

Fairfax Presbyterian Church
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Blessings From A to Z

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Revelation 1:1-8

In the filing cabinet of my office I keep a small pamphlet entitled "Tyranny of the Urgent." When I first read the booklet more than 20 years ago, it made a memorable impact on me as it challenged me to examine the difference between what is urgent and what is truly important. Occasionally we encounter information or events that are both urgent and important—if your house is on fire, for example, that would qualify as both urgent and extremely important. But most of the time, what seems to be so pressing, so urgent in our daily experience is not what is truly most important or has lasting significance. If we listen and respond primarily to what is demanding our attention, we may, in fact, be missing the opportunity to invest our lives in what is truly most dear to us. Listen to these opening lines....

"Have you ever wished for a 30-hour day? Surely this extra time would relieve the tremendous pressure under which we live. Our lives leave a trail of unfinished tasks

When I rediscovered this booklet last week, I was shocked to discover that these words were written in 1967—40 years ago—before cell phones, before laptops, before blackberries and blueberries, before the technology explosion that has seemingly moved life into warp speed. It was a startling reminder to me that there never has been a time when life was easy and everyone was caught up on business of life. Not in 1967. Not now. Not in the 1st century, either.

The book of Revelation was written to the first century Church by a man named John who believes passionately that what he has to tell the church is both urgent and important. John has had a vision, a revelation from God through an angel. John sets about the task of recording what he has seen and heard and of sending that message to the church.

Revelation is a book that has fascinated and intimidated people for ages. As apocalyptic literature it contains wild, vivid, and at times terrifying imagery, and theologians have loved to look for the meanings, hidden and otherwise, in its symbolic figures, numbers, and events. As important as that work may be, it should not be allowed to obscure the fact that, as verse 3 tells us, Revelation is given to the church for the purpose of worship. Even as John recorded his vision, he intended for this text to be read **out loud** in the context of the worshipping Christian community. For John, this is what makes the writing down of this revelation important. "Blessed is the one who reads aloud

the church's worship. With an introduction like that, I can sense the 1st century congregations sitting on the edge of their seats waiting for John to launch into the details of what he had seen. Instead, he launches into a greeting the point of which is to identify the source of his vision who, of course, is God. But John has already told us that in the very opening sentence, so what is he doing?

Twice John names God by the Trinitarian formula, "the one is and who was and who is to come." God is identified as the Alpha and the Omega, which are the first and last letters of the Greek alphabet. All of this is a way of expressing the idea of totality, of proclaiming God's sovereignty, of saying that there is nothing and no one higher or greater or more important than God. Later in the book John will use the phrases, "the first and the last" and "the beginning and the end" to convey the same idea. Jesus is also identified in Trinitarian language, as "the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth." These three titles describe three essential aspects of Jesus' role as one who faithfully proclaimed the Gospel of God which led to his death, the defeat of death in his resurrection, and his future role as universal sovereign. John then moves on to remind the church that it was Christ who loves them, who offers them freedom from sin because of his sacrifice, and who calls us "to be a kingdom, priests serving his God and Father."

Remember that John is addressing the church, so why does he go to such great lengths to name and identify God

state or culture in the 21st. Worship reorients our understanding of purpose, reminding us that God calls us to be priests, to be set apart as holy people, people of God's own choosing, for the purpose of building God's kingdom, not our own kingdom. Worship reorients our sense of allegiance, reminding us that we are to serve God the Father, not the emperors of this world because God alone is the first, the last, the Alpha, the Omega. God alone is worthy of our loyalty.

John is unequivocally and unapologetically stating that God is right to make these claims upon us because of who God is and how much God loves us. This is the very important message that the 1st century church needed to hear and it is the same important message that we need to hear today. Our lives at work, at home, in school, driving the carpool, paying the bills try to tell us that these matters which engage us so completely are critically important. They demand our attention by the urgency with which they press in upon us—our calendars and blackberries tell us that we have to rush from one appointment or meeting or practice or commitment to the next; there is no time to meet the eye of the homeless woman we pass in our urgency, much less time to buy her a cup of coffee on a cold day. There is no time to stop at the nursing home to listen to an old-timer tell a story he's told countless times before. We are too busy, too stressed, stretched too thin to mentor a teenager, go on a mission trip, or give a tithe of our paycheck to the mission and ministry of the church. It's

no simple solutions. Worship does, however, give us perspective. It adjusts our vision. It helps us remember things that we know but that get crowded from our consciousness by the urgency of daily living. It is in worship that we come to confession so that as John tells us in verse 5, we can remember Christ's love for us. We remember that we have been set free by the work of Christ on the cross and in the resurrection. The claims that God makes upon us—for our allegiance and loyalty and service, are not claims that add to the burden of living, lists of things we are to do or not to do that complicate lives already overscheduled and overcommitted. Worship invites us to remember the words of Paul in Galatians: "It was for freedom that Christ set you free." (Gal 5:1) We are free to come into God's presence, before the one who is, who was, and who is to come, and in that presence, what seems so pressing and so urgent is given to the Lord. In the presence of the one who says to us, I am the Alpha and the Omega, and I love you, must we still live at a frenetic pace to prove our worth to ourselves and to others? In worship Christ invites us to share our reality that our fears and our guilt seem to be much more in control of our lives than the spirit of the risen Lord. In worship we can admit that, and Christ invites us to see reality anew, from the eyes of the one who is the ruler of the kings of the earth. In worship Christ invites us to exchange the blessings of this world that we are working so frantically to amass for God's blessings that are promised when we worship and respond to the Word of God proclaimed. These blessings will not call to us as urgently as the latest

electronic gadget. These blessings are the important ones