

It doesn't seem as bad up in Northern Michigan, where we live, but it wasn't too long ago that I remember being surrounded by people who seemed to speak of nothing else but the Rapture and getting ready for the Millennium. That's big stuff in the southwest corner of the state. Come to think of it, I remember it being pretty big in Mount Pleasant when I was growing up, too.

Do you know what I'm talking about? Those of you who were in Bible class last Sunday know. In last Sunday's class I brought up the Millennium and some of the false teachings surrounding it. It seemed natural. The whole class was about the End Time.

So, if you don't know what it is, here's the short version. The Millennium, according to folks who usually go by the title *Millennialists*, is the last thousand years before this world's final day. At the beginning of this period, they say, Jesus will return to the earth—not to judge the living and the dead, mind you. No, they say, he will return to establish an earthly kingdom with Jerusalem as its capital. During the last thousand years of this earth, then, he will physically rule from his earthly throne in Jerusalem, and, when the thousand years are over, the other kingdoms of the world will make one, last, military stand against him in a great battle called Armageddon. They will, of course, ultimately fail, and then the final judgment will begin.

Those who believe in this millennial timeline often question the biblical integrity of those who do not believe in it, and they use our text from Revelation 20 to support their claims. It clearly speaks of a thousand-year reign, doesn't it? What does it say about those souls of the beheaded martyrs? "*They came to life and reigned with Christ a thousand years.*"

I've read articles by millennialist teachers intended to help laypeople in their churches put people like us, people who believe that Jesus will return just one time as Judge and Deliverer, to shame. They instruct people to say things like, "How can you claim to take the Bible literally when you do not believe in the thousand-year reign of Christ clearly presented in Revelation 20? How can you not believe in the Millennium?"

Well, for their sake and for the sake of your own comfort, I

want you to learn a very simple response to that kind of thing: **Welcome to the Millennium!** Say it loud and say it proud! You see, confessional Lutherans don't reject this prophecy of a thousand-year reign. They embrace it! In fact, they believe that we are enjoying it right now. That's why you don't want to say that you reject the millennium mentioned in Revelation 20. Say that you celebrate it, that you enjoy it every day, and that you want your Millennialist friends to start enjoying it, too. Why? Because **1. Jesus has already chained up Satan, 2. Martyrs already reign with Christ, and 3. The first resurrection is already ours.**

Don't buy it when someone says that you're not taking the Bible literally enough if you don't believe in an actual, thousand-year period when Jesus will reign physically and visibly from Jerusalem. Understand instead that the Lutheran Confessions already take God at his Word when they teach about that the millennium of Revelation 20 is now, the full and last End Time (*1,000* is the number of completeness). The Augsburg Confession, Article 17, teaches that Millennialism is not from Scripture but from the ancient opinion that many Jews had in Jesus' day that the Messiah was coming to restore glory to Israel and re-establish the political influence of David, rather than that he was coming to destroy the power of the devil in accord with Genesis 3:15 (cf. our First Lesson and Acts 1:6). Don't get bogged down in ancient falsehoods that Jesus already clearly refuted when he told Pilate that his kingdom was not of this earth (John 18:36)!

Also don't let anyone say that this is not taking the Bible literally. either. They may say, "But look at these very verses! The 'thousand years' that are coming are very specifically mentioned! In fact, they're mentioned three times for emphasis, with an additional mention in verse 7: 'a thousand years,' 'a thousand years,' 'a thousand years,' 'a thousand years!'"

Simply say, "I see that. I also see that these verses mention an angel coming down out of heaven holding the key to the Abyss and a great chain with which he will bind up Satan. Are you expecting an angel with a physical chain and a physical key to throw Satan into a physical pit, or does this image describe in physical

terms a spiritual reality?”

“They describe a spiritual reality in physical terms,” you will hear.

“Of course they do!” you should answer, for this is obvious to anyone reading these words. Not literal enough? This is taking spiritual truths literally as they are plainly described, even if it takes a word picture to do it. After all, when Jesus says that the kingdom of heaven is “*like a net*,” are you not taking him literally when understand this as a word picture instead of trying to actually imagine the kingdom of heaven somehow being an actual net? The spiritual truth is that it *acts like a net*, catching all kinds of people with its teachings. This is taking the words of Jesus literally. It is taking them according to the author’s obvious intent.

So, you can point to the fact that Jesus, God’s greatest Messenger (“*angel*” literally means, “messenger”—thus the double occurrence of the Hebrew word for *messenger/angel* in Malachi 3:1 which has to be translated as *messenger* in English to make sense and obviously refers to John the Baptist and Jesus), has already bound Satan so that he no longer has free reign to deceive the nations of the world as he had in the past. The Gospel of Christ, rather, destroys his lies and powerfully delivers even the heathen nations of the world out of slavery to sin and into eternal life with Jesus. Welcome to the Millennium!

But what of this thousand-year reign of Christ in Jerusalem? I say, “What thousand-year reign of Christ in Jerusalem?” The Spirit did not inspire John to speak of a thousand-year reign of Christ in Jerusalem here. Look closely. Jerusalem is not even mentioned, neither is any kind of new mode for Jesus’ rule from heaven. “*I saw thrones on which were seated those [plural] who had been given authority to judge. And I saw the souls of those who had been beheaded because of their testimony for Jesus and because of the word of God. They had not worshiped the beast or his image and had not received his mark on their foreheads or their hands. They came to life [literally just “lived”] and reigned with Christ [that’s right: Christ who was already reigning would be joined by those who died in faith] a thousand years.*”

This is about those who die in the faith living and reigning with Christ, not about Jesus taking on some throne that was not already his before. This was an extraordinary comfort for those who were watching friends and family being actually beheaded because they confessed Jesus as their God and Savior. They were not really dead! They had been born dead, like the rest of men, but raised spiritually to life through their connection in faith to Jesus Christ, who conquered death, just as Romans 6, says. “*This is*,” as Revelation says, “*the first resurrection. Blessed and holy are those who have part in the first resurrection*,” as we all have by our baptisms. That’s what Romans 6 (as well as Ephesians 2 and other places) literally says. In fact, several ancient writers tell us that Paul the Apostle, the inspired writer of Romans 6, was beheaded in a wave of Christian persecutions. How important it was for early Christians to know that he had not been destroyed, but he lived and reigned with the Savior, even as they read these very comforting words from exiled John! Welcome to the Millennium!

It sounds so simple here, doesn’t it? It makes you wonder how these false teachings, which the Bible so clearly testifies against, even survive. Ah, but Satan has many allies in this world, and he calls out to them from his cold, dark dungeon, from the end of his cold, hard chains (spiritually speaking!). Jesus has removed his power to accuse us by his word of forgiveness, and he has bound him and his lies in chains with the truth of his gospel. But the presence and prevalence of these false doctrines (and our weakness in combating them) are proof of the sinful nature’s resistance, even in those of us who enjoy the blessings of the first resurrection—the resurrection to faith and eternal life in Christ.

So repent, dear friends. Stop belittling the careful and constant study of the exact words that God has inspired through the prophets and recognize the victory that is ours through Christ in the complete forgiveness of our sins. Don’t you see it? And, oh, won’t you rejoice with me? Jesus has already chained up Satan, even those beheaded for the faith now live and reign and, yes, we already enjoy the life of the first resurrection that is ours through the forgiveness of sins. Welcome to the Millennium! Amen.