

Follow the Faithful Witness (Josiah Winkel)

Grace and peace to you from him who is the faithful witness, the firstborn from the dead! Amen.

Can you imagine? I'm not sure I can. There you are, just doing some personal devotion all alone one Sunday, when suddenly you hear a voice behind you unlike anything else in the universe. He says, "Write down what you see" and when you turn around, you're taken on an incomprehensible journey that covers all of time and the biggest, most important spiritual realities out there. You see horrors beyond human language, but also wonders even greater than those. How could you possibly write down everything you see? But the Spirit himself gives you the words, and as you look back on what you remember and what you've written, the point is clear: Jesus always wins. All of Revelation is one great spoiler, that Jesus wins and he brings you with him to victory, no matter what your enemy throws at you. We've only got the very first part as our text for today, but even in this short episode, we'll see John encouraging us to **follow the Faithful Witness**—**recognizing the life of suffering**, but always **embracing the Living Savior**.

So, John is on Patmos. After the introduction, that's the first detail in John's recollection of his vision. Patmos is a little island just off the west coast of Turkey, in the Mediterranean Sea. In Roman times it was used as a place to exile troublesome members of society, and that's exactly why John was there. He's been exiled, because of the Word of God and the testimony of Jesus. John was far from home and he couldn't go where he wanted, couldn't visit friends or family or the churches that he'd served and loved for years, because the government at his time censored him for preaching the gospel. Nor is this the first time that John had suffered loss for Jesus' sake. John calls himself "**a brother and companion in suffering**." Remember the Acts lesson for today? John and the other apostles were arrested and thrown in jail for preaching about Jesus. Right after that lesson ends, they all get flogged for it, too. Several other times just in the book of Acts we see John or his closest friends getting insulted, beaten, imprisoned, and killed. By the time John is on Patmos, fifty years later, he's the only apostle left. All the others have been killed for their faith. It's starting to look like the disciples were right in the Gospel lesson, all those years earlier, to hide behind closed doors. They had a lot of enemies just because they loved Jesus.

But on that Lord's Day, that Sunday that John heard the voice like a trumpet, it doesn't tell him to go ahead and lay low for a while, make sure he doesn't get himself killed too. No, the voice tells him to write, to speak up and spread the news to seven different congregations, and by extension, to the whole rest of the Church. Write? Speak up? That's exactly what landed John on Patmos in the first place! And what news did God have for those seven churches? Each of those churches had their own problems with persecutions and pressure to abandon God's Word, too. And John does not tell them that their suffering is over. He doesn't tell them to go with the flow, to give into the pressure or to try to make the persecution stop by themselves. In each case, Jesus through John gives each church specific instructions to persevere and endure those hardships, for his sake.

We have those instructions, too. You and I are called to be brothers and sisters in the kingdom of Jesus, which means we also are called to suffering and patient endurance in Jesus. If you believe in Jesus, then you'll have opportunities to share him with the people around you, at work or school or even just with your neighbor or friend in casual conversation. But when that happens, there's often various pressures that might make you think twice about bringing up your faith. Would it make people dislike you if they knew you were a Christian at your workplace? Would someone brush you off or even make fun of you if you brought it up to them? Would it damage your relationship if you tried to evangelize that one friend?

To be a companion in the suffering and the kingdom means to understand these challenges and meet them head-on, knowing that any minor embarrassment or even real persecution is worth it for your Jesus who calls you to it.

So how are you doing on that? Feelin' brave? Do you have what it takes to stand up for what's right when you see the rest of the world chasing after what is wrong? To be a witness to the God who loves you and made you his own?

Yeah, me neither. The world out there is very real. Out there I see a culture that encourages and entices me to just go along with the way things are, and which threatens me with all sorts of social penalties if I disturb the status quo by speaking up for what's right or proclaiming the name of Jesus too loudly. I see specific people who honestly hate anyone who believes in Jesus, and who will ridicule and mock the gospel on the internet or to our faces. Worse, even when I see no evidence of any of that whatsoever, I see in here my sinful nature, constantly whispering "Don't say anything. It's not worth it. No one will listen to you. This isn't the right time. You'll only be yelled at or made fun of." And too often I give in. I let my witness fall silent, overcome by nothing more than potential, perceived persecution. What's the cure for this paralyzing fear that we feel so often?

Part of that cure is realizing that we're afraid of the wrong thing. John shows us what we should really be afraid of in the second half of his vision.

