In Harper Lee’s wonderful novel, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, the Radley house is mysterious. Children in the neighborhood are fascinated with the dark house that has peeling trim and overgrown shrubs, where people live but are seldom seen, and yet the adults do their best to avoid it.

I thought about the Radley house this week as I thought about our work this morning with the Book of Revelation. This is a book that is mysterious, filled with symbolism (much of connected to the Old Testament books of Daniel, Ezekiel, Zechariah and others). In Revelation there is talk of falling stars, dragons, beasts and armies of locust-like horseman. There is talk about a new heaven and earth, a New Jerusalem, where the streets are made out of gold. It’s always light because God’s presence is so everywhere…so evident.

Most of us, I suspect, have avoided the book just like the adults in *To Kill a Mockingbird* give the Radley house a wide birth.

We’ve seen or heard loud preachers on late-night talk tv talking about end times, saying that the “mark of the beast” was the universal pricing code on a bar of soap or a person’s Social Security number. There seemed to be a paranoid edge to their preaching out of this last book of the Bible! Or they were finding secret “codes” in the book that gave them the inside-track on predicting the end of the world.

Many of us have simply avoided it the way the adults in *To Kill a Mockingbird* avoided the Radley place. Martin Luther, one of the leaders of the Protestant Reformation, would have understood our avoidance of the book. Luther didn’t have much good to say about the book of Revelation, and wasn’t sure it belonged in the New Testament!

**A Gift too Good to Ignore**

Ignoring the book isn’t really the best option, you see. Because this book is a gift to the church. This book is a gift to the world. This book is a gift to anyone who is going through tough times. This book is a gift to men and women and children who struggle to live in a world where unjust, ravenous empires and economic systems demand to be worshipped as gods. This book is a gift to people who wonder how the story of the universe ends, and where God is during tough times.

We’re going to move fast and quick (some of you may think not quickly enough!) as we look at this book. Even then, even moving quickly, it’s going to take us this Sunday and next to explore what it is God was trying to say to the first century church and what God may be saying to the world today.

If you want to dig into the meaning of Revelation in more detail, I would encourage you to get and read Bruce M. Metzger’s book *Breaking the Code: Understanding the Book of Revelation* (Abingdon). It’s both helpful, accessible and solid. Although he wrote years ago, the commentaries by the late William Barclay (“The Daily Study Bible Series”) are also a help in peeling back the meaning of the words and symbolism in this book.

**What Kind of Book?**

What kind of book is this? Well, first, it is a book that is written to appeal to the imagination of those who would have read it or heard it read. Over and over again there are these amazing visions, these scenes, described by the author with extraordinarily vivid language. A picture has the power to stick with us a long time after words have been forgotten, and so the writer of Revelation gives us one mental picture or panel after another.
Second, this is a book that is generated out of a series of ecstatic visions the author had. Like Ezekiel’s vision of the dry bones in Ezekiel 37, the visions are not be taken literally. When a reader assumes that the visions are to be taken literally, the reader or listener will miss the point the author is trying to make!

Third, this is a book filled with symbolic language. For example, the number seven is used over and over again through the book. The number seven represents perfection. So, for example, if a lamb is described as having seven horns that means the lamb has perfect power. If we are told there are seven stars, the author is telling us that this person has perfect or ultimate authority. Much of the symbolic language, as we said earlier, comes out of the Hebrew scriptures, especially Ezekiel, Daniel and Zechariah.

Fourth, this book is an example of apocalyptic literature. Apocalyptic writings are all about unveiling or disclosing the way things really are. In the current day. And often the writings attempt to reveal how things will turn out in the end. Apocalyptic books tell us what the “final score” is going to be. This kind of literature is usually generated out of times of times of hardship and world crisis.

Apocalyptic writings look at the world as a battleground between good and evil. Behind the conflict between good and evil in this world there are supernatural powers like God and Satan. This literature is intended to help ordinary people understand the battle, and what is happening around them and within them.

The troubles in the world right now are looked at as the labor pains that are leading to a better world. In the middle of this awful, painful, uncertain mess of a world God is at work to bring some kind of better creation or world or New Jerusalem into being.

**Author, Date and Setting**

Who wrote this book, to whom did he write it, and when was it written? Well, we’re not sure who wrote Revelation. The author calls himself “John.” It was a name common among Jews and early Christians. We’re really not sure who the author was but it was someone widely known and respected in the early Christian community.

