

“The Thousand Years”

“If I’ve told you once, I’ve told you a thousand times...” Kids, have you heard this figure of speech before? I’ll bet you have. I know my kids have especially when it comes to closing the front door at our house. “If I’ve told you once, I’ve told you a thousand times!” Parents, you know what I’m talking about. This is one of our go-to phrases for making a point. It’s not that we have literally counted a thousand specific instances of not closing a door, or not putting dishes in the dishwasher or not doing homework in front of the TV. We use the phrase to make the point that we’ve said something over and over again.

And it’s not just us that use the number 1000 as a figure of speech at times. God’s Word, the Holy Scriptures also contain non-literal uses of the number. “A thousand years are like a day to God,” we read in Psalm 90:4. God is timeless. He doesn’t count his days in 1000-year increments, but saying, “A thousand years are like a day to God” makes the point that he is beyond time. In Psalm 50:10, we read that, “The cattle on a thousand hills are mine.” We know that every creature belongs to God, it’s not just the cattle on a thousand hills; it’s every animal in the forest, every bird in the air, and every creature in the sea. The number 1000 is symbolic of his dominion over his creation.¹

Well, this might be a shocker to many of you, but the view of the ancient church, which is our view as Lutherans, has always been that Revelation chapter 20 also uses the number 1000 symbolically. The 1,000 years mentioned six times in chapter 20 is not a literal period of time but a symbolic period that represents the completed era between Christ’s birth and his second coming at the end of this present world.²

Now, in light of the rest of the book, this symbolic view of the thousand years should not be that hard to accept. Lots of Revelation uses symbolic language, which is what we’ve been talking about in this sermon series since the beginning of Advent. In Rev. 1, John

¹Mueller, Steven. *Called to Believe, Teach, and Confess*: Eugene: Wipe & Stock, 2005

² Brighton, Louis. *Revelation*: St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1999

describes his vision of seeing the Christ holding seven stars and having a sword for a tongue. In Rev. 12, he describes this giant pregnant woman clothed with the sun and wearing a crown of stars crying out in the agony of giving birth. Neither of these made the sermon series, by the way, but these and the many more wild and vivid descriptions like these paint this incredible picture of God's victory over Satan and our future in heaven. But we have to be careful when interpreting this book because it's easy to get caught up in the mystery and throw context out the window. There's a good reason, I think, that Revelation is at the end of the Bible. It's because it must be interpreted in light of the clear passages in the rest of the Bible that point to who our God is, what he has done for us in Christ, and the fact that he will return one final time at the end of this present age.

We go with what we know and then we turn to Revelation for assurance. Now that too may seem strange to many of you. Reading Revelation apart from the rest of the Bible certainly doesn't sound very assuring. It actually sounds terrifying. Our reading tonight is no exception. In Revelation 20, we read about bottomless pits, dragons, the souls of those who had been beheaded, marks of the beast, these characters named Gog and Magog who are gearing up for battle, books of judgment, and of course all these references to "the thousand years." Start interpreting all of this literally and you get something that is not very comforting or reassuring at all. In fact, what you get is something that can actually take away from the mercy and grace brought about by Jesus' death and resurrection for the sinners that we all are!

Let me expand on this a little more. Lots of Christians, and I mean lots of Christians, interpret Chapter 20, along with lots of other chapters in Revelation literally, which forces them into this view that looks primarily at Christ's future unfinished work. Now Scripture is very clear that Christ is going to return and when he does, it will be the defining event of the end of the world. Jesus speaks of this in Matthew 24:30. "They will see the Son of Man coming in the clouds of heaven with power and great glory." He goes on to say that at this time he will gather his elect and they will be with him in heaven forever. Sounds pretty good to me. How about you? Everyone will see him coming. We don't know when that time will be — the Scriptures tell us that the timing is unknown. The angels don't even know when according to Mark 13:32. It will be a surprise, that's for sure, but the fact that he is coming again is not.

But as I said earlier, many Christians seem to ignore what Christ has already done and what that means. The center of what has been revealed to us is that we are saved or "might right" with God through our faith in the finished work of Christ. Remember his the

last words he said before he died on the cross? “It is finished.” It’s finished. Now, apart from anything we do, only through our faith in the crucified and risen one who did it for us, our sins are forgiven. And He will come again to claim the faithful.

But so many take our text from Revelation tonight and read it as a literal series of events, which certainly gives the impression that Christ’s work isn’t finished! And this literal interpretation extends to the “thousand years.” Beginning with verse 4 for example, we have this description of those with true faith who are resurrected back to life and then who reign with Christ on earth for a thousand years. During this time, it seems unbelievers actually increase. Then Christ seems to return again for the “great white throne” judgment in verses 11-15. After this is complete, there is finally a new heaven and new earth. This view of returning twice before the new creation is not supported anywhere else in scripture. And this view encourages one to see their faith as a means of avoiding suffering under God’s wrath here on earth in this first 1,000 year period (again, not scriptural) instead of as a means in which we receive forgiveness and salvation throughout the entire time between coming to faith and his return. It turns the gospel of us offering nothing to God except our faith in Jesus Christ into the law of “we better get good enough to be chosen to live in his presence the first 1,000 years and if that works out, it might just last forever.” And it implies a second chance.

But that’s not what we Lutherans, along with many other Christians believe. Instead of looking at Revelation chapter 20 as a series of literal events, we look at each of the “thousand years” symbolically. As forgiven sinners, we are the ones who are reigning with Christ in His church. That is how we would interpret Revelation 20:4. We have new life in Christ. He is the King and those with new life in him will reign with him for a long time or to say it another way — a 1000 years so that others may know of his love and salvation for them until he returns. And during this time Satan is bound—that happened when Jesus came to earth the first time. In Matthew 12, Jesus casts out demons, saying that he has bound a strong man, which we believe is Satan. He is bound and God has placed limits on what he can do.³ He’s still sneaky and deceives us every chance he gets, but he’s not in charge. He will be released and when he is Christ will come again to rescue his church, destroy its satanic enemies and judge the living and the dead. Those with faith— eternity in heaven. Those without—eternity separated from God. This is our comprehensive view of the Biblical story and we’re sticking to it.

Of course, we still take this account in Revelation seriously because it tells once again the completed story of Christ’s second coming. And this story is repeated several times

³ Mueller, Steven. *Called to Believe, Teach, and Confess*: Eugene: Wipe & Stock, 2005

throughout the book. It's really cool to imagine the heavenly vision of being with Christ that John gives us. But we read it in light of the rest of the Scriptures both OT and New. The prophecies of the OT promised a Savior who would save us from our sins. And this prophecy was fulfilled in the Christ of the new.

To bring back the phrase from the beginning of this message, "If I've told you once, I've told you a thousand times... because I can't make this point enough. Faith alone in Christ alone who came into this world and who will come again gives us eternal life with God. There's nothing hidden or buried here in the language of Revelation only to be discovered by a few. What this is really about is no secret. It might sound different but it's just another way of reinforcing the story of our future with Christ. May God keep us in this true faith now and forever. **Amen.**