

Revelation 1:4 Grace and peace to you from him who is, and who was, and who is to come, and from the seven spirits before his throne, ⁵and from Jesus Christ, who is the faithful witness, the firstborn from the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth.

To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood, ⁶and has made us to be a kingdom and priests to serve his God and Father—to him be glory and power for ever and ever! Amen.

⁷Look, he is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see him, even those who pierced him; and all the peoples of the earth will mourn because of him. So shall it be! Amen.

⁸“I am the Alpha and the Omega,” says the Lord God, “who is, and who was, and who is to come, the Almighty.”

Dear Friends in Christ,

CHRIST MY KING

Twenty-five years ago a family of nine was in a mini-van driving down the interstate in Milwaukee, Wisconsin—maybe some of you remember this—and a 30 pound iron bracket broke off a semi-truck. It was kicked up and lodged in the mini-van’s gas tank. The sparks ignited the gasoline and it exploded. The only survivors were the husband and wife and one of their seven children. The father later stated, our children “were given of the Lord, and we understood they weren’t ours. They were his, and we were stewards of those children. And so God took them back.”¹ That had to be tough to say, but what a statement of faith!

Not everyone felt like that father. (Now here I am going on personal recollection rather than researched fact...) I recall hearing about a certain news reporter about that time. He had started attending church services in that same city in the previous months. When this disaster happened, he did a re-take. He publicly stated that he would not go to church again. “How could a loving God let such a thing happen?” he asked.

Over the years, many have taken offense at the hiddenness of God.

In the days of the Roman Empire, Roman governors did not take kindly to people claiming to be kings. The Roman Empire survived on iron-fisted, iron-booted authority. If you let the Romans have their way, they could treat to you as well as anyone in the ancient world. But even a breath of rebellion and your life could be very short indeed. Which is precisely why Jesus’ enemies took Jesus to the Roman governor and said, “This man claims to be a king.” (Luke 23:2) Inside they chuckled, “We should have Jesus off our hands by nightfall!” Pilate put the point directly to Jesus. “You are a king, then!” Jesus replied, “You are right in saying that I am a king. In fact, for this reason I was born.” Then the unexpected happened. Pilate said, “I find no basis for a charge against him.” So manifestly ridiculous was Jesus’ claim to be king, this beaten and bloodied man standing before him, that even the semi-paranoid Roman

¹ <http://archive.jsonline.com/news/milwaukee/b9977784z1-220062931.html/>

governor had no time for such tom-foolery. I imagine Pilate thinking, “I don’t have time for these Jewish madmen!”

Another one fooled by the hiddenness of God. A reporter asking questions, a governor totally unimpressed.

And it can happen to Christians too. Usually not quite in the same way, but still fooled by God’s hiddenness. This letter of Revelation was to Christians who were starting to wonder about the hiddenness of God. They lived in a time like ours, only much worse, and perhaps they were starting to think, “Where is God?” And like any mother when she sees worry shadowing her child’s face, our Lord Jesus, our King, wants to encourage his struggling people. He addresses Christians’ fears with this letter, what we call the book of Revelation. The apostle John, the writer of this book, understood this difficulty with God’s hiddenness. In this letter of Revelation, the Apostle John introduced himself saying: “*I, John, your brother and companion in the suffering and kingdom and patient endurance that are ours in Jesus...*” (1:9). You get the impression John may have had moments of wavering before the hiddenness of God. At least he knew that Christians in a fallen world, they too can be unnerved by the hiddenness of God.

We end our church year today with Christ the King Sunday. It is the assurance that all we have heard in the church year, from Advent to Christmas to Easter to the Sundays of Pentecost; from God’s word about money to marriage to the Ten Commandments, all of it, is backed up by the powerful king of heaven. God’s hiddenness notwithstanding, it is truth.

Who Is This Jesus Who Claims to Be Our King?

The book of Revelation, written to Christians, is an assurance that our faith will not be futile. Though God is not seen, though he is hidden, he is guiding all things for the good of those who love him.

In the opening sentences of the letter, the author of the letter tells us the basis for our faith. Now as I read verses 4 and 5, listen for references to the Triune God. For a little refresher, “Triune” means Three-in-One. “Trinity” means The Three-in-One God. This is why we have this symbol on the front center of our altar. You will notice that the shapes: this triangle, these three linked rings. These aren’t just decorations. These are a visual statements of the Triune God whom we worship.

Anyway, listen to our reading for mention of the Triune God: “***Grace and peace to you from him who is, and who was, and who is to come, and from the seven spirits before his throne, and from Jesus Christ, who is the faithful witness, the firstborn from the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth.***”

Did you hear the three-ness behind this message? This letter is “***from him who is, and who was, and who is to come.***” This speaks of God, especially God the Father. He revealed himself in the Old Testament as the eternal I AM. He does not change either his intentions or his actions. God is. Though he is hidden, he is constant and consistent.

