

SEQUOYAH HILLS
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

“Trumpets: Two Witnesses”

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Revelation 11:1-14

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We’re close to wrapping up this look at part of the Book of Revelation, a section known as the “trumpet judgments.” We’ll finish it up next week, so I wanted to offer a word about what comes next. Two weeks from today, which incidentally is our Rally Day, we’ll start a new series called “Inside Out,” and y’all we’re going existential here. Who are we? Who are we made to be? Who have we become? Those are questions that I dare say anybody has grappled with at one point or another, but the good news is, no matter whether your own sense of identity, whether that’s who you are in your own skin, who you are in relation to others, who you are in relation to God, no matter whether your sense of identity feels settled or unsettled, the good news of Christ brings us into a place of peace.

So I’d add an encouragement, especially in this season of the year as summer rhythms start to shift into more normal routines, to reach out to that friend or that family member that you sense has been struggling and say, “Hey, come worship with me.” You know the single biggest reason someone who has never or rarely been to church might actually come? Slick social media marketing? No. Uplifting music? No. Dynamic preaching? No. All those might do the trick every now and then, but far and away, the biggest one is if they’ve been invited by a friend. So, think about who in your life may be struggling right now with who they are and whether you might be someone God uses to put a call into their lives.

Today, incidentally, we’ll take a look at just how the people of God are called to bear witness to this good news, and a hint: it doesn’t look like the way the world would expect it to. Let’s go to God’s Word together.

11 Then I was given a measuring rod like a staff, and I was told, ‘Come and measure the temple of God and the altar and those who worship there, ² but do not measure the court outside the temple; leave that out, for it is given over to the nations, and they will trample over the holy city for forty-two months. ³ And I will grant my two witnesses authority to prophesy for one thousand two hundred and sixty days, wearing sackcloth.’

⁴ These are the two olive trees and the two lampstands that stand before the Lord of the earth. ⁵ And if anyone wants to harm them, fire pours from their mouth and consumes their foes; anyone who wants to harm them must be killed in this manner. ⁶ They have authority to shut the sky, so that no rain may fall during the days of their prophesying, and they have

authority over the waters to turn them into blood, and to strike the earth with every kind of plague, as often as they desire.

⁷ When they have finished their testimony, the beast that comes up from the bottomless pit will make war on them and conquer them and kill them, ⁸ and their dead bodies will lie in the street of the great city that is prophetically called Sodom and Egypt, where also their Lord was crucified. ⁹ For three and a half days members of the peoples and tribes and languages and nations will gaze at their dead bodies and refuse to let them be placed in a tomb; ¹⁰ and the inhabitants of the earth will gloat over them and celebrate and exchange presents, because these two prophets had been a torment to the inhabitants of the earth.

¹¹ But after the three and a half days, the breath of life from God entered them, and they stood on their feet, and those who saw them were terrified. ¹² Then they heard a loud voice from heaven saying to them, ‘Come up here!’ And they went up to heaven in a cloud while their enemies watched them. ¹³ At that moment there was a great earthquake, and a tenth of the city fell; seven thousand people were killed in the earthquake, and the rest were terrified and gave glory to the God of heaven.

¹⁴ The second woe has passed. The third woe is coming very soon.

Revelation 11:1-14

The Word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.** Will you pray with me?

Almighty God who is with us and within us, we pray for your presence among us this day. Open our minds and our hearts to hear your Word to us, that we would hear the assurance of your faithfulness to us even as you call us to the daunting work of ministry. And for the Word heard and spoken today, may it not be mine but yours. Amen.

Of all the ways to bring an end to a conflict, beer and bees would not be a tactic I would have thought of. Over 1,100 years ago, a Viking army besieged the Saxon city of Chester—not far from the current city of Liverpool if that gives you any sense of the geography. When the Saxons learned the Viking army was approaching, they did what you typically do. You get ready for a siege. You hole up. You shore up the defenses.

The Vikings arrive, and you know how sieges work. You surround and prevent any access to the city until food and water stores run out. If you’re attacking, you hope it doesn’t take that long, so you try to breach the defenses anyway. So the Vikings built these sheltered “hurdles,” as they called them—really they were just fortified lean-to’s against the city walls so they could hack and dig into the city walls underneath them. The Saxons hurled boulders and beams down on them, but because the Vikings had built them so well, the boulders would just land and roll off.

