

## **“Changing Our Focus”** **Revelation 1:4-8**

Almost 20 years ago, for Thanksgiving, Cathy and I traveled to Monroe, Louisiana, to share the blessings of the day at my brother’s house.

He and his wife had invited members from both sides of their family to gather together for a delicious meal in a spirit of Thanksgiving.

My brother’s wife had invited her 93-year-old grandmother to join the festivities, who had also been present when I officiated at my brother’s wedding long before Cathy and I were married.

Because our paths had not crossed since that time, she re-introduced herself to me when Cathy and I entered the room.

“Are you Tom?”

“Yes, ma’am,” I said. “I’m Tom, and this is my wife Cathy.”

“This is your wife?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

And then it was as if the Cathy Ulrich Fan Club had been established.

“Oh, my goodness,” she said with her deep Mississippi accent.

“She is so pretty. I’ve never seen anything like this. She is just so pretty.”

Cathy, more than a little embarrassed by the effusive flattery offered by the 93-year-old grandmother, said “Thank you,” and then tried to change the subject.

But Granny would have none of it.

“You are so pretty,” she said. “I can’t take my eyes off of you. You’re so pretty.”

Someone else tried to redirect the conversation – “How ‘bout them Hogs?”

But Granny continued, “You are so pretty. It’s like a miracle. I just couldn’t have imagined that she would be so pretty.”

Finally my brother asked, “Well, Granny, why couldn’t you have imagined that Cathy would be so pretty?”

And Granny then pointed to me and snapped back,

“Because I *have* seen *him*,

and I would have never thought that someone like him could nab someone as pretty as her.”

After that, for the next three years went to Taco Bell for Thanksgiving!

But I share that story,

because, like Granny, who couldn’t take her eyes off Cathy,

the believers to whom John was writing the book of Revelation were being tempted and enticed to keep their eyes on the world.

The empire's social and economic allure was quite attractive to the early Christians,  
and they were being tempted to forsake their identity as followers of Jesus Christ  
and instead assimilate to the surrounding culture.

The world around them, through its seductions, through its propaganda,  
had the power to make them forget that they were citizens,  
not of the empire, but of God's kingdom,  
and the empire wanted to lure the faithful to live by *their* values,  
asserting that there are really no other alternatives other than the choices that have  
already been made.

And so the Roman empire, like *any* empire or country in power, wanted to suppress any independent  
thinking . . .

and the Roman empire, like any empire or country in power, sought to silence any critical voices  
and to blur their focus on any new horizons,  
so that the citizens would come to believe that there *was* no alternative,  
and the people would then acquiesce to passive conformity,  
refusing to engage in issues,  
or to consider a different interpretation,  
or to follow an undocumented path,  
convincing us that it knows how to keep us safe,  
even giving us colorful red/orange/yellow terror alerts on our screens to  
convey to us that they know how to provide security.

But those of us in the church know better . . .

for we know, as the Bible tells us, that the Roman empire could not keep its promises of security,  
and the Roman empire could not generate new hope or new life.

And as evidence, all we need to do is

to merely remember how the empire executed a Man who challenged *their* power of force by  
demonstrating *God's* power of love . . .

and as the story goes, the man in charge (Pilate) gave a command with strict orders to the  
armed security guards of his military patrol

to make the tomb very secure (Matt. 27:62-66).

But, *by the third day*, the security system of the empire proved to be futile and ineffective,

because God's power for new life could not be contained or restrained;

it could not be depleted or defeated;

it could not be suppressed or repressed.

The security system of Rome was no match for God's will for new life

given to the One who as the book of Revelation describes Him, "the first-born of the dead,"

and thus revealing that the One who is the Alpha and the Omega confirms that the way to

security

is not more weapons  
or more alarm systems  
or our huge military complex,  
or the screening system at our airports,  
or the building of walls around our borders;

on the contrary, the way to security is through embracing the message of the King of the kings and Lord of lords,

by developing a neighborly fabric that includes all people,  
and where the instruments we employ consist of  
the practices of hospitality,  
the enactment of hope and solidarity,  
the expression of mercy and compassion,  
and the embodiment of love and forgiveness.