See, when John heard that arresting voice, he did what anyone would do. He turned around to see who was talking to him. And he clearly has a tough time describing what he saw: **"seven golden lampstands, and among the lampstands was someone like a son of man, dressed in a robe reaching down to his feet and with a golden sash around his chest. The hair on his head was white like wool, as white as snow, and his eyes were like blazing fire. His feet were like bronze glowing in a furnace, and his voice was like the sound of rushing waters. In his right hand he held seven stars, and coming out of his mouth was a sharp, double-edged sword. His face was like the sun shining in all its brilliance."**

Revelation is a style of literature called apocalyptic writing, which just means that though John records here real visions and actual letters that he wrote to actual churches, the visions that he saw are largely symbolic and connect to other ideas in the rest of Scripture. Sometimes, John will explicitly tell us what a certain symbol means. Other times, he lets us figure it out for ourselves. Here, we have some of both. The first thing John tells us is that there are seven lampstands. These, we find out in the verse right after this reading, symbolize the seven churches of John's original audience. And in the midst of those believers, John sees one **"like a son of man"** which is an Old Testament way of saying that he looked like a human being. But this is no ordinary human. Blazing eyes, glowing legs, a face like the sun, with a sword coming out of his mouth and seven stars held powerfully in his right hand. Much of this is Old Testament imagery for God himself. It's also a sight that John has seen before. The blinding face, the blazing white clothes, is just how Jesus gave John and two others a glimpse of his glory at the Transfiguration, a few months before his death and resurrection. Here in Revelation John sees even more of that glory. He sees Jesus holding seven stars, the leaders of the churches. Jesus also has a sword coming out of his mouth, his powerful Word. And his all-seeing eyes blaze like fire, staring even into the thoughts of human minds and hearts.

And John is terrified. Can you blame him? There's God, standing before him. The judge of all the earth, the all-knowing, the all-powerful. John fell at his feet as though dead, and we can understand why.

This is what we should really be afraid of. Although, I can see why we're not. After all, those worldly pressures and powers that we just talked about sure look more real and scary than Jesus does right now. All we can see of him are words on a page, a little water on a baby's head. We don't see Jesus in the way that John saw him, while coworkers, friends, and family can legitimately make an obvious impact on our lives right now, for better or worse. So it often seems like we should care more about how those people see us and what they think about our witness than we should about Jesus and what he has to say to us. But make no mistake, my friends. You will see the Jesus that John describes in Revelation chapter one. And this is what that Jesus has to say in Matthew 10:

²⁸ Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather, be afraid of the One who can destroy both soul and body in hell... ³³Whoever disowns me before others, I will disown before my Father in heaven... ³⁸Whoever does not take up their cross and follow me is not worthy of me.

Jesus will return as the judge of all the world. And what will the Judge do with us when he comes back?

He'll do the same thing that he did to John. **"Then he placed his right hand on me and said 'Do not be afraid.'"** Despite all of John's unworthiness, despite our fear of the wrong things and our unwillingness to be Christ's witnesses, or anything else you've ever done that separates you from God, the first thing Jesus says is **"Don't be afraid."** Why? **"I am the First and the Last,"** he says. **"I am the Living One; I was dead, and now look, I am alive for ever and ever! And I hold the keys of death and Hades."**

Right at the beginning of this reading, John reminded us who Jesus is and what he has done. He is **"the firstborn from the dead,"** the one **"who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood."** There is no condemnation left for any of those who are in Christ Jesus, because he himself has paid the price for every sin you will ever commit and then some. He himself rose again from the dead on the third day, as we celebrated just last week. So he is the one who has the power to give life and reverse death, and he chooses to do just that for you because he loves you! So he tells us not to be afraid of him, because he, the Alpha and Omega, the Almighty, is on your side.

And with those same words he tells us not to be afraid of anyone or anything else, for the same reasons. What is it that keeps us from sharing our light with the world or confronting sin? Is it fear of humiliation? Being hurt in some way or made fun of? Rejected by someone you know? These are all things that Jesus has already taken on and defeated for you. Seeing Jesus as the one in the midst of the lampstands, his church, in all of his splendor as God is exactly the antidote for the fear that restrains our witness. Jesus gives you the immortal power to persevere through any persecution or trouble you might face in this world, to let your light shine before men, and at the end of every day, regardless of how it went, to rest knowing that his blood still covers every time you failed. You can recognize that there will be suffering in your life, but you don't have to be afraid of it. Instead, you can live in the confidence of the living Savior who gives you all the strength and courage and joy that you need, for now and for eternity. Amen.

To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood, and has made us to be a kingdom and priests to serve his God and Father—to him be glory and power for ever and ever! Amen.