Stores were starting to run out, so the Saxons took a daring approach. They took all the beer and water still in the town, which was a big risk because if this didn’t work not only would they be out of water, they would also be out of beer. But they took all the beer and water and heated them all up to boiling in these giant cauldrons. Then they dumped out the superheated beer and water onto these structures the Vikings had made, and where boulders failed, the beer and water seeped through the gaps in the wood and burned the attacking Vikings. The Vikings didn’t

give up, though. To secure their attack, they then lined their structures with animal hides, so that when the Saxons poured hot beer on them, it just rolled off the animal hides.

At that point, recognizing that it all smelled of boiled beer, the Saxons then gathered up all the beehives throughout the town and hurled them onto these hurdles. Apparently Vikings will endure boiling beer, but bees were a step too far, and they abandoned the siege.

Of all the things you might expect to break a medieval siege: archers, oil, pikes, you name it, I wonder how many of us would have thought beer and bees would have done the trick?

I don't know if you picked up on it, but it was a lot of siege language in this part of Revelation. This chapter is tricky. One scholar went so far as to call this the most puzzling part of what is already the most puzzling book in the Bible, because what exactly is this getting at?

After the break last week, of John eating the little scroll which was bitter to the stomach yet sweet as honey to the taste, John is now given a measuring rod and told to "measure the temple of God and the altar and those who worship there." Interesting that he's measuring not just a structure but also the people who worship in it. What's that about?

But then he's told *not* to measure the outer court of the temple, because that would be "given over to the nations," who would attack and trample the city. The image you might get from this is something like the Alamo, last stand sort of thing. Pulling back to the last line of defense, knowing that anything left outside would be overrun.

Then these two mysterious figures emerge, "two witnesses" they're called, but also called "two olive trees" and "two lampstands," the imagery starts getting mixed here. And let me tell you, they have a go of it. They're empowered to prophesy, and even further, empowered to call up droughts, shutting up the sky from rain, empowered to call up plagues. And they face off against nothing less than "the beast that comes up from the bottomless pit." We hadn't heard of him just yet, but he pops up again in a later vision as the "beast from the sea," a figure most commonly referred to as the Antichrist. The beast makes war on them and ultimately kills them, with the vision getting so graphic as saying that their bodies would lie in the streets of "the great city that is prophetically called Sodom and Egypt, where also their Lord was crucified," signifying a corrupted Jerusalem.

Upon their deaths, the nations gloat, they "celebrate and exchange presents" it says. It's almost like Christmas for them; that's how twisted this gets. But just as the nations thought it was all settled, the breath of life from God enters them, and they rise. And they're summoned up to heaven, in full view of everyone who had three and a half days earlier celebrated and gloated over their deaths.

Pretty dramatic story with these two witnesses, kind of tracking some similar notes as Jesus himself. Publicly killed, left for dead, raised from the dead, ascending into heaven. Sounds familiar, doesn't it? But maybe one of the first questions we find ourselves with is, well, just who are these two?

A common thought is that they are Moses and Elijah, the great prophets from the Old Testament. Moses has a track record with plagues, after all, calling the ten plagues upon Egypt, and Elijah had some experience in shutting the sky, bringing on a prolonged drought. They also were the two figures flanking Jesus in the Gospels at an event called the Transfiguration. But maybe most importantly, Moses and Elijah both were prophets standing for God up against oppressive and corrupt regimes: Moses against Pharaoh, the king oppressing God's people, and Elijah against Ahab, the Israelite king corrupting the people of God against their Lord.

There's something compelling about these two as a pair. One contending against a threat that would oppress God's people from without, and another contending against a threat that would corrupt God's people from within. After all if you're in for a siege, sometimes you've got to worry just as much about the threats all cooped up in the city with you as the army camped outside.

And it's that part that makes me wonder whether we're supposed to be looking for Moses and Elijah returned in the flesh in the first place. We've talked just about each week about the three main ways folks interpret the book, the series of visions: first, to help Christians anticipate the future; second, to help Christians make sense of the past. Or third, to help Christians understand more metaphorically what it means to be faithful in an often hostile world.

I've shared before that I tend to skew toward the last one, not exclusively but for the most part. And here, it means that maybe we shouldn't fixate so much on looking for two witnesses, two figures, two leaders to emerge during the end times who would contend against a beast from the bottomless pit, be killed, and be raised again. Instead, maybe we look at this for what it calls upon us to do—what if these two witnesses weren't two witnesses, but rather the witness of the church, writ large?