John has been exiled out to an island in the Aegean Sea called Patmos. And that is where he is…on that windswept island…when he has his visions and where he writes his letter.

To whom is the book intended? Revelation is written to seven key churches in western Turkey (or ancient Asia). We’ll talk more about the message John for each of those churches in a few minutes.

Finally, when was the book written? Scholars believe it was written between 70 AD and 96 AD. The book was written during a time of terrible persecution of the early Christian community. Initially, the Roman Empire saw Christianity as a part of the Jewish religion. Judaism was protected by Roman law, but as Christians began to move out of the synagogues the Roman government began to see it as a new religion…and a threat to the Empire.

At the heart of this book is God’s attempt through John’s vision to help people who are suffering terrible persecution…unimaginable cruelty and injustice.

John is using code language. In his criticism of the Roman Empire he uses words like “beast” and “dragon” and “Babylon” and “the great whore” instead of actually naming the Empire and the emperors.

So John, out on the island of Patmos, has these visions and through these God is attempting to speak an important word to people who are suffering. Whose lives are being made unspeakably difficult by the “great prostitute” that is Rome, and its mad emperor, and the beast that is the government structure.

Before we take a very quick look at Revelation, I want to observe that if we were people who knew the meaning of suffering and persecution we might spend more time in this book rather than avoiding it. If we lived in South Sudan, if we were being driven out of homes in Aleppo in
Syria, if we were Coptic Christians in Egypt, even if we were Muslims being driven out of our homes by Buddhist extremists in southern Asia, we might be hungry for the word this book delivers from God through the ecstatic visions of John in exile. We might be desperate for some insight into what is going on and why. We might be eager to become familiar with these visions and their message, and hear how the vision says the story is going to end.

**Letters to Seven Churches**

The book begins with an opening vision. Look at Revelation 1:10. John is in a “Spirit-induced trance,” John hears a sound like a trumpet. In Jewish literature a trumpet was often used to announce God’s intervention in the world.

The churches who are to receive the message are named. And then John sees who is speaking in the vision. Look at verses 12-16: 12 I turned to see who was speaking to me, and when I turned, I saw seven oil lamps burning on top of seven gold stands. 13 In the middle of the lampstands I saw someone who looked like the Human One. He wore a robe that stretched down to his feet, and he had a gold sash around his chest. 14 His head and hair were white as white wool—like snow—and his eyes were like a fiery flame. 15 His feet were like fine brass that has been purified in a furnace, and his voice sounded like rushing water. 16 He held seven stars in his right hand, and from his mouth came a sharp, two-edged sword. His appearance was like the sun shining with all its power.

The one who is speaking in the vision is the heavenly Christ. The seven lampstands represent the seven churches who are receiving the letter. When John tells us Christ is standing in the middle of the lampstands, he is telling us—and those blessed people in those early Christian communities— Christ is with them. Right in the middle of them.

John describes the Christ as wearing a white robe with a golden sash across his chest. That is the kind of clothing kings would wear. John is reminding the early Christians that Christ is the true king: not the emperor, not the state, not the economy, not the dollar, not the military industrial complex, not the machine of higher education, not status, not power. Christ is the true king and Christ is the one who deserves our deepest allegiance.

It is Christ who is speaking. The true king.

And then John delivers a message to each of the seven churches. I want you to hear something that Adam Hamilton says in *Making Sense of the Bible: Rediscovering the Power of Scripture Today*: everything that comes after these opening messages to the churches, in Revelation, is intended to address the challenges or problems John sees in the seven congregations. Remember that: all the visions through the rest of the book are all about addressing the problems John sees in those seven young Christian churches. *(And perhaps what John might see here in our life at FUMCB....The Open Door.)*

If you will open your book to the 2nd chapter of Revelation, you see the book begins with a message for the church at Ephesus. Look at verses 2-4: 2 I know your works, your labor, and your endurance. I also know that you don’t put up with those who are evil. You have tested those who say they are apostles but are not, and you have found them to be liars. 3 You have shown endurance and put up with a lot for my name’s sake, and you haven’t gotten tired. 4 But I have this against you: you have let go of the love you had at first.

