

Grace and Peace to you from God our Father and from our reigning King and Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

⁴ John to the seven churches that are in Asia: Grace to you and peace from him who is and who was and who is to come, and from the seven spirits who are before his throne, ⁵ and from Jesus Christ, the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead and the ruler of the kings of the earth. To him who loves us and freed us from our sins by his blood, ⁶ and made us to be a kingdom, priests serving his God and Father, to him be glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen. ⁷ Look! He is coming with the clouds; every eye will see him, even those who pierced him; and on his account all the tribes of the earth will wail. So it is to 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 congregation!

Grace and peace, holiness and comfort: words pregnant with hope and meaning that I would like to zoom in on this evening. We are celebrating Ascension Day, the Day when Christ took His place as King and Ruler over all the earth. Had He not ascended we would not have the all-encompassing peace that comes with Christ being King and Ruler over all the earth. Because this earth, the world we live in is a hostile and scary place and we often feel helpless and powerless in the face of many injustices and unfairness, a place where we are faced with many challenges and disappointments, with much pain and fear for the future. *Grace*, that is, the good-will of God towards us and his good work in us; and *peace*, that is, the sweet evidence and assurance of this grace. There can be no true peace where there is not true grace; and, where grace goes before, peace will follow.

Therefore, the greeting of peace here at the beginning of the book of Revelation, that is often misunderstood as the scariest book in the Bible, is not insignificant. The people listening as one of their church leaders reads

John's letter are worn down and disheartened. Revelation is speech by and for the oppressed, those suffering under the sword of Rome, not for a successful, affluent or powerful church. The people were already frightened by the hostile world they found themselves in. The last thing they needed was a word that frightens them even more. The many visions that God gave John on the island of Patmos were not meant to scare, but to reassure the people of faith that, despite all outward appearances, God knows their suffering and hears their cries. It's easy to believe the goal of life is to escape unscathed – without pain, failure or wreckage. And it's easy for Christians to believe that the goal of spiritual life is to skate through with a perfect score – no major errors or mess-ups. But here's the thing: If you live long enough on this beautiful, broke planet, despite your best efforts to avoid pain and check all the right boxes, things will likely fall apart at some point. Cars and planes will crash; marriages will crack up and fall apart; hearts will break, and bleed, darkness and death will come knocking. When things do fall apart it's serious, and they're going to happen to most of us at some point. I'm sure we all know this to be true.

What is immensely important then, is to know of a place of true grace and peace, holiness and comfort, the good-will of God towards us.

John writes during the Pax Romana, a time of "peace" only if you were the favored and privileged of the Roman Empire, which the early Christians were not. Indeed, peace would have been hard for Christians to come by if solicited from the Empire. A popular view of Revelation in our society assumes that this book is "history told in advance", written to warn readers about events that will happen during their lifetimes. John, however, seems to have something more immediate in mind.

He writes to “the seven churches” which represent the universal church, the number seven indicating completeness, wholeness, so John writes to the whole church. That would include us today. At the time of John in the first century, some faced persecution; some were being corrupted by society; some had stopped taking faith seriously. Now this doesn’t sound like issues and problems of only the past or the future, but it sounds like issues very current and immediate to our day and age. Take today, Ascension Day, as a case in point. It has very much faded as a very important and significant day in the Christian calendar. That is why it is important for us to pay adherence to this important day, to celebrate it and learn more about its significant meaning for our lives in a world that may be quite different from the world in the first century, and yet it is very similar too.

The Church of Christ is suffering persecution and being corrupted by society even to this day. Human greed has gone crazy. What is necessary for minimal living is unavailable while the luxuries of life are abundant. Greed does it. People exploit the earth, leaving it depleted and poor, in order to get rich. We accept the worldly standard that the most important thing to do with our bodies is to put them to work to make money and achieve reputations. The result is illness. And illness is then disguised by technology. The gigantic medical facilities that are the new cathedrals of our modern society are not signs of health but of sickness. By some linguistic trick of the devil, we have agreed to call “the real world” – the world of pride and persecution, disease and disaster, power and status, guns and self-help. But that is not the real world. That world is disintegrating and dying. There is no grace and no peace to be found there.

