When I was in San Antonio, I had a parishioner who really wanted me to do a Bible Study on the Revelation of John. After a sufficient amount of nagging, I finally agreed. When we had completed a few sessions, she told me how disappointed she was with our study. I was a little confused by her assertion because we were following a book by a well-respected New Testament Scholar and so it wasn’t like I had just making stuff up. As she began to explain her disappointment, I realized that she had a much different expectations of the book. What she was really after was not how the book related to her life or what it told us about God and our relationship to him, rather she was looking for more of a play by play about how the world was going to end -- would it start on a Tuesday, would any Norwegians be saved, would David Hasselhoff be one of the four horsemen of the apocalypse and so on. In all honesty, I could not be too annoyed with her for her expectations, because the Revelation of John has been and is still seen by many as the sort of stage directions for the end times. And while the book certainly does concern itself with the end of this world the desire to see it as an apocalyptic day planner does not always work so well. And it is partly for this reason that I don’t preach on the Revelation of John very much because these interpretations can generate a lot of baggage. This does not mean that it should not be looked at and examined it is just that working with it is kind of like making sushi with puffer fish – it can either go really well or really poorly. But I am going to dip a toe in and see what happens.

Here is the first part of the passage I want to look at. It says, “Then one of the elders addressed me, saying, ‘Who are these, robed in white, and where have they come from?’ I said to him, ‘Sir, you are the one that knows.’ Then he said to me, ‘These are they who have come out of the great ordeal; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb." So, what is it trying to tell us? Let’s start with the oxymoronic passage which says, “they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.” In plain language it is telling us that you can make something pure and white by dipping it in blood, which is obviously not something you regularly see on a Tide commercial.

There is, of course, a symbolic understanding of what is going on. White represents purity, Christ’s blood makes us pure therefore the garments washed in the blood represent the purity that is available through Chris’s sacrifice. But there is another piece to it that is not just symbolic and that is contained within the oxymoronic language itself. This language serves as a reinforcement of the idea that God’s kingdom often reverses the way we understand things on this earth. Here we are, just a few weeks after the Crucifixion and Resurrection and we are again reminded that the way God’s kingdom enters this world is not the way we would have scripted it. In today’s telling it is the blood that makes things white, but this reversal is not an isolated incident, rather it is a pattern. The two biggest days on the Christian calendar highlight this seeming backwardness --on Easter we get victory from a crucifixion and on Christmas we have God born in a stable. It’s a topsy-turvy world. And Jesus explains why this is in a passage not in today’s lectionary, but in a scene that happened just before he is crucified.

Pilate asks Jesus if he is King of the Jews and Jesus responds by saying, “My kingship is not of this world; if my kingship were of this world, my servants would fight, that I might not be handed over to the Jews; but my kingship is not from the world.” Pilate is asking a question that is very human; are you King of the Jews? If Jesus had answered yes, Pilate might have followed up and asked him to present some evidence of this royal claim – a crown, a palace, a weepy interview with Oprah. But Jesus tells Pilate that he doesn’t get it. His kingship is not worldly and that is why his subjects are not fighting. The kingship that he brings is not about earthly power, but about God’s power and as a result of this there is something counterintuitive about it. A kingship without an army is not the way things work on this earth, but Jesus is not talking about the way things work on earth. Just as something that causes stains on earth is actually the source of purity in today’s reading. Because the purity we hear of today is not of this world. And a purity not from this world will lead to somewhere not of this world. Which we hear about in the second part we have today form the Revelation of John. It is a very popular passage read at funerals and says, “They will hunger no more, and thirst no more; the sun will not strike them, nor any scorching heat; for the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of the water of life, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.”

It is not hard to see why this verse is so often employed during the burial of the dead, it is beautiful and it gives something of the vision glorious. The vision where we see that for which we long. But here is the thing about the vision of heaven and that is the fact that it is not detached from what we just talked about. For not only does our previous description invert much of what we see on earth but this view of what comes after does much of the same. This heavenly vision inverts how things work on earth, that is why it is so beautiful. For as someone about to go to Kuwait for six months I would be happy to avoid the scorching heat. But it is not just that these two anticipate one another in that they both subvert things that are normal in our day-to-day life, rather they are dependent on one another. In other words, we begin by participating in Christ’s crucifixion and resurrection while on this earth so that at the end we enter fully into this vison glorious. Experiencing the heavenly reality comes after we participate in God’s kingdom in this life, a kingdom that is often much different from our earthly kingdoms. For remember the way we are to live on this earth is to be a foretaste of our heavenly reward. Participating in the heavenly kingdom begins when we are drawn into what Jesus has done and is doing. For just as Jesus’ followers did not fight in earthly ways for an earthly kingdom, the things we do may look odd, they may be antithetical to our world’s norms and values. These things may be as simple as what we are doing this morning, coming to church rather than doing what most everyone else is doing – sleeping in, watching small children do stuff with a ball or queuing up for the hottest new brunch spot in Ashipun.

I once heard someone say that the message of The Revelation of John is that God wins. It’s not a bad way to look at things. For in this book, we see the change that is taking place as we move between the earthly and the heavenly kingdom. Things that seem strange or out of step on earth are perfectly normal in God’s kingdom. And so, in many ways the Revelation of John is not about stage directions but rather is about us and the choices we make. Do we keep milling about in this earthly kingdom, looking to blend in or do we do things that may seem odd and out of step in order to pursue God’s kingdom so that we may be his own this day and forevermore.