the recorder of the Revelation from God? Well, he is a prisoner of Rome, jailed on the island of Patmos – an impregnable and miserable place – imagine Cape Lookout on a bad day, surrounded by cliffs and rocks and roaring ocean. He is writing at the turn of the century – 95 or 100 AD – at the end of a great persecution from Rome. You need to know that for its first thirty years, the juvenile church was largely ignored by Rome. The middle age years for the church were not so kind – in the 60’s, 70’s, 80’s CE – 30 or so years after the death of Jesus – Rome could kill somebody just for being Christian. It was a brutal and merciless crackdown against our forefathers and foremothers of faith. By the time John is writing, the church is beginning to show her years. Like an aging beauty queen or Hollywood starlet she is showing her wrinkles, and there is no “Dr. Beverly Hills” to iron things out.

I wonder – what would I write? I am in prison, never to leave again, surely to die a nameless faceless death – what would my words be?

What John gives us is truly a masterpiece of the grotesque, the amazing, the shocking, and in the end, the hopeful. John gives us a work of faith that he believes will demonstrate our errors and “fortify” our souls for the challenges, and maybe even the battles ahead.

It is like a 21 chapter pep talk. A 21 quarter basketball game. And a 21 hour dance marathon combined. We’ll need inspiration, team work, and perseverance if we are to make it to the end and through the storm.

But none of it makes sense if we do not “set the stage” – no, instead of seeing what John actually meant, our imaginations will be captured by dragons and prostitutes and lambs and trumpets and seals and the like. There is a reason, after all that the middle ages were fascinated by Revelation and its interior claims.

I think this is a good time to set another piece for us – and that is that the book of Revelation is not really called Revelation. The original title of the book is the “Apocalypse of John.” The secondary title revelation comes from the first verse of the work – “The revelation of Jesus Christ to his servant John.” I share this to say that I do not think, as a student of scripture or as your pastor, that anything in Revelation is set in stone. I am not a dispensationalist, I am not a literalist – this book is not an answer book or a book that requires a decoder to predict the future. You will find many on television who think that it is. I disagree. When even the title of something is up and open for

interpretation and for reassignment, then it strikes me that interpretation, prayer, and guidance is required every step of the way.

Further, when we hear the word Apocalypse, we automatically begin thinking of end times and terror and the anti-Christ. This too is overly simple – yes, Apocalyptic writing is about these things, but it is also about naming wrongs in the world, declaring the indecency of suffering in all its forms, of making a stand against evil, and shouting from the rooftops that faith demands that we believe that God is going to make the wrongs right and the rough places flat and smooth. That is to say that things in our Bible which are apocalyptic – Ezekiel, Joel, Daniel, Jude, parts of Matthew and Luke, Thessalonians, and Revelation – these things are equal parts warning and blessing, they are shocking and hopeful at the same time. To only see one of the meanings in the text is to misread the whole.

What I want to do in Lent on these Sunday mornings is to see Revelation for what it really might say to us in 2010. And I want to take the problems that I see confronting the church in 2010 and place them under the light of Revelation.

After all – did you hear the beginning of Revelation – “John to the seven churches that are in Asia” – “to the churches” – it was a letter to the churches those many centuries ago – it can be now.

I want to set the stage for John, invite him in and let him speak to us with drama and comedy and imagery.

I want to set the table for him, that he might come in and eat with us, and see what he would say to the church today just as he was speaking to the church then.

So for the next few weeks I am going to be looking at problems that are confronting the larger Church – not necessarily Howard Memorial, not necessarily yet, but problems that plague us in North America as we try to witness to God’s divine grace and lovely and inspiring faith.

Just as we have our eyes opened to see Jesus through the temptations – we learn that he is not going to be a savior or a messiah who easily gives in or who slowly commits himself to the cause of evil instead of the cause of salvation – our eyes can be opened at Lent as we are called to be honest and come clean as to who we are and who God is – as to what we have become and why we need God’s grace.

Grace – ultimately that is what it all comes down to. Jesus’ word to the church – even in Revelation is one of hope. We always approach this book with fear – in art, in preaching, in our minds – but listen to the first word from Jesus – Revelation 1:8 – “I am the Alpha and the Omega, who is and who was and who is to come the almighty.” This same Jesus who loved the children will surely love us, no matter how charged the clouds or how difficult the journey.

It strikes me that we should approach this book with wonder and awe – with imaginations ready to be shaped – but with resolve that in the end it is all about Jesus and his love. Nothing is ever greater than that. Nothing at all.

What John has to say to the church – that our theology has become weakened, and that our mission has become staid, and that our hearts are more invested in fighting than loving – well this may not be easy to hear. But here it is.

The table is set. The stage is ready.

Won’t we sit and eat awhile and listen for what Christ is saying to us today?