

SEQUOYAH HILLS PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

“Trumpets: Apollyon”

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Revelation 9:1-21

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Today we continue in our series in this part of the Book of Revelation known as the “trumpet judgments.” Revelation is a book that, yes, is a bit scary but ultimately embedded within the good news of Jesus Christ, and as a church we should feel equipped to see it. If you were with us last week, you’ll remember that we’re dropping into just this one section of the book, chapters eight through eleven.

So last week we kicked things off with John of Patmos, the writer of the book, sharing this vision he was given of seven angels and seven trumpets, and how the first four trumpets were blown, each of them with an accompanying judgment, hence the term “trumpet judgments.” But you might remember at the very end of what we read last week an eagle flying, after these horrible things had already happened, and saying “Woe, woe, woe to the inhabitants of the earth, at the blasts of the other trumpets that the three angels are about to blow!” In other words, “You thought that was bad? Just you wait.” And what follows, well, if Revelation is a series of visions, then what John sees next is truly the stuff of nightmares. Let’s go to God’s Word together.

9 And the fifth angel blew his trumpet, and I saw a star that had fallen from heaven to earth, and he was given the key to the shaft of the bottomless pit; ² he opened the shaft of the bottomless pit, and from the shaft rose smoke like the smoke of a great furnace, and the sun and the air were darkened with the smoke from the shaft. ³ Then from the smoke came locusts on the earth, and they were given authority like the authority of scorpions of the earth. ⁴ They were told not to damage the grass of the earth or any green growth or any tree, but only those people who do not have the seal of God on their foreheads. ⁵ They were allowed to torture them for five months, but not to kill them, and their torture was like the torture of a scorpion when it stings someone. ⁶ And in those days people will seek death but will not find it; they will long to die, but death will flee from them.

⁷ In appearance the locusts were like horses equipped for battle. On their heads were what looked like crowns of gold; their faces were like human faces, ⁸ their hair like women’s hair, and their teeth like lions’ teeth; ⁹ they had scales like iron breastplates, and the noise of their wings was like the noise of many chariots with horses rushing into battle. ¹⁰ They have tails like scorpions, with stings, and in their tails is their power to harm people for five months. ¹¹ They have as king over them the angel of the bottomless pit; his name in Hebrew is Abaddon, and in Greek he is called Apollyon. ¹² The first woe has passed. There are still two woes to come.

¹³ Then the sixth angel blew his trumpet, and I heard a voice from the four horns of the golden altar before God, ¹⁴ saying to the sixth angel who had the trumpet, ‘Release the four angels who are bound at the great river Euphrates.’ ¹⁵ So the four angels were released, who had been held ready for the hour, the day, the month, and the year, to kill a third of humankind. ¹⁶ The number of the troops of cavalry was two hundred million; I heard their number. ¹⁷ And this was how I saw the horses in my vision: the riders wore breastplates the colour of fire and of sapphire and of sulphur; the heads of the horses were like lions’ heads, and fire and smoke and sulphur came out of their mouths. ¹⁸ By these three plagues a third of humankind was killed, by the fire and smoke and sulphur coming out of their mouths. ¹⁹ For the power of the horses is in their mouths and in their tails; their tails are like serpents, having heads; and with them they inflict harm.

²⁰ The rest of humankind, who were not killed by these plagues, did not repent of the works of their hands or give up worshipping demons and idols of gold and silver and bronze and stone and wood, which cannot see or hear or walk. ²¹ And they did not repent of their murders or their sorceries or their fornication or their thefts.

Revelation 9:1-21

The Word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.** Will you pray with me? Father in heaven, we pray that by your Spirit you would soften our hearts to hear a challenging word today, that we might look to you as our assurance and our hope, no matter what may be frightening around us. And for the Word spoken and heard today, may it not be mine but yours. Amen.

Well when I read a passage like that, the first thing that comes to mind is, naturally, the joy of Christmas. I’m sure many of you feel the same way. Because I know that when you consider that magical time of year of peace and goodwill and charity, you quickly also think about giant grasshopper monsters coming out of the abyss. In fact, I think they’re one of the twelve days of Christmas.

But I think especially too about that classic yuletide tale of redemption: *A Christmas Carol* by Charles Dickens. Many of you probably know this one. Ebenezer Scrooge, a miser and a harsh, cruel man, is visited by three spirits on Christmas Eve: the ghost of Christmas past, the ghost of Christmas present, and the ghost of Christmas yet to come. And over the course of the night, he is taken on a troubling tour of visions. First, with the ghost of Christmas past, he witnesses instances that had shaped the cold, calculating man he had become. Second, with the ghost of Christmas present, he glimpses how his contemporaries think and speak of him when he’s not around, and the results aren’t pretty. And then finally, and most chillingly, with the ghost of Christmas yet to come, he sees the sum and culmination of a selfish life, with more people fighting to divide a yet unnamed person’s possessions than those that actually mourn.

