

# “A Lukewarm Faith”

Revelation 3:14-22

Sermon notes from the Pulpit of  
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The book of Revelation is a book of comfort written to a church that was frightened and persecuted.

The writer employs fantastic imagery of elders sitting on golden thrones with winged creatures flying around over seas of onyx. A green horse appears—a red horse, a black horse. Earthquakes rumble through these pages. There are angels and clouds of smoke and lampstands and the blowing of lots of trumpets.

A lot of these symbols are symbols the first readers of Revelation would have understood. It is a coded language that was meant to comfort the Christians and simply confuse the Romans—the persecution authorities.

Just when you think the writer of Revelation couldn't be more vivid, a dragon with seven heads and ten horns appears. The dragon is slain. A beast rises from the sea. One-hundred pound hailstones pummel evil doers. The beast, the dragon, the name “Babylon” all refer to the powers that persecute the church (in this case, the powers of Rome), and all of those powers will be defeated in science fiction battle scenes.

The nations who persecute the church will be brought down with a tumbling crash. An angel descends from heaven in shafts of bright light. The nations fall to their knees worshipping God. A new heaven and a new earth dawn after the great battles. Jesus, the Lamb of God, reigns. God's good has overcome evil.

The early church read this (what we might call George Lucas' first draft of the Star Wars screenplay) and found comfort, not terror. They were comforted to know that God is supreme. If there is a cosmic battle, God will win. In Jesus, God shows he reigns even over the powers of death. What do we have to fear? God's power cannot be bested. It lives forever and ever.

Ultimately, we don't need to be afraid.

That's the book of Revelation—a great comfort to those who are tired, for those who sometimes are afraid, for those who sometimes feel overwhelmed by the vicissitudes of life. If you are in the foxholes of battle, one naturally wonders, who will win the war? The answer is we may lose the battle, but God wins the war. Ultimately, God wins, and God's peace prevails. *All will be well, all will be well, all manner of everything will be well.*

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There is much in life that frightens us. And the message of Revelation still offers sustaining comfort.

Jimmy Stewart races to the cabin in a horse and buggy. He storms in. “How is she?” he desperately asks. “It was a false labor,” the woman at the stove declares. He flings open the bedroom door and kneels at his wife's bedside. She's delirious. She's wet with fever.

Will she survive?

Will Jimmy Stewart and his cowboy wife ride off into the sunset?

We don't know. It's a troubling situation. If we stop the movie right there, life hangs in the balance.

The message of Revelation is that life doesn't hang in any balance. Life is safely, securely, and eternally in the hands of God. God has seen the whole movie. In the end things turn out well. Sure, life can be difficult. Jimmy Stewart's wife may or may not survive that fever. The ancient church didn't know if they would survive. That's precisely when God swoops in and comforts them with this action-movie of a book.

God doesn't lose. And because God wins, those who love God win.

So, don't invest in gold from anybody else, only from God. Don't call on powers that will fail. Call on God. Don't trust things, people, nations, political parties, or schemes that will let you down. Trust God.

The book of Revelation doesn't give a specific picture of how our lives will turn out. We have no snapshot into the future. If we read Revelation to learn such things, we are expecting more from this book than it will deliver. But we are given reason in these pages to trust in God, lean on God, call on God, and live for God. We must keep this big picture in mind.

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That's what Joseph does in the book of Genesis. He keeps the big picture in mind.

Remember his story?

He is the youngest son of Jacob—the son of Jacob's old age, and thereby his Jacob's favorite child. His ten elder brothers are jealous. They throw him into a pit and sell him to Midianite (or Ishmaelite) traders. Joseph is taken as a slave to Egypt. His brothers tell their distraught father that a wild animal killed poor Joseph. There are many tears in the house that long night.

In the meantime, Joseph rises in the Pharaoh's household, and because he accurately interprets dreams, Joseph is given the role of manager of Pharaoh's house and affairs.

When a famine came to the land, Joseph's brothers head to Egypt to buy grain. And who do they meet? You got it! They come face to face with the brother they almost killed. Joseph is now governor of the whole land. He can decide if these brothers will be allowed to buy grain or not. He can decide, even, if they will be allowed to live. He's got all of the power, and these hapless brothers have none. It's a great literary reversal.

I'm skipping the good parts. Start reading in Genesis 37 and read all the intrigue yourselves.

At the end of this saga, Father Jacob dies, and the brothers are certain that Joseph still bears a grudge, and, now, will kill them for their terrible treachery.

But Joseph assures them. He will bring them no harm. He said, "even though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good." Joseph believed that God had led him to Egypt and put him in a place of authority where he, many years later, could thereby save his family from starving.

Joseph has the big picture in mind, the picture in which God is always working God's purposes out. And what are those purposes? Victory over death. A peace that passes understanding. Dwelling in the house of God forever. Wholeness. Holy shalom.

This is how the prophet Jeremiah would put it (Jer. 29:11): *For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope.*

Allan Boesak was in a South African prison in 1985 during the days of apartheid. He did not know if he would survive. He had no idea where apartheid would take his country, but he knew it would get worse. In prison, he was inspired by the book of Revelation. He found comfort and hope in its pages. God was on the side of justice. Good had already overcome evil in Jesus Christ. Boesak wrote these words as preface to his commentary on the book of Revelation he would write in 1987: *For all those who, true to their faith, have struggled and fought with us; gone to jail and shared pain and bread with us. They are seeing the power of the beast. They shall see the victory of the Lamb!*<sup>[1]</sup>

In taking the long view—which the book of Revelation encourages—we trust God because God can be trusted. God can be trusted all the way to the end. And because we can trust God, we trust the seeds of hope God has planted in the story of our lives. Those seeds bear fruit.

We can trust God with a full-on faith, nothing lukewarm or tepid, but an all-the-way faith, giving thanks to God the creator, God the deliverer, and God the sustainer.

Alleluia.

Amen.

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<sup>[1]</sup> (Comfort and Protest: The Apocalypse from a South African Perspective, Allan A. Boesak, Westminster/Philadelphia: 1987.)