The one we usually think of as the third person of the Trinity is mentioned next: “***and from the seven spirits before his throne.***” Revelation does not explain why the Holy Spirit is referred to in this unusual way as “the seven spirits.” But the context makes it clear that this refers to the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit, sometimes called the Comforter, reveals God’s

message for our comfort even while we wonder about the hiddenness of God.

Finally, this message of encouragement comes ***“from Jesus Christ, who is the faithful witness, the firstborn from the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth.”*** Jesus is a ***“faithful witness.”*** Not like the false witnesses we hear about: whose unsubstantiated allegations are nothing but a smoke screen. Jesus is the faithful witness who tells us the way to heaven. That way to heaven is not through a new and improved morality, but through a plan of salvation built on trust—what we call “faith”—in our Savior.

Jesus is a faithful witness about the way to heaven, and he is also ***“the firstborn from the dead.”*** Jesus has risen from the dead to live forever, and so shall we. Jesus is also ***“the ruler of the kings of the earth.”*** Kingdoms rise and fall, but Jesus has authority over them all. Jesus has them all on their leashes and knows the days of their birth and death.

Notice how this Trinitarian, this Three-in-One introduction equates Jesus with the Father and Holy Spirit. It does not merely equate Jesus with God. It states that he is God. Therefore the one we believe in is not just a good guy, nor even a good leader who shows us the way, nor my better half whom I aspire to be more like, nor my buddy who is always there for me. Jesus is categorically different from me because he is God. So even if he is hidden, I should not worry that he is unable to help me.

To the same point, but something that has special meaning here at Faith Lutheran Church, Jesus adds in our reading, ***“I am the Alpha and the Omega.”*** Alpha and omega are these. [Point to the alpha and omega on our altar.] If you ever wonder why we have this letter “a” and this weird sign here, these are first and last letters of the Greek alphabet, the language of the New Testament. When Jesus says, ***“I am the Alpha and the Omega,”*** he says that he is the beginning and the end, from eternity past to future eternity. These symbols are on the altar remind us that the one who gave his life as a sacrifice for our sin is true God. He was not merely another person. He was not a person so good that he became a god. He is not something kind of halfway between human and God, like an angel or something. Jesus is true God, the Alpha and Omega.

The point of this is to say that Christ Jesus can be our confidence because he is true God who took on flesh and blood and united them to his God-ness, his deity, and lived among us. In this way, God for a moment, made himself less hidden. With his presence among us, he showed his great concern and freed us from our sins by his blood, human flesh and blood united to God’s person. And so while God is hidden to us now, he once walked among us to prove to us that God does care, and that God did create a bridge from our fallen state to heaven through the person of Jesus Christ. And he left a small token of that humanity for us in the Lord’s Supper, where Jesus gives us what he assumed for our salvation. Now even though Jesus Christ has returned to that hiddenness, we look to him in faith, faith rooted in history.

One of the great benefits of coming to God’s house to worship, one of the reasons God wants his people to be in his house regularly, is so that we hear these encouraging reminders of who Jesus is. God’s word admits that the world is often a nasty place. Counting by the world’s scoresheet (and we do sometimes count by the world’s scoresheet), we do not always win (though God does give us many victories!) But in God’s house, God’s word and his people testify that Christ our king has won all the victories that matter.

Now I Have a Relationship with My King

Jesus did all he did to save us, but it was not *just* to save us. He didn't save us so that we can just go back to doing what we were doing.

When I was a young boy a neighbor two houses down trapped rabbits. He used a live trap. I don't know what he did with the rabbits, but I didn't like that he was trapping them. So my brother and I would sometimes trigger his traps so that he wouldn't catch rabbits. (Yes we eventually did get in trouble.) There was one time I even saved a rabbit from the trap. I opened it up and let it out. I saved it and it probably went right back to eating our neighbor's lettuce. That's not what Jesus does when he saves us. A lot of people think that's what Jesus does—he frees us so we can go back and do whatever we want, only now we have forgiveness too, so we can *really* do whatever we want. That's not why Jesus saves us.

God's word tells us: "***He has made us to be a kingdom and priests to serve his God and Father.***" We have a new and better purpose. Our purpose is to be a kingdom, to be priests, to be those who live in a relationship with our king, Jesus Christ. It's not an "I'll scratch your back if you scratch mine" relationship. No, this is a different relationship. In this relationship love and service are given without a thought. We and Jesus respond to each other in love: him giving to us, and us responding in thankfulness to him.

With that relationship of faith—a certainty that Jesus Christ is our king, that he supplies our needs, that he has prepared us for eternal life by granting us forgiveness—such faith makes us content with the hiddenness of God. Because no longer do I concentrate on what I wish I had today, but I look at the big picture that stretches into eternity. No longer am I obsessed with what I am getting out of life because I know and trust that Jesus is my king who faithfully supplies what I need. And even if I do fall into sin, I know just where to go for forgiveness: to the king who is ever-merciful and forgiving to all who come to him in humble, dependent faith. Amen.