It means that the church, like these two witnesses, would have to contend against both threats without and threats within, pitted against the forces of empire, persecution from the nations, as well as corruption within its own ranks. It means that the church will be despised and resented by the nations. It means that the church would have to take on the mantle of those who have been alongside Jesus himself, and then entrust that mantle to the next generation.

It means that though the church would be empowered by God, the church would also have to trust God powerfully to deliver, because as we see here in this vision, the witnesses are given some authority, yes, but what actually proves to be effective in the end?

Did you catch that part? John's vision talks about how the two witnesses are given power to send down plagues and call up droughts, that fire could come out of their mouths to consume those who would oppose them. It's powerful stuff. And maybe it'd be tempting to think of all the ways the church might be empowered to strike back, to last back out.

But did you catch what actually ends up effective? The two witnesses are killed and publicly humiliated, but then raised from the dead by the power of God, and then lifted up to be with God. Do we know anybody else with a story like that? This is following the way of Christ, the way of the cross, the way of sacrifice, the way of giving themselves up for up, and ultimately that way leading to life and to victory.

And then how does the world react? There's a whole other sermon, or maybe a whole other series, about the place of the church within the world, but we see it captured here: being within the world, yet standing in contrast to the world, and even while being opposed by the world, and yet bearing witness to the world because God so loves the world.

So how does the world react here to these two witnesses? Do they come to know the presence and love and grace of God when the two witnesses send down plagues or call up droughts or consume them with fire? No, in fact it seems the nations' resentment only grows after that. Are they inspired by the two witnesses' resistance against the beast from the bottomless pit? Doesn't look like it; instead looks like the nations are gloating.

But what was it that changed things? Only at the end, after the witnesses are killed, humiliated, but then raised, and lifted up, do the nations then see. And what do they do in end? They give glory to the God of heaven.

This isn't a prediction. It's a playbook. It's a design for the shape and sacrifice of the witness of the church.

The German pastor, theologian, and martyr Dietrich Bonhoeffer knew a thing or two about sacrifice and witness. His own story and ministry contended against the rise of empire, against persecution by political power and against corruption and complacency within the church itself. He's best known perhaps for his involvement in a plot to assassinate Adolf Hitler, for which he was later executed, but even that comes with some caveats—Bonhoeffer's story and writings can sometimes be a bit of Rorschach test: folks see what they want to see in it.

But the day of his execution, one of the prison camp doctors observed Bonhoeffer in his last few hours. He wrote: "I saw Pastor Bonhoeffer, before taking off his prison garb, kneeling on the floor praying fervently to God. I was most deeply moved by the way this lovable man prayed, so devout and so certain that God heard his prayer. At the place of execution, he against a short prayer and then climbed the steps to the gallows, brave and composed. His death ensued after a

few seconds. In the almost fifty years I worked as a doctor, I have hardly ever seen a man die so entirely submissive to the will of God.” It’s all too fitting that Bonhoeffer’s last recorded words before his death were, “This is the end—for me, the beginning of life.”

What ultimately brought about fruit for the harvest: was it because he very practically sought to overthrow a regime, arguably for the greater good and a swifter end of the war? Or was it because he so willingly laid down his life in submission to God? For that camp doctor, what made a bigger impact?

This vision from Revelation assures the church that it will face opposition, and for us, that a faith truly following Christ will not be looked upon favorably by the world. But how is the church called to live out that faith, to contend against these threats? Well, how was that siege broken back in Chester? With bees and beer. With what you wouldn’t expect.

In the same way, how is the church called to break through, how are you called to let your faith show? With shows of power and fire and plagues and droughts? Think about it. That person in your life, that friend, that family member, the one who is close to you but always considers the fact that you are a person of faith to be a bit weird, met with skepticism, maybe even hostility. Do you think that faith will break through to that person by your presenting just how powerful it makes you? No. But what if you laid yourself down, giving yourself up for that person’s well being above your own.

What’s the playbook? Following the way of Christ, the way of the cross, the way of giving of ourselves, of laying down our lives, of dedicating our lives to the will of God, with the faith that new life is to come. As it was said, “This is the end—for me, the beginning of life.”

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