

## **The Invitation of Finality**

A Sermon Preached by Christopher A. Joiner  
First Presbyterian Church, Franklin, Tennessee

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*Nineteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time*

Revelation 21:1-6



During a Christmas Eve candlelight service at the church I served in Alabama, it was the custom to form a circle at the end of the service while our candles were lit and invite people to share. In January, one of the core families in that church was moving across the country. The father spoke up and said, with tears in his eyes, “Thank you for making it so hard for us to move away.”

It is a blessing that Joan Chittister commends to us all, the one a father said every time he hugged his daughter goodbye: “May every place you be make it hard for you to leave...May every person you love make it hard for you to say goodbye.”

I’ve mentioned to you before our daughter Chandler’s habit when we go on vacation of starting to anticipate the end before it has barely begun. We arrive on a Monday afternoon to the white sand beaches of the Gulf Coast, just putting our feet in the salt water, and she says, “We will have to leave on Sunday. I don’t want this to end.” I used to try and argue her into recognizing that Sunday was a long way off, but we both knew the truth. It really wasn’t a long way off. It would be here before we knew it. And we knew the week would be wonderful; just being all together in that place, sharing uninterrupted time, Sabbath rest and re-creation. We would miss it for sure. She was just missing it ahead of time.

And I saw it on the faces of students on Friday as they waited in our neighborhood for the school buses. A mixture of excitement and apprehension, and that telltale look that says, “Where did the summer go?” I sensed it in the scores of Facebook and Instagram photos of students on Friday. All of them a variation on the theme, “I can’t believe how fast they are growing up.” Where did the summer go, where did the *years* go? If you were one of those students, and you felt a little or a lot of sadness about summer’s end; if you were a parent or a grandparent and felt the sting of tears falling down your cheek as you watched your child enter the school building, then it is a sure sign you were blessed in some way by the thing you miss.

Chittister says that life is made up of a series of choices, and gradually we build up a scaffolding of those choices, “each of which, sooner or later, one way or another, ends.” And the measure of our happiness, the measure of “our wisdom as we go,” is whether or not, when that period of life which those choices represent comes to an end, it is hard for us to leave...it is hard for us to say goodbye.

We are sad because that which we are leaving or saying goodbye to is important to us, has become part of us in some way deep within. Often before a funeral, someone will start to cry and apologize. I always try to say, “Never apologize for your tears. They are a sign of the importance of this person to you.” And what we affirm at a funeral we see affirmed here today. Each of these moments in our lives, each of these goodbyes, anticipate a day when our lives will be gathered up into the life of God, when there will be no more goodbyes, no more tears, no mourning over losses. This is the vision of John compiled in the often-troubling and misunderstood letter called *Revelation*.

It would be easy here to take a detour through this book’s eerie visions of dragons, lakes of fire, the four horsemen, and lots of other images that feel taken straight from the fertile mind of Stephen King. In reality, many of these images were taken straight from the pages of the Hebrew scriptures and the apocalyptic tradition, which tried to describe metaphorically something that is indescribable. What is it they were trying to describe? The end of days, the day when God would do what we cannot do for ourselves, the day when God would fulfill God’s intentions for the world.

But today, we have skipped the detour and gone straight to the end of the book. All of *Revelation*’s seemingly bizarre imagery has been leading up to something, which we see with striking clarity here in Chapter 21. And what we see is that “God does not merely bring the end, God *is* the end.”<sup>1</sup> God is “all in all.” Our lives and the life of the world will be taken up into the life of God so completely that it can only be called “new.” A new heaven and a new earth. The One we worship we will see, face-to-face.

When God is all in all, there are certain things which can be no more. Death, the thief which takes those we love away from us, which stalks the world in violence and war, which hides away in cancer cells, which hangs over us as threat, always in the background of every goodbye and every ending, which is the source of crying and mourning and pain, will be gone.

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<sup>1</sup> M. Eugene Boring, *Interpretation: Revelation*. (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1989), page 215.

