

MESSAGE IN A BOTTLE

REVELATION 21:1-6; 22:1-5
LETHBRIDGE MENNONITE CHURCH
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I know a number of you were thinking of and praying for Naomi and I this week as we drove out to Vancouver to attend the funeral of a family friend.

On the drive *to* Vancouver, we had nearly perfect conditions. On the drive *back*... Not so much. Yesterday was a long day on the roads with rain or snow or both for nearly the entire trip.

But we are glad to be safely home, and we thank you for your prayers.

One person commented that this probably wasn't the kind of trip that refreshes, but perhaps one that refocuses. I think this is very good way to put it.

It's almost a cliché to say that grieving loss and remembering the life of a friend can force us to confront our own mortality, but it is true nonetheless.

It was for me.

When we are forced to walk through the valley of the shadow of death, we are reminded that one day this will be us.

Which leads to questions. Questions like:

- What is the point of life? What is the meaning of the handful of decades (sometimes more, sometimes less) decades that we spend here?
- What, **actually**, can I hope for? Like, *really* hope for. Not just, what's the right theological answer to the question of the afterlife, but what is the concrete hope that guides my life right now?!
- Is there goodness at the end of this story—the story of my life, the story of the world—or does every story end with a box being lowered into the ground, with tears and hugs, and with hushed conversations in a church fellowship hall around open-faced buns and bad church coffee ☺?

These are old questions, frequently asked questions, but important questions, too. Questions that are easy to ignore, easy to push to the side as we go about our days.

So, today, we're going to take a break from our fall journey through Luke's gospel. We've been looking at some very pragmatic teachings from Jesus about what life in the kingdom of God looks like.

Today we're going to kind of elevate our gaze a bit and survey the big picture. We're going to look at the forest instead of the trees.

Speaking of forests and trees, we're going to begin on an island.

I want to begin by reading a short passage from a book by the American novelist, Walker Percy. The book is called *The Message in the Bottle*.

There is a man who finds himself castaway on the shore of a remote island civilization. He is a special kind of castaway. He has lost his memory in the shipwreck and has no recollection of where he came from or who he is. All he knows is that one day he finds himself cast up on a beach. But it is a pleasant place, and he soon discovers that the island is inhabited. Indeed, it turns out that the islanders have a remarkable culture with highly developed social institutions, a good university, first-class science, a flourishing industry and art. The castaway is warmly received. Being a resourceful fellow, he makes the best of the situation, gets a job, builds a house, finds a wife, raises a family, goes to night school, and enjoys the local arts of cinema, music, and literature. He becomes, as the phrase goes, a useful member of the community.

The castaway, who by now is quite well educated and curious about the world, forms the habit of taking a walk on the beach each morning. After doing this for a while, he begins to regularly come upon bottles that have been washed up by the waves. The bottles are tightly corked and each one contains a single piece of paper with a single sentence written on it.

These messages are very diverse and appear to be random statements. Some say basic statements of fact like "Chicago, a city, is on Lake Michigan" or "2+2=4" or "lead melts at 330 degrees." Others are a bit more abstract and peculiar, like "truth is beauty."

Yet he finds that all of these messages, while occasionally useful, have nothing to say about the most important questions he has:

- "Who am I?"
- "How did I get here?"
- "What is my fate?"
- "What can I hope for?"
- "How should I live?"

All the messages in the world that explain the mechanics of life on the island, or even provide news from other places are of no use to this man when it comes to these questions.

On another island, a long time ago, sat a man named John. The island is called Patmos and John is in prison.

He had been sent there by the Roman emperor Domitian during his persecution of the early church. He is writing during a dark time for the infant church. He is writing to churches throughout Asia to encourage them to hold fast to the truth, to persevere, to take heart, to keep the faith, to keep on living out the message of the Kingdom of God.

In a way, he is bringing them a message in a bottle.

He has seen a vision. Jesus has revealed himself to John! He has shown him strange and beautiful things. The message in the bottle has told John, sitting on his island, about how the story ends.

And what does the message say? It says that the old order of things is passing away. It says that one day God is going to dwell among his people.

It says that one day there will be no more tears or mourning or death.

It says that one day Christ's church is going to be as beautiful as a bride. No more fighting about theology, no more disputes about doctrine, no more personality conflicts. Our theology will be shown for the pale imitation of the real thing that it is when God himself dwells among us!

It says that the God we serve is the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End, and that he can be trusted with the future—with the future of the world, with your future, and my future.

It says that no matter how bad things might look—no matter if the Emperor is snuffing out Christian lives like there's no tomorrow, no matter how the church is persecuted and ridiculed, no matter how hard (or easy) it is to believe that Jesus is gonna win, it's true.

News has come from across the sea, and it is good news indeed!

As always, the "so what?" question remains. What does Walker Percy's story about the castaway and John's vision on Patmos mean for your life or for mine?

It's great to know how the story ends, but what do we do on the island in the meantime?

I want to draw THREE conclusions:

1. We need to remember that just like the man in Walker Percy's story, we are castaways, no matter how "nice" (or how miserable, for that matter) life on the island is

We need to pay attention to our "homesickness."