The Christians there have accomplished a great deal. They are hard workers. They have endured all kinds of challenges and not given. In fact, one of the tasks they have taken seriously is challenging heresy. They have kept at bay false teachers. These early Christians know their theology...they know what the gospel is and what the gospel isn’t. They are bright and theological rigorous.
The only problem is they have lost the love and the passion they once had for Jesus. And while they have been doing the hard work of keeping the church strong, they have lost their love for one another. Everything is organized, false teachers are kept away, the classes and preaching are orthodox and faithful, the bills are being paid: they have lost that kind of passion and enthusiasm that is the hallmark of a first love.

In Smyrna the early Jesus community is being attacked by zealous Jews who view the new faith as a threat. John knows tough times are ahead. In verse 10, he says: "Don't be afraid of what you are going to suffer. Look! The devil is going to throw some of you into prison in order to test you. You will suffer hardship for ten days. Be faithful even to the point of death, and I will give you the crown of life."

Christ, through John, is honest with the Jesus community: to be faithful is going to involve suffering! The people there in Smyrna are terrified that they won't be able to handle what is coming. Through John the Christ is encouraging the people to remain faithful even in the face of persecution. When the suffering is over, they will receive from God the kind of wreath given to the winner of a race. There will be joy and gladness at the end of the ordeal, John promises. Don't give up!

The Christians at Pergamum have not only experienced suffering, but they are starting to adopt the lifestyle of the surrounding culture. They are joining non-Christians in the eating of meat that has been dedicated to pagan gods, and they are also adopting the casual and promiscuous sexual patterns of the Nicolatians.

Not only are the Christians being pressured by the exterior culture to blend in, to adopt the values and priorities of their non-Christian neighbors, but there are people inside the church teaching that being like everyone else isn't really a bad thing at all.

Change your hearts and your ways, Christ says through John.

Those who are faithful, who resist the pull of the larger society and the tempting teachings of the misguided leaders inside the church, will receive a white stone with their name on it. Stones like that - with the name of a god written on it - were sometimes handed to people as confirmation that their membership in a special group was secure.

And so it goes. The congregation at Thyatira is tolerating immoral behavior and teaching, as well as participating in feasts dedicated to pagan gods that are a part of their work world. John tells them to resist the false teachings and "Just hold on to what you have until I come." People's faith in Christ, people's trust, is wavering. He tells them to hold on.

The Christians at Sardis lived in a city that was a natural fortress, and yet twice the supposedly impregnable city had been overwhelmed by an enemy because the people, the defenders, weren't paying attention. They weren't vigilant. It was all very embarrassing.

The early Jesus community is half asleep. They're suffering from spiritual lethargy. John, in 3:3, says the congregation has a reputation of being alive but they are in fact "dead." Christ, through John, tells them to wake up - an ironic reminder for people who lived in a city that had twice been defeated because the defenders were half-asleep. Christ tells them to "strengthen whatever you have left, teetering on the brink of death."

Sometimes people and congregations lose their faith, their passion, their way, their love, because of a great fight or disappointment or persecution. More often than not, though, the people lose their faith and their passion and their courage and their joy step by step, inch by inch, week by week. It just gets worn out of them, or we become complacent, and suddenly one day we wake up and notice our walk with Christ has become a lifeless thing... a faded copy of what it once was.
John tells the people at Sardis to wake up, change their ways and their lives. Those who are faithful will emerge victorious from all the challenges and wear the white robes that symbolize that they are loved by God and their sins have been washed or forgiven in Christ. (The Roman emperors would wear white when they would travel through the city and region in a triumphal procession.)

The congregation at Philadelphia receives little or no criticism. They congregation is small and poor, but they have been faithful. John says there is an open door in front of them, and Bible commentators say that means there are opportunities for mission work...for doing good. People have noticed the genuineness of their faith, their courage, their love, their generosity and so people may be open to what they have to share about Jesus and the gospel.

Finally, God through John has a word for the people at Laodicea. It is a hard word. They could not have been pleased to be singled out as John singles them out!

The city was known for its wealth, its textile industry, and it was a medical center. Laodicea was especially known for an eye salve that was exported around the ancient world.

