



Massanutten

PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

The Beginning and the End
A Sermon Preached by John P. Leggett

May 2, 2010
Easter 5 (Year C)

Revelation 21:1-6a

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Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying,

"See, the home of God is among mortals.

He will dwell with them;

they will be his peoples,

and God himself will be with them;

he will wipe every tear from their eyes.

Death will be no more;

mourning and crying and pain will be no more,

for the first things have passed away."

And the one who was seated on the throne said, "See, I am making all things new."

Also he said, "Write this, for these words are trustworthy and true." Then he said to me, "It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end.

The director of music of the church where I was pastor in Nashville was known for three things: his excellent music; his cluttered office; and his terrible penmanship. Most weeks he would hand-write the titles and composers for the music that he would be playing or the choir would be singing in worship, and more often than not, we couldn't read it. Usually there would be a single letter in question, and the secretary and I could usually agree on what it was. But then there were the more-harried weeks when he would scribble even more quickly, and then we'd have to call in the whole staff to determine what a letter in some word was. I'll never forget the day that we could only narrow it down to one of three different letters it could be.

I thought of that when I looked at the sermon title listed in today's bulletin. This was one of those harried weeks, and I had scribbled my title on a post-it note for Karen to add to the bulletin, and then I promptly left the office. I had already read the bulletin, and all it needed was that sermon title. But apparently my writing left a lot to be desired. You see, I had meant the title to read "The Beginning and the End," so I was a bit surprised

when I read the printed version, “The Beginning at the End.” I clearly had run my “nd” of “and” into a blur, which made it look more like a “t,” thereby making “and” into “at.”

Here’s the truth: I like the printed title a lot better. While mine simply repeated a line from today’s passage, the printed version captures the deep theological truth that the Book of Revelation is trying to communicate. And I can’t think of a better title for a sermon on the Sunday we ordain and install our new officers.

When I first started thinking about this day, it was that line near the end of our reading when God announces, “I am the Alpha and the Omega” that jumped out at me this year. Those are the first and last letters of the Greek alphabet, and would correspond to the English language’s A and Z. It was God’s way of saying, “I am the beginning and the end”—the one who is and who was and who is to come. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the A and the Z.

Of course, in order to fully understand what God is saying, at some point you had to learn the letters of the alphabet. Many of you will remember the number and letter of the day of Sesame Street. They are alive and well not only on Sesame Street but also in the preschool classrooms downstairs. Each day, some letter comes into focus for those children, and it’s fun to see them recognize the letter that begins their name—and then the others that are part of it—and they slowly learn to recognize all the letters from A to Z.

While children have fun learning their letters, we know something about these letters which isn’t yet obvious yet to them: these random letters that they are learning will one day become words—words that they will begin to recognize and use as they learn to read and write. And they will put those words together to form sentences which will become paragraphs that become essays, or dissertations, or letters that have power not only to describe the world that they are discovering, but in a real sense to create a world that is yet to be. Or, by the power and truthfulness of their words, they may peel away the layers of the world before us to expose a truth that lay hidden from our eyes. Words have such power, and the importance of teaching each letter—its shape and its sound—is pivotal to creating the words that will form and shape their lives. The letters and the words they form have power to change the world.

In a real sense, that’s exactly what John is trying to do in the Book of Revelation. Now I know the very mention of that book makes some of us squirm in our seats. We have all heard or read far too many so-called experts in Revelation who repeatedly and loudly tell us exactly what each symbolic image means. And, when world leaders or powers shift, so do their explanations. And, perhaps even more telling for our time, the Book of Revelation has been used as fuel to stoke the fears that consume us, and now we have added the fear of being left behind to everything else that keeps us up nights. It’s no wonder one scholar once called the book “the playground of the religious eccentric.” And it’s also no wonder that the Book of Revelation makes us nervous when just about every time we hear it what we are really hearing is some perversion, some corruption, of the real message of John’s vision.

John’s vision, you see, wasn’t shared to create fear in his hearers. Nothing could be further from the truth. It was designed to give hope, to give beleaguered disciples a vision of a world held by God, and to remind them that the promises of God could be trusted.