But true to form in this book of images, all those things that disappear when God appears are summarized in the disappearance of one thing. John writes it at the very beginning of our text: “And the sea was no more.”

Remember back at the beginning, the very beginning as narrated by Genesis, when God created the heavens and earth and the earth was void and without form, and darkness covered the face of the *deep*. The Hebrew is *tohu wa bohu*. It is chaos, disorder, formlessness. And God creates by pushing the seas back, causing land to appear. The ancient Hebrews believed that it was only God’s grace that held those chaotic waters at bay. We see in the story of the Flood the one time God’s gracious hand was lifted from those waters, allowing them to run free, and chaos and death ensues. The sea represents that chaos. It represents all that is broken in the world, all that threatens.

“And the sea was no more.”

I don’t know that I fully understood the power of this image until I stared out through night vision binoculars onto the Aegean Sea. Standing atop a hill overlooking a lighthouse, temperatures below freezing, the chopping waters rising and falling in colors of green, chaos was a word that made sense. As I scanned the waters - up and down, up and down - I occasionally saw the far shoreline of Turkey, knowing that in the deep woods on that other shore there were thousands of people waiting. The smugglers advertised bad weather discounts for those desperate enough to get in flimsy boats, more than likely wearing fake life jackets for which they had paid extra, to make the journey across the sea to where we were, on the Island of Lesbos, in Greece.

What must that water have represented to the refugees on the other side except *tohu wa bohu*, formless and void and full of chaos?

How much more powerful is that promise, standing on top of a cold hill in Greece – “And the sea was no more.” It is not a promise about the literal disappearance of the sea, but about the banishment of what it represents. Refugees drowning in the cold waters? No more. Cancer? No more. War? No more. Homelessness? No more. Broken relationships? No more.

And goodbyes? No more. All things new.

It is easy, though, when reading these promises, to begin to pine for that new day, to say things like, “I know it is hard now, but one day, in the future, on the last day, everything will work out.” Not only is that cold comfort for someone experiencing the chaos of the sea now, it is not faithful to the call of the Book of Revelation itself. We are

called to live now as if that new day were already here, because, in Christ, it is already present though not fully realized. We catch glimpses of it when we walk in the Way of Christ in the world. We participate in it when we cry with those who weep, when we sit alongside those in pain, when we mourn with those who mourn. We participate in it when we give water from the well of life to those who thirst.

One of those nights in Greece, Harding McCall saw a boat through those night vision binoculars. By the time the next day dawned, Harding and Tony Inglis were in the Aegean Sea, guiding the boat to the rocky shore, where other members of our team were waiting to tend to babies, help people out of wet and cold clothing, guiding them up to the lighthouse. The refugees were filled with joy, taking selfies with our people, laughing. They had made the journey across the sea. Every cup of water given to them, every bowl of hot soup and mug of warm tea was a participation in that day, that coming day.

“And the sea was no more.”

So that feeling you feel when you are sad to see something go, whether it is the summer or the year or a season of life? May you see that feeling as a grace, a sign of the blessing that was, and a foretaste of blessings to come. But may you also see this: a day is coming when all those events and seasons and times, all the love that you have ever given or received, along with the world itself, will be taken up into God.

Last June was my last time to take classes at Austin Seminary, as I move to the writing phase of the program. From the moment I arrived on the campus for the two-week term, I was saying to my friends I dreaded the end. It was like my toe was barely in the water and already I was anticipating the end. I know where Chandler gets it. My friends were begging me to stop talking about it. It was two whole weeks away. But they knew. We all knew. It flew by. And what a blessing that at the end, it was so hard to say goodbye. And yet, those friendships, that time, it is not gone. It, and all the other times when we have loved and been loved, all of it is taken up into the life of God. So let us live each day by the light of that coming day, let us live each day so that every place you be make it hard for you to leave and every person you love make it hard for you to say goodbye. Amen.