

Sermon

November 2, 2014

Title: Call to March

Text: Revelation 8-11

The Problem with Repentance

Vesuvius, AD 79:

He sits huddled as to protect himself from the unthinkable – a nameless inhabitant of the ancient Roman city of Pompeii. He was one of some 16,000 people who died on August 24-25th, AD 79 when Mount Vesuvius erupted. His body was encased with ash and lay undisturbed for almost 2000 years. Archaeologists poured plaster into the space where his body once been, creating this cast of his final moments.

The ancient writer Pliny the Younger was an eye witness to this eruption. From his vantage point across the bay from Vesuvius he wrote:

The cloud was rising from a mountain -- at such a distance we couldn't tell which, but afterwards learned that it was Vesuvius. I can best describe its shape by likening it to a pine tree. It rose into the sky on a very long "trunk" from which spread some "branches." I imagine it had been raised by a sudden blast, which then weakened, leaving the cloud unsupported so that its own weight caused it to spread sideways. Some of the cloud was white, in other parts there were dark patches of dirt and ash. (Pliny Letter 6.16)

The next day he and his mother attempted their escape from the ongoing eruptions. His tale is one of earthquakes, a tsunami, black skies, lightning and fire.

The carts that we had ordered brought were moving in opposite directions, though the ground was perfectly flat, and they wouldn't stay in place even with their wheels blocked by stones. In addition, it seemed as though the sea was being sucked backwards, as if it were being pushed back by the shaking of the land. Certainly the shoreline moved outwards, and many sea creatures were left on dry sand. Behind us were frightening dark clouds, rent by lightning twisted and hurled, opening to reveal huge figures of flame. These were like lightning, but bigger. (Pliny Letter 6:20)

Then came the ash and a world gone dark in the middle of the day:

We had scarcely sat down when a darkness came that was not like a moonless or cloudy night, but more like the black of closed and unlighted rooms. You could hear women lamenting, children crying, men shouting. Some were calling for parents, others for children or spouses; they could only recognize them by their voices. Some bemoaned their own lot, other that of

their near and dear. There were some so afraid of death that they prayed for death. Many raised their hands to the gods, and even more believed that there were no gods any longer and that this was one last unending night for the world. (Pliny 6:20)

The Unwinding of the Cosmos:

It is hard to read this account of the eruption of Vesuvius and not think of the Book of Revelation. Surely John and his readers would have known of the catastrophe: it happened approximately 15 years before the writing of Revelation, and would have been the talk of the entire Roman world.

John's Third Vision Cycle begins with what could almost be an alternative account of this eruption. After an opening vision in Heaven, we plunge down into the chaos and disorder of our world. Angels begin sounding trumpets and the cosmos begins to unwind:

- The First Trumpet brings hail and fire mixed with blood that burns up 1/3 of the earth's vegetation.
- With the Second Trumpet a blazing mountain is cast into the sea, destroying marine life and ships.
- The Third Trumpet brings a star that poisons 1/3 of the fresh water.
- The Fourth Trumpet darkens the sun, moon and stars.

The next two Trumpets take us beyond the physical manifestations of destruction, and confront us with the dark powers that war against God's Creation:

- The Fifth Trumpet reveals demonic monsters that come up out of the Abyss:

Revelation 9:2-3 NIV

When he opened the Abyss, smoke rose from it like the smoke from a gigantic furnace. The sun and sky were darkened by the smoke from the Abyss. ³ And out of the smoke locusts came down on the earth and were given power like that of scorpions of the earth.

- The Sixth Trumpet reveals a vast demonic horde that kills 1/3 of mankind.

With these Six Trumpets John describes the cosmos being virtually "uncreated," reversing the Creation Story of Genesis. Such is the effect of the dark forces of evil operating in and through a corrupted humanity. We are at the bottom of the U.

The Problem of Repentance:

None of the trumpets cause human beings to change their ways:

Revelation 9:20-21 NIV

²⁰ The rest of mankind who were not killed by these plagues still did not repent of the work of their hands; they did not stop worshiping demons, and idols of gold, silver, bronze, stone and wood—idols that cannot see or hear or walk. ²¹ Nor did they repent of their murders, their magic arts, their sexual immorality or their thefts.

Therein lies “the problem of repentance.” So often, Christians imagine that a natural or man-made disaster will spark a great turning to God. Surely people will see the error of their ways when they see their world collapsing all around them! But the message of Revelation is exactly the opposite. The great judgments and demonic attacks of the first Six Trumpets do not cause people to turn from their idols and acknowledge the true God. Such is the “problem of repentance.”

And isn't that what our own experience tells us as well? 90% of people with heart disease *refuse* to alter their lifestyle or diet, even though their doctor warns them that they are at risk of a fatal heart attack if they do not! The world caught a glimpse of the demons of hell when Allied forces liberated the German death camps. But now, 70 years later, anti-Semitism is back with a vengeance. Such is the “problem of repentance.” They say that there are no atheists in foxholes; but I wonder how many foxhole converts continue to seek God when life returns to normal?

