

“What About the End?”

Preaching Text: Revelation 1:4b-8

25 November 2018: The Reign of Christ Sunday

Salado UMC—Salado, Texas

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**“Sometimes when we are generous in small, barely detectable ways
it can change someone else's life forever”**

(Margaret Cho).

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We of course celebrated Thanksgiving this week, but we also recognized that this concludes a year in the Christian calendar. We begin a new year with the first Sunday in Advent next Sunday. We title worship for today as either Christ the King or Reign of Christ Sunday—a day we anticipate Jesus’ final return. Next week, Advent anticipates Christ’s coming. But today our question is: **“What About the End?”**

The end is frequently a key element of an experience. The conclusion of a football game is likely the most important aspect of the game. If you don’t believe me ask those few who even now rehash the “Heidi football game” of 17 November 1968 when Shirley Temple as Heidi knocked the NFL off TV. The end of films, plays, and books are as important for us in everyday life as the end of a semester is for a student—or the end of an operation for a patient. Today we celebrate the Christian year’s conclusion.

Revelation provides the text for Reign of Christ Sunday. Some Christians consider Revelation a book to avoid at all costs. Contrarily, others embrace Revelation to the exclusion of the Bible’s other sixty-five books. Yet, to avoid extremes, I suggest that Revelation sums up the entire Bible. For although it is unusual that Revelation does not directly quote any other part of the Bible in its 404 verses, it just as remarkably echoes 278 other scripture texts.

Revelation is an apocalypse. Apocalypse means “unveiling” or “disclosing.” Scholars designate apocalypse as literary category akin to a “parable” or “psalm.” Revelation offers a vision which on one level foretells the future, but more reliably presents a grasp of both past and present. Revelation as apocalyptic literature relates a struggle between good and evil, and Christ’s final victory. John writes in symbolic language, urging Christians to keep faith in times of persecution. Hear our lesson:

Grace to you and peace from him who is and who was and who is to come, and from the seven spirits who are before his throne, [5] and from Jesus Christ, the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth.

To him who loves us and freed us from our sins by his blood, [6] and made us to be a kingdom, priests serving his God and Father, to him be glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen.

[7] Look! He is coming with the clouds;

every eye will see him,

even those who pierced him;

and on his account all the tribes of the earth will wail. So it is to be. Amen.

[8] "I am the Alpha and the Omega," says the Lord God, who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty (Revelation 1:4b-8).

A first point this text makes reveals three messianic titles for Jesus. Jesus is the “faithful witness,” which means Jesus is the one who by giving up his life and becoming a martyr (Greek = “witness”) both announced and brought to bear the eternal reign of God. Without this eternal reign of God, we would easily lose hope.

Jesus is also “the firstborn from the dead.” This title means Jesus is God’s chosen one who by his resurrection/ascension establishes God’s new order of righteousness. A God who defeats sin and death, as Paul puts it, is a God worth paying attention to.

In addition, Jesus is “the ruler of the kings of the earth.” This claim for Jesus is difficult for us modern American-types to grasp. On the one hand, we are too democratic to believe in monarchy. On the other hand, we wonder how can Jesus rule anything in 2018 when political order seems to be evaporating right before our very eyes. How can Jesus rule when countries with many Christians engage in ruthless political behavior? How does Jesus rule when no political power on earth is capable of stopping refugees or exiles yearning for freedom? These messianic titles for Jesus (the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth) help us understand Jesus.

A key second point at Revelation’s beginning tells us what the rest of the book details: God will realize God’s rule in Jesus Christ. After this note, our passage shifts rapidly into a doxology: “To him that loved us and freed us from our sins by his blood and made us a kingdom of priests be glory and dominion forever.” For those who take God’s rule seriously a fresh world of hope emerges. To those who have by their baptisms experienced this new order of forgiveness, the apt response to this “faithful witness” is a hymn of praise, the first of many in Revelation.

Some people suggest that the book of Revelation is a first century worship book—something like our hymnal. Others pronounce the book is about the just desserts of evil people. Some say it is a roadmap to the future. Some say Revelation outlines for believers what comes next for those who are true disciples. Yet, I want to add one more voice and this is our third point. More than anything this book is a book of power—an ultimate kind of power.

There is a kind of power in this book that is different from the power of Egypt, Assyria, Babylon, Greece, or finally Rome. It is a power that God gives Christ’s messenger John and to John’s churches when they read his letter testifying to God’s glory. These churches are struggling, tempted, and experience a hostile environment.

Not only that, but John’s message to the churches—and to us—is that suffering for the sake of the gospel should not come as a surprise. The entire New Testament is a steady witness to the conflict of Christians with all other idols that try to claim our loyalty. I would lie if I told you I was not amused when one of my former church members (a person I hold in high esteem) was worked up because “they” are taking our churches away from us! What are we going to do about it? I said nothing—as hard as that is to believe, but I did think no one has to take the church away from us because we are all too happy to simply give it away. Each time we decide for something other than helping build up the church we give a little piece of it away. People used to ask me “do you think our children will have faith?” Today my question is more like, “Will our faith have children?” Many folks are smitten by Revelation. Yet an irony

remains. Revelation is speech by and for the oppressed; those suffering under the sword of Rome, not for a successful, affluent or powerful church. Perhaps soon we will be lucky enough to find our faith as an oppressed minority—this is the real power of faith.

Perhaps you remember the small portion of 2 Corinthians where Paul candidly writes about his afflictions:

. . . but he [the Lord] said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness.' So, I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me. Therefore, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities for the sake of Christ; for whenever I am weak, then I am strong" (2 Corinthians 12:9-10).

"What About the End?" was our original question. What this means on the last Sunday of the Christian year is this: Despite all evidence to the contrary God rules and overrules God's creation. We are not in charge and ultimately, although we feel surrounded by evil and tragedy, eventually God will draw all things together and we will be God's people for eternity. Human beings can exist in any circumstance as long as they recognize that within that circumstance there exists hope. God is our hope.

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