Despite the current mantra of living in the moment (a message that dominates our advertising and media!), we all know this isn't true, if we stop to think about it for even a few minutes.

No matter how beautiful our "Island" is, no matter how much we enjoy exploring it, we all get these reminders that we are castaways, that we need good news of rescue from across the sea.

A loved one dies. Depression sets in. Addictions take over someone close to us. The longings we have for security and love and permanence are not met here. Our bodies begin to betray us, in tiny little increments. We get reminders that we're not going to be around forever.

And ultimately, of course, we all die.

A comfortable life in a beautiful place can push the unpleasant realities of life into the background for a while—maybe even for a long while.

But not forever.

Deep in our bones, we know that we were created for eternity, and that our hearts long for what we were made for. St. Augustine famously set that "our hearts are restless until they find their rest in thee." We know that we were made for life, not death!

No matter how nice our island is, no matter how pleasant our experience of it might be, we are castaways and we must not forget this. Which leads to...

2. We need to realize that news of our rescue must come to us as genuine *news* from across the sea

We cannot *think* or *analyze* our way to rescue.

In Percy's story, the man became quite good at analyzing his environment, and learning about it, exploring it, and enjoying it. And this was all very good. But it didn't address the biggest questions he had.

Those answers had to come from somewhere beyond, somewhere outside the system

News of the rescue that God offers cannot be found by examining our Island.

There is no amount of observing our world, no scientific explorations of nature or anything like that that could ever produce the message that Jesus died on the cross and rose from the dead to save his people and redeem the world!

We can't "figure it out" or "discover it through research" or anything like that. It's good to figure things out and to research things, but when it comes to the big questions, the questions that move to the front of our consciousness when we see a friend or loved one being lowered into the ground, we need to hear news to come from the outside.

We need to hear from God. We need things to be *revealed* to us and for us.

I think this is one of the biggest problems we "sophisticated" moderns have. We are too proud to accept that the most important news that we will ever receive has to be *accepted* rather than *discovered* by us.

It is an offense to our pride and our self-sufficiency! If news like that was so important, why would God entrust it to a bunch of first century fishermen and tax-collectors who didn't have our accurate means of information transmission?!

But accept it we must. We must understand our situation and we must be open to hearing the message in the bottle.

And we must be willing to accept it and obey it. We must trust the message.

3. We need to realize (and celebrate) that the message in the bottle is not about getting off the island!

Most often, we think of the castaway as someone whose main goal is rescue and that this involves one day getting *off* the island. And this is how many have interpreted the Christian hope. Our main home is elsewhere—heaven.

But this is not what we see in Revelation. The message in the bottle tells of a different kind of rescue—one that involves the island itself!

REVELATION 22:1-5:

¹ Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, as clear as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb ² down the middle of the great street of the city. On each side of the river stood the tree of life, bearing twelve crops of fruit, yielding its fruit every month. And the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations. ³ No longer will there be any curse. The throne of God and of the Lamb will be in the city, and his servants will serve him. ⁴ They will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads. ⁵ There will be no more night. They will not need the light of a lamp or the light of the sun, for the Lord God will give them light. And they will reign for ever and ever.

Our texts this morning show us that there will continuity between the good things on our island and the new creation God is bringing.

The book of Revelation uses images of water and trees and leaves and fruit and cities and streets and the sun. We're not going to float up into the clouds like a Philadelphia cream cheese commercial! The future we await is one of incredible beauty of which our earth is just a foretaste!

(Recall Norman Wirzba lectures!)

There is a well-loved hymn called "this earth is not my home." I'm just passing through. There is a sense in which this hymn is right. Our deepest hopes and longings as human beings can never be met here on this earth as it is.

But there is also a sense in which the hymn is misleading, because this earth *is* our home.

We see this most clearly in Genesis 1-2. God made it, he made us for it, he called animals and plants and rivers and forests and strawberries, and everything else that delights and amazes us, *good*. He put us into the world and called us *very good*. We were made for the earth and the earth for us. Our sin has defaced and damaged this goodness, but it has not destroyed it entirely.

And God has not given up on it! The island is not a place to be *escaped*; rather, it is a place to be *redeemed*, and made *new*.

As Darrell Johnson says in his commentary on the book of Revelation, "it says that God is making *all things new*, not *all new things*. It's amazing the importance of rearranging those few words!

Just like God is making all things new in the big picture, he is also making his followers—you and me—new as well.

As followers of Jesus, we are part of the new creation. We are given the freedom and the opportunity to learn how to be new creations in our own skin. God takes us and remakes us as we are—we don't have to alter our entire personality in order to be a new creation.

"All things new" not "all new things."

And one day, our redemption will be complete. Everything we do in the present is leading to the day when God's name and his image will be so deeply imprinted within us that it cannot be defaced or damaged anymore, when there will be only light and no darkness, and where we will reign with Christ.

This is the grand hope of the Christian faith.

May God help us to be grateful, obedient, faithful, and joyful castaways on this island.

Amen.