The Mystery of the Scroll

An Open Scroll:

It turns out that the solution to the problem of repentance is found in an open scroll.

Revelation 10:1-2a NIV

Then I saw another mighty angel coming down from heaven. He was robed in a cloud, with a rainbow above his head; his face was like the sun, and his legs were like fiery pillars. ² He was holding a little scroll, which lay open in his hand.

Here is the scroll that we first saw in chapter 5 being given to the Lamb to unseal. It was given to Jesus, the Lamb, so that He could restore and repair God's Creation. The opening of the Seven Seals did not reveal the contents of the scroll. That could only be known *after* the last seal was opened.

The Seven Trumpets call the world to attention so that the contents of the scroll may be proclaimed and so that humans can repent and worship the One True God. The angel promises John that with the sounding of the Seventh Trumpet its mysterious message will be announced as Good News to the world.

John's Assignment:

The angel gives the scroll to John and commands him to eat it, thus taking its message into himself so that he can proclaim it. He is warned that it will be sweet as honey in his mouth, but bitter in his stomach, thus taking its message into himself so that he can proclaim it. In other words, it is Good News, but involves suffering.

Once he has eaten the scroll, the angel gives him the command to proclaim its message:

Revelation 10:11 NIV

¹¹ Then I was told, "You must prophesy again about many peoples, nations, languages and kings."

The word of God and the testimony of Jesus Christ:

In many ways, the story of the first half of the Book of Revelation is the story of this scroll:

- The book begins with John telling us that he has a message for the churches that comes from God, to Christ, to an angel, and finally to himself.
- The Throne Room scene in Heaven climaxes with the presentation of a scroll to Jesus, the Lamb, the only One who can unseal the scroll and repair God's world.
- Now, the mysterious message of the scroll is about to be revealed, and with it, the answer to the problem of repentance.

Call to March

The Two Witnesses:

The next thing John sees is a vision of the Temple and two people who bear witness to the true God. Their mission is to challenge the forces of evil and call people to repent from worshiping this world's false gods.

Both the Temple and the two witnesses are symbols of Christians living in a hostile world. In the introductory letters John had promised that faithful Christians would be "a pillar in the temple of my God." (Rev. 3:12 NIV) Throughout the NT the church is consistently referred to as the new temple of God. The two witnesses, who are described as "lampstands" are likewise representative of the church. We saw the churches symbolized as lampstands in John's first vision of Christ.

The Witnesses' Journey:

The witnesses take their stand against the world system. They wear sackcloth, the garb of repentance, and they call their generation to turn to God just as Elijah and Moses did in their time.

When they have completed giving their witness, they are killed by the world system that they oppose – in John’s case, Rome as embodied by its emperor. But John’s message is that whenever and wherever Christians stand true to God they will be opposed by both human and demonic powers. Then God raises them up and brings them to Heaven.

John tells us that their enemies see them raised to life and taken into heaven. God has affirmed that their witness was true and has defeated the system that killed them. It is only then that people repent and turn to God:

Revelation 11:13 NIV

At that very hour there was a severe earthquake and a tenth of the city collapsed. Seven thousand people were killed in the earthquake, and the survivors were terrified and gave glory to the God of heaven.

The prophet Elijah lamented that no one was left in Israel who honored God. In reply, God told him that there were still 7000 who had not “bowed the knee to Baal.” Now, John tells us that the numbers are reversed: all *but* 7000 repent and give glory to the God of heaven. Craig Koester notes:

The witness, death, and vindication of the community of faith accomplish what the prospect of judgment alone does not do. It brings people of many tribes, languages, and nations to fear God and to give him glory. (Craig R. Koester. Revelation and the End of All Things (p. 111). Kindle Edition.)

Solved: the problem of repentance.

The Seventh Trumpet:

With the Seventh Trumpet we finish the journey back up to Heaven. This trumpet sounds the victory that God has won through the faithful witness of His people:

Revelation 11:15 NIV

The seventh angel sounded his trumpet, and there were loud voices in heaven, which said:

*“The kingdom of the world has become
the kingdom of our Lord and of his Messiah,
and he will reign for ever and ever.”*

Once again the 24 elders praise God, this time not as Creator, but as the One who has begun to restore His world and punish those who would destroy it.

Call to March:

God has given us a sacred mission during our journey here on earth. Like Israel, we are called to bear witness to Him and Him alone as the true God. Pharaoh, the “beast” of that time, never repented of his hatred of God and God’s people, regardless of the plagues that afflicted him and his land. But God never told Israel to fight back. Instead, Israel was called out of Egypt to become God’s light to the whole world.

