

The House of Hope Presbyterian Church
Rev. Dr. Andrew McDonald preaching
“To the Angel of the House of Hope”
April 19, 2020
Revelation 2: 1-7, 3: 7-8, 14-22

Second Sunday of Easter

The book of Revelation is the most misunderstood book in the Bible. Bar none. John Calvin wrote an entire commentary about every other book in the Bible, but not Revelation. Martin Luther, for a long time, did not think Revelation should even be in the Bible.

But there it is. I love the book of Revelation. It is not Revelations, plural, it is Revelation. Singular. It is a dream. A vision.

John is a prisoner on the Island of Patmos, And John believes the church is about to undergo some great tribulations. In the face of this situation, he has a dream, a vision, Which he perceives is a gift of God. A revelation from God, which is what the word apocalypse means.

This dream, like the dreams we have, has a logic all its own. It swirls around, and has themes that are different, and yet similar. Overall, this revelatory vision is aimed primarily at strengthening the church in a most difficult time. The vision is spoken to the Angels of seven churches. We only heard about three today.

Not to the church, but to the angel of each church. That is fascinating. Not written to the churches, but to the angels. Each church has its own angel. Each has its own spirit. We don't talk in that language. We do talk about corporate culture. So if that is easier for you to hear, translate it that way.

1. The angel teaches the church its values, its way of life. The spirit of that people. Some of the angels are faithful, powerful. Some angels are incompetent.

Every organization has a spirit. The first is written to the angel the most poignant. To the angel of the church in Ephesus, he says, “You have patience, endurance, you stand up to evil. You recognize false faith. You have not grown weary. You have so much strength.”

Then he says, “But... you have abandoned the love you had at first.”

Wow. For all the good a church can do, they have to keep that loving spirit. That's key.

2. The angel of the church in Philadelphia, the Spirit says, “You have kept my word with patient endurance.” There is a passion for what God says, for the living meaning of the word. This is central. Their name is written in heaven. The spirit of this church communicates the meaning of the word of God. It is such a beautiful vision.

3. The angel of the last church, the spirit of the last church, the corporate culture of the last church, the

one at Laodicea: “I know your works: you are neither cold nor hot. Would that you were cold or hot. Because you are luke-warm, I spit you out, literally, I vomit you out.” A church whose spirit is to be milquetoast, bland, never-take-a-stand, never take a risk, Play the middle of the road, never make anyone uncomfortable, Much less make someone angry. A church that never takes a stand is the church that Jesus vomits out. He can’t stand it.

The book of the Revelation is there to help churches take a look at their own angel, at their own corporate culture.

That is what I have been looking for in the last two years. I’ve been trying to listen to the Angel of the House of Hope. What is the spirit of this church teaching the people of God here.

It has been a wonderful experience. So many good works. You have structured yourself to constantly build up each other, And to build up people beyond this church community.

You are an incubator for mission. There is a spirit of exploration here. Of open inquiry here that is amazing. You are not afraid to ask challenging questions, You are not daunted by challenging answers. I have a friend who says it’s a horrible death to be bored to death, And it is never boring here.

Every organization has some sort of competition going on. Competition for power, or position, or money, or status. The competition at the House of Hope tends to be about what books have you read. I’ve never seen another church like it.

The bible says, Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, strength, and Jesus emphasized, and with all your mind. That is what you do, And it is never boring.

This is an inspiring church. There are so many people who find creative ways to reach out to care for each other. So many people in the Deacons, So many Stephen Ministers, So many people who do things whose lives have been shaped here.

Jan Favorite’s daughter was mentioned in the newspaper yesterday because she is an ICU nurse at Regions Hospital. But she has taken time out to go to New York City, because there are still 500 people a day dying there and someone has to answer the call.

This church, and the people who come through this congregation, Are people who are inspired and inspiring. It is amazing.

David Brooks says the world needs more thick institutions. Institutions that truly shape people. Institutions that imprint on people’s minds. Institutions that stir people’s hearts. The House of Hope is a thick institution.

Now let me leave you with a few challenges.

1. Remember the love that you had at the beginning. We live in a world that is structured to undermine love with radical individualism. Deep love does not just happen. It takes work. It takes commitment. It takes food. Where you eat and talk together, often. For long periods of time.

Love needs to be a priority. Paul says: “Faith, hope, and love, abide, these three. The greatest of these is love.” But then he adds what everyone forgets: “The greatest of these is love.” Make love your goal.

2. Endurance is a core value in the book of Revelation. They expect to have an oppressive situation that will last a long time. Endurance is what we need right now. Stick with the church. There are lots of people whose lives are going to be permanently altered or scarred from this historic trauma we are going through.

