**SERMON 12-22-2019**

**REVELATION 21:1-8, 22-27, & 22:1-5**

The famous explorer Marco Polo made many long journeys.

He visited many strange countries and cultures.

He spent a lot of time in many areas where the customs and lifestyles

          were completely different from what he had known.

After completing his journeys, he returned to his home in Venice.

Frequently he tried to tell his countrymen about the people he had encountered

          and what he had seen on his journeys.

But his friends thought he was making up stories, or had gone completely crazy.

He told them about black stones which could actually be set on fire

          and they would provide heat and keep them warm.

But they could not imagine what he was talking about.

          After all, they had never heard of charcoal.

He told them about a piece of cloth which could not be set on fire,

          No matter how hard he tried.

But they could not believe him – they had never heard of asbestos.

He told them about large animals which were nearly 20 feet long,

          and had jaws large enough to swallow a man.

But they had never seen a crocodile, and they thought he was making it all up..

He told them of a substance which came spewing out of the ground,

          and it could be lit, and it would catch on fire, and actually provide light.

But they had never heard of crude oil.

And so, his fellow countrymen missed out on all the fantastic things he had seen,

          the incredible animals and plants he had discovered,

          and the amazing customs of other nations.

Years later when Marco Polo was lying on his death bed, he was visited by a close

          friend who asked him if all those strange stories were really true.

Marco Polo simply answered:

“It is all true. Every bit of it. In fact, I have not told you half of what I saw.”

When we try to read and understand the book of Revelation we react

          much like Marco Polo's neighbors to his strange tales.

Often this book makes us uncomfortable.

It doesn't seem to make any sense.

The unusual visions are hard to understand, and most are frightening.

So mostly we ignore it, we don't read it, we don't try to understand it,

          We haven't experienced it, we can't even imagine it.

There are all those phrases in this strange book:

          The Mark of the Beast – The Antichrist – The Battle of Armageddon

          – Wars and rumors of wars – The Great Ordeal – The Final Judgement

          – Trumpets – Dragons

          – and Many Angels (who often seem rather scary).

The images and visions are threatening and frightening.

There are seals on scrolls which will be broken,

          books will be opened, and names will be read.

We prefer wise answers and good explanations,

          but the end of time is short on both.

So we opt not to think about it. Why consider what we cannot understand, or explain?

And then there are those who are obsessed.

Those with charts, and codes, and timetables they expect us to believe.

They often produce panic. Some will run up the total on their credit cards.

Others will sell everything and head to the hills.

Time after time these predictions have proven false.

And so we find it hard to picture, or believe.

Bill Hybles told his friends that one of his earliest memories of church

          was when he was in a children's choir.

They dressed up in robes, and stood on risers, and practiced a lot.

As a child he hated almost every minute of it.

He hated putting on his robe on, and having to stand still for so long.

"To make matters even worse," he said, "the Choir director told me:

          That if I didn't like singing in the choir, I wasn't going to enjoy heaven.

So, as a child, I thought of heaven as putting on a choir robe,

          and standing on a riser, and singing for all eternity.

So, I wasn't really all that excited about going to heaven."

Perhaps many of us feel the same way. Maybe some of our images are mixed up,

and we are not sure what to expect of heaven, either.

So what is heaven really going to be like?

We really won't know until we get there.

It is probably ever so much more than we can possibly understand right now.

But if we believe in God; if we trust God; we can believe the words of Jesus:

          "Do not let your hearts be troubled.

Believe in God; believe also in me.

My Father's house has many rooms; if that were not so,

          would I have told you that I am going there to prepare a place for you?

          And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back

          and take you to be with me so you also may be where I am.

          And you know the way to the place where I am going. "

Thomas said to him,

“Lord, we don't know where you are going, so how can we know the way?”

Jesus answered, "I am the way and the truth and the life."

Whatever the full meaning of everything in the book of Revelation,

          we can trust in the promises of Jesus, and not let our hearts be troubled.

He has gone before us. He has prepared a place for each one of us.

He will come back and take us to be with him, forever.

For Christians, the return of Christ is not a riddle to be solved or a code to be broken,

but a day to be anticipated.

Dr. William Willimon was a pastor and a professor at a southern seminary.

One day he mentioned that when he was growing up,

          whenever he was leaving home,

          for a date, or to go to a party, or out with the boys,

          or to meet a group of people to find something to do,

his mother would always say: "Will, don't forget who you are."

Certainly she didn't think her son would forget his name, or where he lived,

          or who his parents were.

She was reminding him that alone on a date, in the midst of some party,

          or in the presence of some strangers, or fooling around with a group of boys,

he might forget who he was.

She knew he might, in a moment of fun, under pressure of his peers,

          in an effort to be accepted and approved by the group,

          forget who he was.

He might forget the values, love, and acceptance,

          he had received from his parents and from God.

He might be persuaded to take on a another name,

          or do something in a moment that he might regret later.

So she told her son whenever he left the house, "Will, remember who you are."

"Remember who you are" is a good slogan for us.

God wants us to recognize who we are, and never forget whose we are.

Each of us is a child of God all the time.

We are a people belonging to God.

And we ought not ever to forget.

We focus on heaven because we need to remember:

          this is not heaven here and now, and was never intended to be.

We don't expect what life cannot give.

We don't demand something from this world which it is incapable of giving.

We know that day is coming, but it is not now.

So we live here on earth in hope, and trust in God's promises.

We do not give up, or lose heart, or become defeated,

          because we know and trust God.

We know whose we are.

When we know this is our Father's world,

          and he created it all with a grand purpose in mind,

          when we believe we are loved by the Creator of the universe,

          and life has meaning, purpose, and direction,

          when we understand God is in control,

          and that he is bringing the world to a wonderful conclusion,

          then we can face life with peace, joy, and enthusiasm.

Our life began in God's love,

          and will end in his love forever

AMEN