Then, as now, on this Christ the King Sunday,

the book of Revelation summons the Christian community to complete faithfulness,

fixing our focus on the One who is the ruler of all the kings of the earth, Jesus Christ.

But then, as now, a choice must be made . . .

so that the possibility of neutrality is eliminated . . .

because either the community of faith will remain thoroughly committed to the One who loved us and freed us from our sins,

or we will join the indoctrinated masses whose vision is dulled because they have turned away from the One who offers a new way of life.

Indeed, all people will choose their allegiances . . .

but the question is whether or not we can take our eyes off the attractiveness of the prevailing culture,

or whether we will unite with the faithful and work for a new reality for all people on the planet.

Stephen Lawhead's Pendragon Trilogy attempts to present the legends of King Arthur in a historical setting.

In the initial book, Charis, a princess from the peaceful island of Atlantis, has narrowly escaped the devastation of her homeland.

In her refuge, she journeys to the ancient lands of Wales and Britain . . .

and there she meets her future husband, Taliesin, a mystical seer and druid prince.

One day, as they are making their way by horseback through a land of chaos,

Taliesin and Charis come to the crest of a hill.

As they looked upon the vista, Taliesin said, "Beyond those mountains is my homeland."  
Charis replied, "I have never heard you speak of your former home."

"Nor have I heard you speak of yours," Taliesin replied,

before turning back to the mountains and gazing upon them for a long time without speaking.  
When he did speak again, his voice sounded far away, but full of life:

"I have seen a land shining with goodness,

where each man protects his brother's dignity as readily as his own,

where war and want have ceased,

and all races live under the same law of love and honor.

I have seen a land bright with truth,

where a man's word is his pledge and falsehood is banished,

where children sleep safe in their mother's arms,

and where no one ever knows fear or pain.

I have seen a land where kings extend their hands in justice rather than reach for  
the sword;

where mercy, kindness, and compassion flow like deep water over the land,

and people revere virtue, truth, and beauty, above comfort, pleasure or  
selfish gain.

It is a land where peace reigns in the hill . . . where the True God is  
worshiped . . . and where His ways are acclaimed by all."

"That's a wonderful dream," Charis said.

"It's not a dream only," he answered, shaking his head. "It is a true world."

"But it is not our world."

"No," he admitted, and then added,

"but it is our world as it was meant to be, and *will* be.

It can happen, Charis.

Do you see it? Do you understand?"<sup>1</sup>

Indeed, do we see it? Do we understand? . . .

for, in the King's court, we anticipate, and work for, a world as it was meant to be,

where chaos will be fashioned into a new creation,

where a culture of injustice will be shaped into a community of equality,

and where alienation will be transformed into a joyful homecoming.

Do we see it? Do we understand

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<sup>1</sup> Stephen R. Lawhead, *Taliesin: Book One of the Pendragon Cycle*, (New York: HarperCollins, 1987),  
page 443.

how, as citizens of God's kingdom,  
we are called to invite all people to come inside –  
to experience the warmth of God's love in the harsh winters of the world . . .  
to stand up for those who may be neglected, cast out, or weak . . .  
and to remain faithful and uncompromising to the way of Jesus Christ.

As we follow Jesus Christ as our King,

we invest our lives in molding a society where the strong will no longer dominate the weak but  
instead they will share their resources to support all life . . .

we work for that day when no one will be forsaken or forgotten, but all people will share  
their unique gifts to enhance the world's welfare . . .

and we seek to establish a community that promotes justice, righteousness, and steadfast  
love for all people.

In the King's court, we do not set our focus on the values of the world,

but instead we always look to Christ who inspires us to participate in a kingdom

that invites new dreams,

initiates new social arrangements,

and evokes new joyous living in the embrace of Christ's unconditional love.

But isn't that what we expect when we pray to God, "Thy Kingdom come"?

This sermon was delivered by Tom Ulrich  
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