Stick with the church, and ask the question: How can the house of Hope give hope to the people around us as we move into the future?

Endurance is a core value. But let me also say: Endurance is not a word that ought to come to mind when you are thinking about church committees. Find ways to move faster in your decision making. Make this a priority so you don't wear out your exciting new pastor!

3. Finally, remember that last angel in Revelation. The one who was neither cold nor hot. What is so beautiful about the House of Hope is that you can talk about controversial issues here. Your pulpit can handle preachers who take controversial stands. And this is a church that has a history of making some controversial decisions. Maybe not all the time, but at the right time.

The world does not need the church to show up late for the party. It is not easy. But it is crucial. So find ways to help make that a positive experience.

Listen to the Spirit of Jesus saying: You were neither cold nor hot, so I spit you out.

Why does it matter? According to Revelation, it matters because The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse are coming: An image of the dynamics of evil, See it as evil's system of process: First, the rider on the White horse rides in, the false one, proclaiming he is savior. Second the Red Horse rides in, as the next step is war, a battle of all against all. Third, the Black Horse rides in, where the poor get gouged yet again, And the rich get richer. Fourth, the Pale Horse, the horse the color of pus, where society becomes A perpetual death machine.

The four horsemen are what sociologists might call a typology to use to measure what is going on in the world.

The White Horse, world is full of false saviors, proclaiming they alone are the hero. It matters that we see them for what they are because of what comes next.

Use the Red horse to ask questions. Does the battle have to be an actual war with swords? Or can it include The Battle against science, The battle against journalists with solid journalistic ethics, Can the battle include slicing off of the World Health Organization in the middle of a pandemic? Can the battle include suspending the EPA environmental rules that will mean the death machine kicks in quietly for decades.

Revelation is there to have us take a hard look at the world in every age, including this one. To ask the hard questions, Like: What are the dynamics of sin going on in the world? And to ask, what is God

empowering us to be and to do? Where is the sacrificial love embodied by Jesus Christ?

The church, with its enduring values of love, compassion, truth, creative responsibility, has answers that counter the false power of the death machines that rise up in every generation.

The witness and the work of the House of Hope matters in a world tempted by the dynamics of sin and evil. It matters that the House of Hope continues to hold tight to those values of Jesus Christ, and to hold tight to the presence of God That gives them the courage to endure in every age.

Remember and hold on to who you are.

With that I end, except to say, thank you for inviting me to be your transitional pastor.

What does it mean to be a transitional pastor? It's really a new term, and it's a different model than the old interim model. I talk with my colleagues. Some say, the old image of an interim was like being the Lone Ranger. You ride into town and its a mess. So you clean it up with your silver bullet, (change committee structures, drag skeletons out of the closet, confront all sorts of conflict, slash budgetary overspending – whatever silver bullet solution is required.) And without saying goodbye, ride out with a hearty hi-o-silver. Some interims still do that.

I met one interim Rabbi. He said being an interim is like being Mary Poppins. You fly in with the breeze, open your bag of tricks, Sing a couple cheery songs, and when the family is all fine, The wind changes, you open your umbrella and fly away.

The image I much prefer as a transitional pastor is, of course, the Wizard of Oz. Oz, who with smoke and mirrors, provokes the journeyers to an adventure, On the journey, they are tested for their virtues. At the end, it may look as if he does not do a thing. But what he does do is help name their virtues, and help them become aware of the virtues that they have. So they better trust themselves to embody them.

Then Oz, for like all the other consultants, When the wind changes, with a hasty goodbye from the balloon, flies away.

The House of Hope has welcomed me so well. You have honored me in asking me to be your Transitional Senior Pastor. It has been a constant source of blessing to me. Blessing, and inspiration, and love. One of my life's greatest honors. I am overwhelmingly grateful. Thank you.

Let me close with a story I know I've told you before. Remember the story of the nuns with their convent way out in the country. The head nun was ancient and they thought she was dying. They relished her every word, so they went to get her a glass of milk to strengthen her. Then they thought, well, maybe a big shot of whiskey in the milk would help. So they mixed it in. They brought it to their ancient one, laying in the bed. She took a tiny sip. Then another. Then another. Then she drained the whole glass. She began to speak. They all drew close. She said, "Whatever you do.... Whatever you do....Whatever you do, don't sell that cow!"

House of Hope: You have this mix of values here that strengthen and animate you. It is intoxicating. Whatever you do, don't sell that cow. Be who God has called you to be.

God bless you all, and God bless the angel of the House of Hope. Amen.