Jesus’ disciples had to learn the same lesson. Just before Jesus, the Faithful Witness, was taken up to heaven, they asked if now was the time for Him to defeat Rome and establish Israel as world ruler. Instead, Jesus gave them the command to be faithful witnesses themselves:

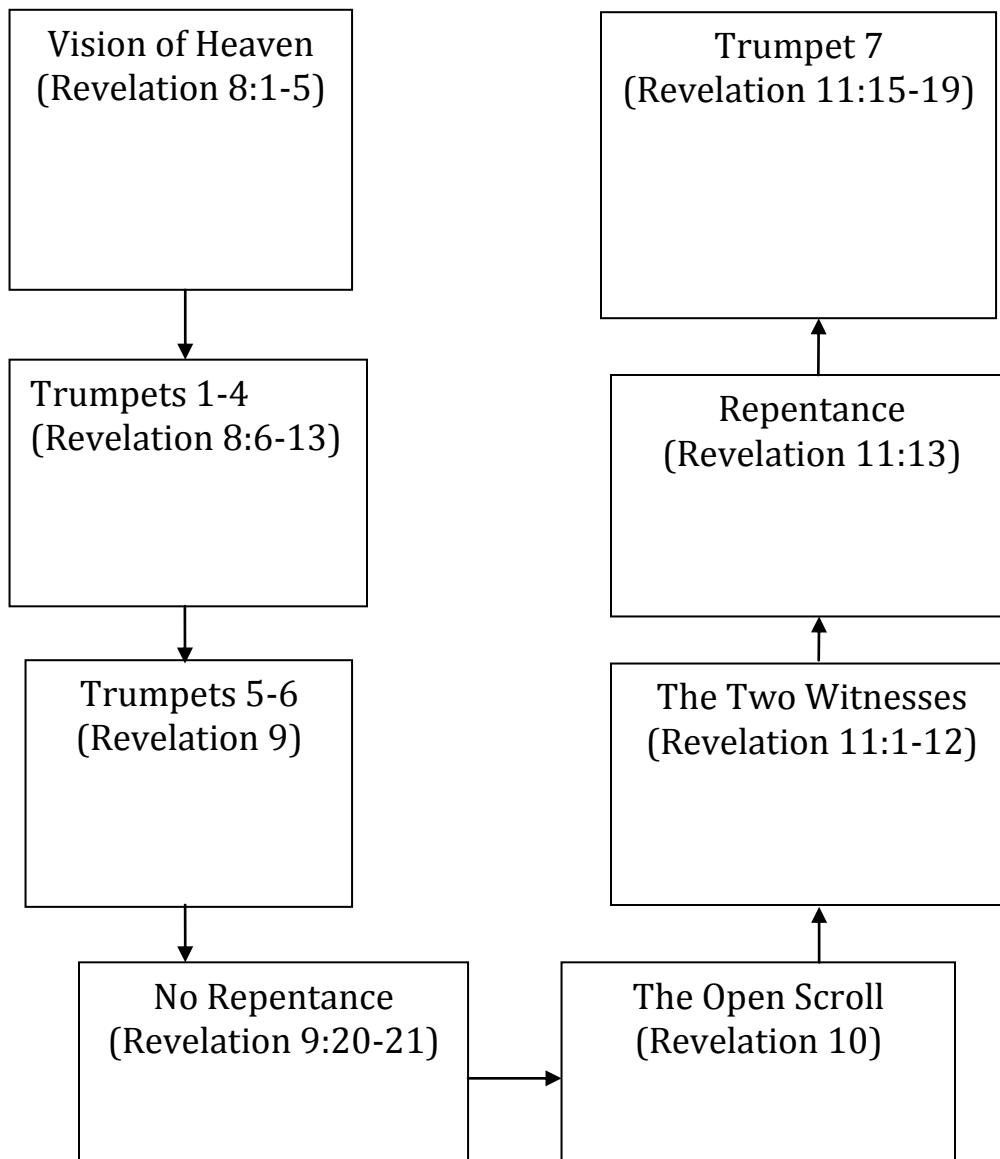
Acts 1:8 NIV

“But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”

Their assignment is our assignment. We are God’s lights in a dark world. We are not mere victims of the world’s injustice and evil. We are God’s lights in a dark world.

Last week we saw God’s people being sealed against judgment and arrayed as God’s army, God’s change agents. Now we see God’s people in the testimony of the Two Witnesses. We are called to bear witness to Him, His justice, love and mercy. We are the proof that He has begun to repair this broken world.

That is why Jesus’ path is our path, His suffering is our suffering, His victory is our victory. We are God’s answer to the problem of repentance.

The Third Vision Cycle (Revelation 8-11)

- Assimilation: Believers called to resist “the beast.”
- Persecution: Witnesses are killed by “the beast.”
- Complacency: Vision of Evil to shock us out of complacency