The first two are painful for Scrooge, maybe even embarrassing. But the last one is just plain terrifying. Even in versions of this that are meant for a wider audience, this last ghost is scary. I mean, the *Muppets Christmas Carol*, you know, a kids movie, when Scrooge sees this ghost in a dark shroud and bony hands, then Gonzo and Rizzo the Rat, the muppets who have

been narrating the whole time, just straight up tell the audience, “You’re on your own folks,” and scam.

These next two judgments, or these two woes, according to what the eagle said, are like the ghost of Christmas yet to come. The first four were hard enough: hail and fire, seas turned to blood, stars blotted out. That’s pretty frightening in its own right, but this is the stuff the nightmares.

The fifth angel blows the fifth trumpet, and a star falls from heaven, a fallen angel, who is given the key to the abyss, the bottomless pit. When it’s opened, smoke like a furnace pours out. Notice last week we had the beautiful smoke of the incense, the prayers of the saints, but now it’s the darkened smoke of a great furnace, that which burns and consumes. And out of that smoke come these locusts. (By the way, when you heard locusts and waters turned to blood, you might have thought, hmm, that kind of sounds like the ten plagues of Egypt. You wouldn’t be the first to notice that. Definitely some common threads.)

Locusts are threatening enough in real life. Especially in the ancient world, if the crop didn’t come in one season, then a lot of people were going to starve, and a herd of locusts can take out a crop in an afternoon. This is dangerous in normal circumstances.

But these aren’t normal locusts. You heard the description: lions’ teeth, human faces, scorpions’ stings. Then perhaps the most disturbing: they didn’t do what locusts typically did, that is, eat crops. Verse four reads: “They were told not to damage the grass of the earth or any green growth or any tree, but only those people who do not have the seal of God on their foreheads. They were allowed to torture them for five months, but not to kill them, and their torture was like the torture of a scorpion when it stings someone. And in those days people will seek death but will not find it; they will long to die, but death will flee from them.” And they had a king, the angel of the bottomless pit, presumably the same one that set them free, named Apollyon, Greek for “Destroyer.” If you’ve heard of Apollo, the Greek god of war, same root word.

And you might think, well at least they’re not being killed, but that doesn’t hold for long. Because the sixth angel blows the sixth trumpet, and now four angels, presumably also fallen angels, who are bound at the river Euphrates, are released and then either they turn into or subsequently unleash 200,000,000 cavalry, but not regular cavalry—horses with lions’ heads and snakes for tails and fire and smoke and sulfur coming out of their mouths, and they kill a third of humanity. This is the stuff of nightmares here, these hordes of monsters, really, released to torment and destroy.

Folks react to this differently. The fact that it’s nonbelievers that get this treatment might cause some to say, “Finally. Judgment upon a cruel, unrighteous world.” Others are troubled that

this kind of evil is unleashed in the first place, because it brings up questions in a gray area on the sovereignty of God. Technically, it's these fallen angels and what they let loose that do all this bad stuff, so you could say, "It wasn't God; it was them," to which you could also say, "Yeah, but isn't the one who let them off the chain at least partly responsible?"

And folks have interpreted this differently. Last week we talked about the three main branches of interpretation of Revelation: preterist (that is, past stuff), futurist (that is, future stuff), and idealist (more metaphorical). You can look at this as the judgment of the unrighteous on the earth, those who got what was coming to them. You can look at it also as the worst impulses humanity has to offer: those of murder, deception, lust, robbery, being given full license to indulge themselves and seeing what comes of it.

But even among the more literal, more futurist leanings, there's disagreement. Some may be familiar with the books called the *Left Behind* series, which is kind of a spiritual, global spy thriller, all with a more literal understanding of Revelation as its backdrop. Well, the title of one of the books is in fact *Apollyon*, and in that book, there's nothing metaphorical about this part. There are actual horrible grasshopper monsters flying around stinging people.

Then there was another writer, a guy named Hal Lindsey, who wrote back in the 70s and connected apocalyptic images to contemporary geopolitical movements. For example, the two hundred million cavalry of this chapter, in Lindsey's view, represented the Chinese army and the rise of communism and the threat of global takeover. And no matter what way you go about it. You read through it, and this stuff is scary. But it's not the scariest part. You hear of the abyss being opened and smoke pouring out and the locusts from hell, but that's not the scariest part. You hear of four angels released and the millions of cavalry and the multitudes killed, but that's not the scariest part.

The scariest part is at the very end. Verse 20 reads: "The rest of humankind, who were not killed by these plagues, did not repent of the works of their hands or give up worshiping demons and idols of gold and silver and bronze and stone and wood, which cannot see or hear or walk." Even after all of that, they do not recognize the sum of a selfish life, the fruit of their labor, and they continue on in their ways.