15 I know your works. You are neither cold nor hot. I wish that you were either cold or hot. 16 So because you are lukewarm, and neither hot nor cold, I'm about to spit you out of my mouth. 17 After all, you say, 'I'm rich, and I've grown wealthy, and I don't need a thing.' You don't realize that you are miserable, pathetic, poor, blind, and naked.

A few verses later Christ reminds the people, after speaking this harsh and honest word to them, that he only corrects those he loves. And then he calls them to change and he invites them into a deeper relationship.

19 I correct and discipline those whom I love. So be earnest and change your hearts and lives. 20 Look! I'm standing at the door and knocking. If any hear my voice and open the door, I will come in to be with them, and will have dinner with them, and they will have dinner with me. 21 As for those who emerge victorious, I will allow them to sit with me on my throne, just as I emerged victorious and sat down with my Father on his throne. 22 If you can hear, listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches.”

“All things in moderation,” could have been the core value of the Jesus community at Laodicea. Apparently, they had decided that they could live in the middle between worship of the emperor, participation in pagan rituals, and their life in the Christian community. They would straddle both worlds...the “God comes first world” and then the “let’s live like other people world.”

You and I may have some sympathy for those folks.

We don’t really need to be different, do we?

We don’t have to be so radical about our faith, our love for Jesus, our passion for a better world, our hunger for a deeper justice, that it will get in the way of the other stuff in our lives, right?

I’m still figuring out this faith walk, I want you to know. I’m not where I want to be or need to be in all sorts of areas in my life with Christ. My prayer life needs to be deeper. My engagement with the Bible in devotional time needs to be more regular. I need to get outside the walls of the church and serve where non-church people live and breathe. So I am a project in process. I’m a slow learner.

And yet...yet...it is always odd when I run into nominal church members who act like the faith matters...when it appears, by every metric, not to with them. They smile, they tell me how glad they are to be a part of the church, they insist it matters, they say I’ll see them soon, and then we shake hands...and they are gone. They say God is God but their worship life doesn’t show it, their serving life doesn’t show it, their giving life doesn’t show it.

Years ago I was called in as a potential juror in a capital case. With the others I took my place in the juror’s box. The deputy prosecuting attorney in that county, who was a member of
the church, began to question the potential jurors. In three and a half years we had never spoken.

When he got to me, he said, “Reverend Fenstermacher, I don’t believe we have met.” I responded by simply saying, “No, Mr. Johnson, I regret to say that is correct.” I was excused from jury duty. Right then.

Honestly, I don’t think it’s cool when we pretend something matters when it really doesn’t matter much at all. I remember a high school coach sending me home early one morning from practice. “You’re showing up late, and I don’t think this matters that much to you,” he said. “You can go home. You don’t need to come back. I need players who are all in.”

I remember that walk home in the early winter darkness.

God says through John that the people who live in this city known for its textile industry and fine clothes are actually naked spiritually. They have nothing, and he tells them to put on the clothing of faith...let the mercy and grace of God cover them in a white robe.

Finally, to people who live in a city known for its treatment of eye problems, John tells them put the ointment of God’s truth on their eyes so they will be able to see.

God, all through the tough love, is about grace. And the people at Laodicea are invited to let Christ in. Begin a whole new chapter. The people at Laodicea are a proud, complacent, affluent, puffed-up, “I don’t need to really risk much of anything to belong to this Jesus movement, do I?” kind of bunch. They think they can see clearly, they think they have faith down, but the truth is they can’t see ten feet beyond their $1,000 suits. And still Christ wants a relationship...is just waiting to be invited in.

Everything in the rest of the book, the visions and the symbolism, is about responding to the messages delivered to these seven churches. Christ is delivering a word that will help those early Christians who are struggling with some of the same things we may have struggled with...or be facing still.

The whole rest of the book, the visions and the symbols, are about helping those people deal with the tough stuff in their life.

And so we’ll talk about all that next week.

You may discover the book is a beautiful book, not just a mysterious book, with a message you need to hear.

Before we finish this morning, though, I have this question that keeps circling around my head...darting here and there. The question won’t let go of me. I swat it away but it keeps coming back. And here is the question: If Christ had given John a word for you, for our church, what would that word be? What would Christ say to us...today...about who we are and how we are as God’s people?

Isn’t that some question?

I wonder if it won’t keep circling around you...this week. I’d love to hear how you would answer it: If Christ had given John a word for you, and for our church, what would God say to us today?