

## Whom Will You Serve?

Revelation 1:4-8

The 2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday of Easter - April 3, 2016

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**[SLIDE 27]** Did you recognize the song that we played as a prelude this morning? Bobby Dylan's "Gotta Serve Somebody." Let's hear the first verse and refrain again ... **[STEP ?]**

The words of the refrain express the main point of the book of Revelation. No matter who you are, no matter what you do in life ...

... you're gonna have to serve somebody, yes indeed,  
you're gonna have to serve somebody.  
It may be the devil or it may be the Lord,  
but you're gonna have to serve somebody.



**[ SLIDE 28 - STEP 1]** A little bit of historical background will help us make sense of this mysterious book from which our Sunday readings will be drawn during this Easter season.

The book of Revelation was composed by John, a visionary and prophet exiled to the island of Patmos (1:1-2, 9). He was a native of Judea/Palestine who ended up in Asia Minor (modern day Turkey) as a refugee, traumatized by the death and enslavement of hundreds of thousands Jews, the destruction of the Temple and the city of Jerusalem. Living as a refugee and asylum seeker in a foreign land in the decades following this catastrophe, John saw the rise of patriotic enthusiasm for Roman emperors who had destroyed his homeland. Vespasian, and his sons Titus and Domitian were powerful generals and efficient administrators, who were hailed as sons of gods, saviors, and benefactors. Domitian was formally addressed as "dominus et deus" — my lord and my god. The emperors brought peace and prosperity, but not for everyone. Those at the top of the social ladder reaped the greatest benefits, while the majority had to settle for whatever trickled down to their level. Immigrants and refugees, like John, were at the bottom of the ladder. They were viewed with suspicion because they were ethnically and religiously different from the majority, often the victims of verbal abuse, harassment, bullying, and even physical violence.

The book of Revelation was written by and for Christ-followers trying to survive in a world where success required demonstrations of allegiance to an imperial cult that proclaimed the absolute power of the emperor. The question for John and his first-century audiences was whom were they going to pledge their allegiance to, whom were they going to serve, knowing full well that refusing to acknowledge the emperor as lord and god could lead to poverty, suffering, and

even death. Our world is different than the world in which they lived, so we might well wonder if the book of Revelation can still speak to us today. I think it can.

**[STEP 2]** We might not have emperors, but we do live in the midst of social systems, structures and practices that dehumanize, dominate and exploit people. *If* we survive and prosper within these systems is often determined by factors that we cannot control: where we were born, the families and neighborhoods within which we were raised, the color of our skin, our gender, our sexual orientation, our size, our age. *How* well we survive and prosper within these systems often requires us to make choices — choices about whom we will serve — the devil or the Lord.



**[STEP 3]** John describes his book as “a revelation of Jesus Christ” (1:1), an unveiling of the mystery of Jesus. Through a series of vision reports John shows his readers: who Christ is, where Christ is, what Christ is doing, and what Christ will continue to do.

Today’s reading begins with a greeting of grace and peace from “the one who is and who was and who is coming, and from the seven spirits before his throne” (1:4). “The one who is and who was and who is coming” is the Lord God, the alpha and omega — the beginning and end of all things — the *pantokrator* — the ruler of all, the almighty (1:8). The seven spirits refer to the Holy Spirit, perfect and complete in wisdom, understanding, counsel, might, knowledge, awe of God, and piety (cf. Isaiah 11:2). The ultimate source and foundation of grace and peace are God, the Holy Spirit, **and** Jesus Christ “the witness, the faithful one, the first-born of the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth” (1:5).

Jesus is the faithful witness, the one who authentically reveals God’s nature and purpose, God’s dream to bring grace and peace, well-being, wholeness and reconciliation to all people. Jesus’ faithfulness to God’s purpose leads him to the cross and out the other side into the resurrection as the first-born of the dead, showing us the path to our ultimate destiny. The risen Christ is the lord of all creation, ruling over the kings of the earth, i.e. all of us who imagine ourselves to be in charge not only of our own lives but the lives of everyone else around us.

John reminds us that the risen Christ loves us, and freed us from our sins by his blood, and made us a kingdom of priests to his God and father — to this risen Christ be glory and dominion forever (1:6). In other words, when faced with the questions: to whom we should give glory, to whom we should give power in our lives, whom we should serve — the correct answer is ... Jesus Christ.

Why?

We give glory and power to the risen Christ, because he loves us — here and now already, just as we are. We give glory and power to the risen Christ, because he has freed us from sin and made

us priests in his kingdom. Notice that these are in the past tense. They are what Christ has already accomplished for us through his death and resurrection. The only future element in this text is Christ's revelation to every eye, calling forth wailing from all the tribes of the earth (1:7). I suspect the wailing will be an expression of mourning, sorrow, and grief for all the times and places humanity did not give glory and power to the risen Christ.



John goes on to describe the risen Christ standing in the midst of seven lamp stands, holding seven stars in his right hand, with a sharp two-edged sword issuing from his mouth. The seven lamp stands represent churches, the stars represent the spirits or planets ancients believed controlled the fate of humanity (1:9-20). This vision expresses the reality that the risen Christ is present in the midst of his people, and that the risen Christ is the spiritual force at work throughout the universe. The risen Christ's message to his followers is: "Do not be afraid; I am the first and the last, the living one. I was dead, and see I am alive forever and ever; and I have the keys of Death and Hades" (1:17-18).

Bob Dylan sang, "you're gonna have to serve somebody. It may be the devil or the Lord, but you're gonna have to serve somebody." And so the question remains: whom will we serve? Will we serve the risen Christ and how will we know who or what represents the risen Christ?

Hear again the voice of the one who loves us and freed us from sin, death and the devil, who brings us grace and peace: "Do not be afraid."

We live in a culture of fear, manufactured and manipulated by persons and organizations that profit from convincing us that we need to be afraid of crime, drugs, minorities, killer kids, mutant microbes, aliens from outer space, plane crashes, road rage, suicide bombers, and so much more. In the April edition of *Living Lutheran*, Peter Marty addresses this national obsession with being afraid by reminding us that "the more fear we possess, the less love we have. The more love we have, the less fear we retain ... the greatest achievement of Easter [is] not ... freedom from death but ... freedom from our fears. We get our lives back through this resurrected one who looked fear squarely in the eyes ... and loved. Only love can conquer fear."

Please pray with me:

Lord God, you are the alpha and the omega, the one who is and who was and who is to come. By your Holy Spirit, open our eyes to see our risen Lord standing in our midst. Open our ears to hear Christ say, "Do not be afraid." Open our hearts to receive that perfect love that casts out all fear. Empower us to serve Christ in all the arenas of our lives. Amen.