I told you that all of this made me think about Christmas. But now I'm thinking about the movie *Home Alone*, well really the sequel. Many know *Home Alone*. If you don't, think peak 90s Christmas family movie. Kevin MacAlister, played by a young Macauley Culkin, is left at home by mistake for Christmas by his family. But then he thwarts two thieves by setting a bunch of booby traps around his house, and they're caught.

So then they made a sequel: *Home Alone 2: Lost in New York*. Kevin gets separated from his family for Christmas *again*, but this time he gets on the wrong plane and ends up in New York City by himself. Incidentally, the same two thieves escape (this evil that has been bound but now unleashed, if you want to get apocalyptic), and they're in New York too plotting their next heist.

What are the odds, but they see Kevin, the kid who had gotten them nabbed, walking alone in the streets, and they confront him. Kevin turns to see these two thieves on a busy New York sidewalk and screams at the top of his lungs. The thieves, this unleashed evil, they were scary enough. What they might do to him was definitely scary. But you know the scariest part watching that scene? That no one stops. Every else on the sidewalk just kept going their own way.

Some of you may remember a few weeks back when we were in the Book of Daniel. That second half of Daniel is what's often called apocalyptic literature. Revelation is an "apocalypse" too. The first words of the book are "the apocalypse of Jesus Christ."

But we hear "apocalypse" and we think, "end of the world," and in a sense, yeah it typically has something to do with that. But that's not its core purpose. The word itself "apocalypse" means a "revelation," an unveiling, hence the title given to this book, Revelation. It speaks often of what is to come, yes, but its main purpose is not to predict the future. It is to galvanize a response of perseverance, of faith, of repentance among those who hear it and to assure that no matter what happens, God will bring it about to make things right.

We read a passage like this, a nightmare like this, and what response do you think is intended?

Have you ever had a dream so troubling that even if you knew it wasn't a 100% real-life thing, it still made you live a bit differently the next day? There's the nightmare about not studying for a test—the ones I get are showing up to church having forgotten to write a sermon. But then maybe even more troubling than that, a dream of something horrible happening to a loved one, or a hardship in your life, and even though you know it's just a dream, just a vision, it makes you hug that loved one a little harder the next day, live your life with a little more earnestness and faithfulness.

We read a passage like this, and what kind of response do you think is intended?

I told you that this passage made me think about Christmas. Ebenezer Scrooge and the Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come. He's been shown what has taken place after the death of a yet-unrevealed person whom no one seems to miss or mourn, the sum of a selfish life. But then the spirit takes him to a graveyard, to show him just whose grave it is.

It reads:

The Spirit stood among the graves, and pointed down to One. [Scrooge] advanced towards it trembling. The Phantom was exactly as it had been, but he dreaded that he saw new meaning in its solemn shape.

“Before I draw nearer to that stone to which you point,” said Scrooge, “answer me one question. Are these the shadows of the things that Will be, or are they shadows of things that May be, only?”

Still, the Ghost pointed downward to the grave by which it stood....

Scrooge crept towards it, trembling as he went; and following the finger, read upon the stone of the neglected grave his own name, Ebenezer Scrooge....

“Spirit!” he cried, tight clutching at his robe, “Hear me! I am not the man I was. I will not be the man I must have been but for this intercourse. Why show me this, if I am past all hope!”

For the first time, the hand appeared to shake.

“Good Spirit,” he pursued, as down upon the ground he fell before it: “Your nature intercedes for me, and pities me. Assure me that I yet may change these shadows you have shown me, by an altered life!”

Many of you know how the story ends. It’s a happy ending, actually. Scrooge changes his ways, starting that very day, showing uncharacteristic cheer and generosity. It’s not a perfect comparison to this, but what could be? It’s Revelation, after all. There’s also a bit of “saved by good works” running throughout *A Christmas Carol* too, which isn’t what this teaches.

But there we have one who is given a vision of the sum of a selfish life, his life, and turns from it as a result.

Perhaps we too have been given this vision, the sum of all that is cruel in the world, all that kills, deceives, lusts, and steals, all that has been given license to indulge itself and thus is given over to the Destroyer. Will we turn from it?

We’ve seen this before. Many years ago, a man hung upon a cross, the sum of selfish life. But in that case, it wasn’t his life. His hanging there was the sum of all that was cruel and vindictive in the world, all that the world at its worst could dish out, and there held up for all to see was the fruit of that labor, where all that selfishness and cruelty and might makes right ultimately leads: the excruciating torture and death of an innocent man.

And yet the calling of that cross is not, “Fear, all of ye, the judgment of God,” but rather that the judgment has been poured out, and that grace is extended, especially to those who feel they could never turn to it on their own. “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.”

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.