The Book of Revelation “is the product of the marriage of hope and despair, of promise and pain.” It was most likely written toward the end of the first century by a banished Jewish Christian leader named John who was in prison for his faith on the Isle of Patmos.

And it’s confusing to say the least, as all apocalyptic literature is. What John is attempting to do in this letter is to convey a message so powerful and unexpected—so radically world-shattering and world-creating—that he discovered the limitations of the language he knew. And so he took on the language of a poet, crafting in grand apocalyptic fashion a story that would literally turn the world on its head. But, because of its wild imagery, John has left us scratching our heads as well. The Book of Revelation has confounded Christians for centuries, much the same way that life itself confounds us. Was it written in code? What does it mean? To what do its symbols refer? Is it a message about the past, the future, or the present?

While those questions often clutter our minds and the answers aren’t clear, the purpose of this book is very clear. It was written primarily to encourage and inspire a particular group of Christians who were suffering under Roman persecution. John wanted to help them endure and remain faithful during their time of struggle—both their internal struggles and those with what seemed to be an out-of-control culture.

I like the way one preacher once described the context of the Book of Revelation. She writes, “It was a time of turmoil and terror in which the promise of ease and safety long believed to be a result of faith, could only be achieved by abandoning faith altogether, or by living a maddening double life. People of every race and circumstance saw every other as the enemy. The only hope for unity seemed to be in the heavy handed control of an out-of-touch government that was basing its values on greed, power and the lack of visible dissension.”

It is into that context that John offers his vision of another way. It is a vision of hope. I like to think of John’s Book of Revelation as a drama set with two stages, one above the other. And what John does throughout the whole book is to point first to the bottom stage where the sad story of human history plays itself out. That stage is filled with a story of persecution and suffering where everything that defies God’s righteousness and love seems to rule.

But then John’s vision shifts, and he points us to the stage above. And what we see there is a world held by God—the Alpha and the Omega—the one who is and who was and who is to come—the one who holds all time and all of us in his hands, and what we see when the heavens open is the Lord seated on the throne, ruling in power and in love, and there is nothing that will ever happen that will change that. The Lord God omnipotent reigns—always has, and always will.

And then John moves back to the lower stage, and what we see there is the world that seems all-too-real in its hurt and anguish, where the faithful suffer and the wicked prosper, and where despair seems to rule. But, since John has given us a glimpse of the true world—a world in which hope lives because Jesus reigns—we are given courage for the living of these days.

Some of you may be familiar with a term from the art world called *pentimento*.

That's a big word that describes what happens to oil paintings over time. As you know, artists would often paint more than one image on a canvas because they couldn't afford a new one. Over time though, the first image painted beneath would start to show through the top painting, and you could see the true image from that canvas.

That's sort of what John encourages us to do when we look at the world around us—to learn to recognize the true image of God's reign upon us and this world, even when it looks as if we are living in a radically different world. The vision John gives us, you see, is the true picture of a world not out-of-control that will spiral into chaos, but a world lovingly created and cared for by the God who is the beginning and the end.

But we miss all of that if we fail to learn the whole alphabet of God. I have been struck by my older daughter Rachel, who was a kindergartner when she learned to count to 100 with conviction. But, when she had mastered it, she and the other kids in her class started to count this way, "1, 2, skip a few, 100." My concern is that we not do the same with the alphabet of God's grace, but that we learn the shape and sound of every letter in God's vocabulary, so that we will be able to recognize the God who is and who was and who is to come in all the ways and places that God shows up.

Today, as we ordain and install officers into the church—as we gather again to remember the claims made upon us in baptism—we are setting apart a group to lead us. And so, I dare say to you who are being set apart today—along with those on the board of deacons and session with whom you will be serving—we need you to remember that God is in charge, that God is the beginning and the end who is making all things new. We need you to love one another. We need you to love God. We need you to love us.

What we need from our officers—more than anything else—is for you to abide in the God who is abiding in you, and to remember with every breath you take, that God is in control, and God is even now making all things new.