That is why John sends real and true peace from another source, from a Trinitarian God – the Almighty One who is, was, and is to come; Christ the resurrected and ascended one. A God who, in Jesus Christ, is the “ruler of the kings of the earth.”

This God of true peace exists before and after and within the false peace of the earthly empire – an all-times-and-all-places God and His peace that is so important it’s mentioned three times in this short passage. The Lord God was before the empire, is in the midst of the empire, and will be once the empire falls. When it comes to the end of the earthly empire, the question is not if but when, it is the reign of the Almighty that is forever. This one is the one who deserves glory and dominion forever. This one is the one who gives spectacular visions of an upside-down kingdom of which Christians may be a part and over which Christ reigns in his peculiar kind of power. Among other things, I think that means because God is sovereign over even the most awe-inspiring forces of nature, we can rest assured that the ground under our feet will *not* give way, the stars will *not* fall from the sky, and the sun *will* come up tomorrow. It’s the promise of the rainbow in Genesis – God will never again destroy the world (Genesis 8:21-22; 9:8-17). And whatever we face in our fragile and sometimes messed up lives will not have the power to ultimately destroy us either.

There is no escaping the fact that we at times will have to deal with the intrinsic consequences of our own actions. But God is not the one who enforces the laws of gravity, of cause and effect as some kind of extra punishment. God is the one who interrupts that natural cycle with His grace. In the words of Gustavo Guitierrez, God is the one who enables us to “run free in the fields of God’s love and breathe an unrestricted air like the animals.” No matter what reasons we seem to have to fear ourselves or our monsters, God is decisively not the one we have to be afraid of. He brings the grace that can engineer beauty out of our chaos. He opens up new possibilities beyond simply living out the consequences of our choices. That may be part of the story, but it does not have to be the whole story – not in a universe where a God like that exists and rules.

It does not mean that we will not experience or be the cause of deep brokenness in the world. It does however mean that there are no dead ends. We can look at the world with all its beauty and ugliness without fear, and we can look at ourselves without fear. Frederick Buechner writes: "Here is the world. Beautiful and terrible things will happen. Don't be afraid." There is grace and peace and beauty to be found even in the depths of whatever you might currently be going through. The love of God, like the Son of God, who, in the words of the Apostle's Creed, 'descended into hell' (before he ascended into heaven), is always bent downward. It is the nature of love to plumb the depths – of the earth, of our lives, of ourselves. It spirals downward into the very core of us ⁽¹⁾. The God of Grace who rules over the kings of the earth and over all the forces of nature is also the God that rules over the depths of the sea and the underworld and whatever hell we may be currently occupying.

God's reign is the power that keeps this old world turning, that keeps the rain falling, that keeps the seasons returning – that keeps our lives going and our hearts beating; and it is all expression of God's faithful and everlasting love. That same faithful and everlasting love is what sustains us each and everyday of our lives; that offers us an all- encompassing grace and peace that we can always go back to. God is the same faithful God all the way from promise to fulfillment. *This* God is the one who is "First and the Last, the Beginning and the End." This is what it means to believe that Christ has ascended, that God will act no differently at the end of all things than at the beginning of all things; this is what it means to joyfully affirm that "as it was in the beginning", so it is now, and so it "ever shall be. World without end. Amen!"

God "loves us and freed us from our sins by his blood" (v. 5). Because of this good news,

we are encouraged to "look" (v. 7) – to look up, to behold the One who is coming. When he comes in power, he comes as our Savior not our enemy. Our faith sees his coming as a fulfillment of promise, and our "Amen" (vv. 6, 7) is our affirmation that the One who comes is none other than our Lord Jesus Christ (cf. Rev. 22:20).

While we live in this beautiful and hostile world, we live as priests of the promise (v. 6). The Lamb who was slain has begun his reign – and "his glory and dominion will be forever and ever." Our role is to celebrate the victory, even in the midst of many trials and sorrows. And that promise will sustain us all the way and all the time, because He is the Alpha and the Omega (v. 8), the One who is with us right now, the One who was and is to come. Such promise provides the counterbalancing witness to the rulers of this earth: There is another ruling going on – one that loves and frees us all, one that give us true grace and peace for our weary souls! Amen.

¹ in: J. Martin, How to survive a Shipwreck: Help is on the way and Love is already here, 2016:134-135