

The Reverend Dr. Randall K. Bush
East Liberty Presbyterian Church
April 11, 2010
Revelation 1:1-8
Backwards, Yet Forward

Our New Testament reading for today is the opening verses of the book of Revelation. It is a wonderful proclamation about the good news of Jesus Christ, the one whose Good Friday sacrifice and Easter resurrection are at the heart of all we believe. There's a lot to say about this and the book of Revelation – and I will in a moment. But for several reasons, I want to start with a story about Bob Gibson.

For 26 years, Bob Gibson was a great pitcher with the St. Louis Cardinals. He was also a fierce competitor known for throwing fast, inside pitches to intimidate batters. Hank Aaron once told a young batter: "Don't dig in against Bob Gibson. He will knock you down. He'd knock down his own grandmother if she dared challenge him." Bob Gibson also had a long memory. In his last major league appearance, a young journeyman first-baseman named Pete LaCock hit a home run off Gibson. That ticked Gibson off so much that 15 years later while pitching in an Old-Timers Game, he happened to face none other than Pete LaCock again; so Gibson wound up his 57-year old arm and threw a fastball high and inside at LaCock that almost knocked him to the ground.

OK, now back to the book of Revelation. It's true that Revelation is full of visions and symbolism. Many people think of it as a book prophesying about the future – telling about events yet-to-come like the end of the world and the coming of God's holy realm. But out of Revelation's 404 verses, 275 of them directly relate back to material in the Old Testament. This was quite intentional. Revelation uses the language of the past – the Hebrew scripture language about a coming Messiah and a priestly kingdom – to offer a message of hope for first-century church members struggling during a time of persecution. It is not about end-times formulas; it is a pastoral letter that uses apocalyptic language to comfort churches back then. In Revelation, we hear language borrowed from Ezekiel, Daniel and Zechariah, to encourage the early Christian churches that the God of yesterday – of the Exodus, King David, the years of exile and the time of restoration – was also the God of their day and age and days yet to come. Since God is consistent, by looking backward at how God acted in the past, we can look forward with confidence toward the future and know how God will act in those days as well. It is a backwards-yet-forward faith.

So hear again verses 4 and 5 from the passage I read: "[From] John to the seven churches that are in Asia" – to all the churches in the area on the west coast of Turkey. "Grace to you and peace from him who is and who was and who is to come, from the seven spirits who are before his throne, and from Jesus Christ, the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth." This was written during the early days of the church – post-Easter, post-Pentecost, deep-in-a-time-of-persecution –

and Jesus is given three new titles as part of the church's backward-yet-forward looking faith.

Jesus Christ – the faithful witness: The people of the Exodus were witnesses to their escape from slavery in Egypt; the people of the Babylonian Exile were witnesses to how Jerusalem fell when the people strayed from the faith; and then in the period of John's New Testament church, people were becoming martyrs by professing their faith. So to guide and encourage the church, Jesus the crucified Lord was held up as the prime example of what it meant to be a "faithful witness." Jesus Christ – the firstborn of the dead: This title looks back to the good news of Easter resurrection, while holding out that same promise for people then dying for their faith. Jesus Christ – the ruler of kings on earth. This looks back to all earthly emperors, Caesars in Rome, and Herod on his throne, who have claimed they deserve our absolute allegiance, while reminding people that Jesus Christ is the one Lord and ruler over heaven and earth to whom we owe full allegiance.

The same example of backward-yet-forward faith happens again in verse 8 of the passage, where God says, "I am the Alpha and the Omega, the One who is and who was and who is to come." God is Alpha and Omega, A and Z of the Greek alphabet; the first and the last. Looking backward, God is there – at the dawn of time and life and creation itself. Looking forward, God is there too – at the end of time and life and creation itself. Past, present, and future – God who was and who is and who is to come – this is the Almighty Lord, in whom we trust and by whom we exist.

Why is this so important – and why in the world did I tell you that story about Bob Gibson earlier in the sermon? All of us go through life today shaped by what we experienced yesterday. Like Bob Gibson, we remember – and those past memories affect our present choices. In every single pew of this church, people hold onto stories from their past: stories of celebrations and births, of defeats and deaths. Some have endured things that are almost impossible to forgive – certainly by human means impossible to forgive. Many of you have past memories that, under the right circumstances, pour back to your present awareness and shape your present behavior as well as your future hopes and dreams.

There was a touching photo-essay in a recent New York Times magazine; it showed the bedrooms here in the States of some of the soldiers killed in Iraq and Afghanistan. We forget that so many of the men and women serving overseas are scarcely much more than boys and girls. When the events of September 11th unfolded in New York City, Washington, D.C. and here in Pennsylvania, many of the soldiers fighting now were still in Junior High. So across America, there are rooms of young soldiers who won't be returning home – rooms now empty of their occupants but full-to-overflowing with memories. The photo essay captured these shrines in black and white clarity: beds neatly made; trophies and posters still in place; invariably a stuffed animal, a piece of sports equipment, and an American flag somewhere in the room. How does one look forward when something so strong, so tragic, so difficult is always there in one's consciousness, visible with every backward glance?

The answer has two parts. First, we have to name we are looking backward at. We have to name the old fears and prejudices, acknowledge the way we've blamed others and been trapped in old patterns and habits; name the times of abuse and neglect and recognize the times we've tried to drive while staring in a rearview mirror. By naming all this, then we can choose to look out through the windshield and move forward with an unimpeded vision at last.

Second, despite our memories and backward glances, we are to look forward just as the writer did in the book of Revelation. We do this by being Easter people, followers of Jesus Christ, the risen Son of God as attested to in the gospel stories. That whole Easter day was spent with backward-yet-forward looking faith. Women went to a tomb to properly prepare Jesus' body for burial, since they hadn't had enough time to do it well on the day he died. These same women, focused on the past, were told by heavenly messengers, "Why do you look for the living among the dead?" and were sent out into the future. Or consider the disciples on the road to Emmaus, sadly looking backwards and discussing all the events around the recent death of Jesus, until he joined them and ate with them and their eyes were opened, causing them to return to Jerusalem, going forward into a future unimaginable a few short hours before.

We all carry the past with us. It can be in the form of scars or of medals pinned to our lapels. It can be baggage and burdens that weigh us down, or training and wisdom that makes us stronger. But we are not defined by the past – none of you are defined by your past. Easter says there is a future now for all God's children; there is a tomorrow and a sunrise and a resurrection life for each of us. You may struggle with accepting that or understanding that or even believing that – but it's not of our doing, therefore it is not for us to fully grasp anyway. What we can trust is that this promise is honest and compassionate and straight-forward, for such is the nature of the God who has acted in our world before, who is active in our world now, and who is guiding us all, freely, gracefully, intentionally, into a future yet to unfold.

We are not defined by our past. Nor are we simply captive to the present demands of the moment. In Christ, the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, the ruler of the kings of the earth, we have been given a future and a hope. And it begins now.

Thanks be to God. Amen.