A Thousand Years: Already Reigning

Revelation 20:1-6

Grace, mercy, and peace be unto you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

The Vine Still Bearing

Last week the weather was strange for November in Pittsburgh. The mornings were bright and cool, somewhere in the fifties, and the sun was out over the backyard. My arch trellis stands seven or eight feet high, and the Early Girls and the Mountain Rouge were still hanging heavy with fruit. This week the vines are nearly bare. The tomatoes are gone, and still the frost has not come.

By now I would usually have done what every gardener in this city does. Two or three weeks earlier I would have pulled the green tomatoes off the vines and put them in paper bags with apples, so they would ripen into early winter. That is what we do when we know the season has an end date, and we hurry to save what we can before the cold arrives. This year I did not do it. I enjoyed the extra weeks and the warm sun. One morning I picked a tomato fresh off the vine and ate it with my breakfast, an omelet of eggs, sausage, cheese, mushrooms, and onions. I will tell you, it was a very good tomato.

I have been thinking about that vine all week, because our text from Revelation 20 is about a season and about who rules it.

Waiting for the Frost

Here is the question Revelation 20 raises, and it is a question Christians have asked for centuries. Satan is bound for a thousand years. The saints reign with Christ for a thousand years. When does that begin, and when does it end? We want to read God's timing off the calendar. We want to know whether the reign of Christ is somewhere out in the future, waiting to be started on a date

we can chart, the way I stand in the yard and watch the forecast for the first hard frost.

We even pray as though we are waiting for it. "Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven." That petition is honest. It confesses that the kingdom has not yet come in its fullness, and that we still live among thorns and sorrows. But look at what we are asking. We ask that God's will be done here, now, on earth. We do not ask only for a reign that will start someday. We ask that the King who rules would be seen among us.

The truth is that our impatience is the Law at work in us. We would rather have the reign on our schedule than trust that God already rules the seasons we cannot control. Like the gardener with the paper bags, we want to do something about the ending, because we are afraid of what we cannot predict. Our Lord does not ask us to predict. He asks us to hear Him.

What John Saw

So let us hear what John actually saw. An angel comes down from heaven with a great chain and seizes the dragon, that ancient serpent, who is the devil and Satan, and binds him for a thousand years. He is thrown into the pit and sealed in, so that he might not deceive the nations any longer.

When did this happen? The Lord Himself tells us. When the Seventy returned rejoicing, Jesus said, "I saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven." When His enemies accused Him of casting out demons by the power of the devil, He answered that no one can plunder the house of a strong man unless he first binds the strong man. Christ is the One who bound him. He did it by His own death and resurrection, when He crushed the serpent's head and took away the accuser's best weapon, which is your sin. Satan is not bound so that he cannot growl. He is bound so that he cannot deceive the nations as he did before, shutting them up in darkness without the Gospel. And look at what has happened since Easter. The Gospel has gone out to every nation, and the Church has been gathered from every tribe and tongue.

Then John sees thrones, and on them sit those who have been given authority to judge. He sees the souls of those who were beheaded for the testimony of Jesus and for the Word of God. They lived and reigned with Christ. This is a picture of the faithful who have died in the Lord. They are not lost. They are not asleep in some dark place waiting for the frost. They are with Christ, and they reign with Him now. And then comes the verse we dare not miss.

> *Blessed and holy is the one who shares in the first resurrection!*
> *Over such the second death has no power.*
>
> Revelation 20:6

The First Resurrection

What is the first resurrection? It is not a date on the calendar. It is not a program to be completed. It is the new life that Christ gives to His own, and He gives it now.

Hear the words of Jesus in John 5, verse 24.

> *Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life. He does not come into judgment, but has passed from death to life.*
>
> John 5:24

Notice the tense. He does not say the one who will someday hear has life. He says whoever hears and believes has it. Has. Present tense. He has passed from death to life already. And in the very next verse He says,

> *an hour is coming, and is now here, when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God, and those who hear will live.*
>
> John 5:25

Is now here. The hour of resurrection is not only coming. It is also here, in the voice of Christ speaking through His Word. That voice reached you in your

Baptism, when, as Paul says in Colossians, you were buried with Him in Baptism and raised with Him through faith in the powerful working of God. You were dead in your trespasses, and a Word was spoken over you, and you lived. That is the first resurrection. Augustine came to see this clearly. He once read the thousand years as a future earthly age, but he came to understand them as the present life of the Church, and the first resurrection as the new life Christ gives now. The second death is the death that follows unbelief, and it has no claim on a baptized child of God.

The Vine and the Reign

Now go back to the trellis. I have stood in front of that vine, looking at the fruit, and I keep hearing what Jesus said in John 15.

> *I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing.*
>
> John 15:5

A branch cannot bear fruit by itself. It cannot decide the date of the harvest. It has no power to produce one tomato, and it has no worry about the frost, because it is not the branch that carries the season. It is joined to the vine. Everything it has, it has from the vine.

So it is with the reign of Christ. He is not still hanging on the cross. He is risen, ascended, and, as we confess in the Apostles' Creed, He sits at the right hand of God the Father Almighty, from whence He shall come to judge the living and the dead. He reigns now, over every power and every season, for the sake of His Church. And the fruit of His cross keeps reaching us. It reaches us in the forgiveness of sins spoken over you each Sunday, in the Word you hear, in the body and blood of Christ given you in the Lord's Supper, and in every promise that flows from His death and resurrection. The vine keeps bearing, and the fruit comes from Him.

That is the Gospel in our text. The reign of Christ is already here, not as a rival to God's final day but as the pledge of it.

Not Yet, and Yet Already

We must be honest about the other half of the truth. The reign of Christ is hidden under the cross, and it does not look like a reign to the world. We still bury our dead. We still hear of wars and of sicknesses, and the news is not often good. Paul says, "He must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. The last enemy to be destroyed is death." The last enemy has not yet been destroyed. Revelation 20 tells us, too, that near the end Satan will be released for a little while and will gather a great rebellion against the Church. But it also tells us how that ends. Fire comes down from heaven, and the deceiver is thrown into the lake of fire, and Christ sits in judgment on the last day.

So the resurrection of the body is still to come. We confess it every Sunday. "I believe in the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting." Every grave in the churchyard is waiting for that voice. But the One who will speak it has already spoken life into your dead places, and He does not need our calendar to do it. The frost will come, and it will come when He says. And on that day the vine does not die. The vine is the One who died and is alive forevermore, and He will gather every branch into a harvest that has no winter.

Fruit We Did Not Schedule

Here is what we do while we wait. We do not bag every hope and wait for a frost on a date we can plan. We receive the gifts He gives, the way I received that tomato at breakfast. I did not plan for that tomato. I did not earn it. It was there on the vine because the weather was kind and the vine had been given what it needed. I took it, and I thanked God for it, and I did not ask how many more weeks the vine would last.

The sun on the trellis is His. The vines that bore in November are His. The forgiveness spoken to you is His. The bread and the wine are His body and blood. The Baptism you were given, whether as an infant or as an old man, is His. None of it came when the calendar said it should. All of it came when He chose.

If you are afraid this morning, if you are watching for some frost in your own life, a diagnosis, a loss, a day you dread, hear this. You are not a branch cut off and thrown into a paper bag. You are a branch in the vine, and the vine is not going to fail. The One who bound the strong man has promised that the second death has no power over you.

So we do not need to know the day. We need to know the One who reigns. He has never failed to bear fruit for us, and He will not fail to raise the dead.

Christ reigns even now.

Amen.

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