

In his memoir *The Pastor*, Peterson wrote about his son, home from his university studies in creative writing, telling the older man what he was learning. Peterson's son said, "*Dad, novelists only write one book. They find their voice, their book. And write it over and over. William Faulkner wrote one book. Anne Tyler wrote one book. Ernest Hemingway wrote one book. Willa Cather wrote one book.*" That seemed fine until his son said, "Dad, you only preach one sermon."

Today's sermon comes from that place for me that is the one message I continually hear from God. This message from prayers said, favorite hymns sung, creeds declared, and yes, even sermons preached is how I hear God.

Allow me to share with you something about myself and drives me. It is my "Why!" I admit that I felt alone for most of my growing up years. All the moving around the country and attaching to places and leaving friends was hard. I put up walls to stay safe and did not attach to places or people. And as a result, I felt I was alone, terribly alone. That changed for me dramatically when I read these startling words that broke through and I finally began to find peace.

Hear the words came from the Heidelberg Catechism that says, "What is my only comfort in life? That I belong – body and soul, in life and in death – to my faithful Savior, Jesus Christ." Those words grew within me like a flame and continually stir within me a deep passion to share that love with others who may feel lost and uncertain. Those words come from within, and in Seminary I found Revelation focused those Heidelberg's words of comfort and hope into John's culmination of Revelation 21 and 22. So, that is it my friends. I believe this that is my one signature sermon and as you listen to the things I say from up here you will hear echoes throughout our time together. Friends, God wants you to know that things will be okay because we (you and I), despite what the world throws at us, "we belong... to God!"

Revelation 21:1-7 The New Heaven and the New Earth

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 and be their God;
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. To the thirsty, I will give water as a gift from the spring of the water of life. Those who conquer will inherit these things, and I will be their God, and they will be my children."

Title: Bear Has Your Back

Text: Revelation 21:1-7

Preacher: Eddie Bellis

Date: August 17, 2025

When I was 7 years old, I moved from Fort Huachuca, AZ, to NW Arkansas and started the 4th Grade in a tiny town of north of Alma, AR called Mountainburg. The town had 880 residents, and when school was in session, the population of the school was as large as the town. I remember being the “new kid” on the block, and after a couple of months, I made a bunch of friends. My friends and I looked forward to our lunch period each day, because after lunch we were able to play games on the school yard for about an hour before heading back to class. This time was important to all of us because it allowed us to get out our wiggles.

One particular kid was a kid named Steve. He was in my grade and like most middle school boys our heights were all over the place, and Steve was quite large. What is important for us today is that he ended up being a bully. He also was the ringleader of few of the kids who would “pick on” my other classmates. One day, I remember they turned their attention to Bobby.

Allow me to tell you about Bobby. He was small, and he was burdened with an affliction some called “Brittle Bones Disease.” Through no fault of his own his bones would just break. I remember him walking to class in front of me and collapsing one day. When he returned the next day, he was in a cast. Because of his condition, he was small and sickly.

One day Steve and his goons turned on little Bobby and began to pick on him. I knew I needed to do something, or Bobby might be hurt. So, I said something like, “Hey, you guys, cut that out! Leave him alone!” Yes, I spoke out against Steve and his gang.

I remember their turning away from Bobby ready to take on the challenge. I remember their look of “hungry for a fight” clearly in their eyes. Frankly, I was scared. As a group, they took one step towards me when suddenly they stopped. I could see their excitement quickly stop. I did not know what had changed until I turned around and was surprised to see what I thought at the time to be a giant, the biggest kid in our school, named Bear standing behind me. He was in High School, and his name suited him. To me, a lowly fourth grader, he looked huge.

Bear did not say a word. He just stood there. You could tell he was hoping Steve’s gang would start something. Suddenly, my confidence was bolstered by the presence of Bear. I knew things were going to be okay. I remember turning back to Steve and looking at him with confidence saying, “Just leave Bobby alone and leave us alone.” Steve and his crowd backed down!

Over the years, I have reflected on that day. One of my great lessons in that moment is I was a different person when I realized I had Bear backing me up. Because of Bear and his size, I knew I would be okay. I felt good and safe knowing Bear had my back. I was able to release anxiety and fear because of Bear. I possessed boldness and confidence that things were going my way. Why? Because I had a great, big Bear behind me. Frankly, Bear’s presence convinced me I was not alone.

Friends, John’s lesson, the lesson of scripture as I understand it, is that despite what we may feel at the moment or think about our present circumstances it is this simple truth: each of us have a

Creator Bear backing us up. We are never alone. Revelation's powerful message is God is our Alpha and Omega in Chapter 1. Our God is here with us through the powerful throne of God and the Bleeding Lamb in Chapters 4 and 5. Our God is with us in our tears which are our liquid prayers in Chapter 7. And now John brings us full circle to the beginning, and he reminds us that God is intimately involved in our story. This sermon is my witness to the world! We are not alone, and we see this promise is one of the most beautiful passages in Scripture. This scripture is one that shows up many times at a Celebration of Life. Friends, our God being with us and will wipe away our tears.

Our God is the great, big Bear who always has our back. Think what it means for us to have complete and absolute assurance of the permanence and faithfulness of God.

- Psalm 92 records: *"Before the mountains were born or you brought forth the whole world, from everlasting to everlasting you are God,"*
- Psalm 8 says, *"O Lord, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the universe."*
- Psalm 90 says, *"A thousand years in your sight are like a day that has just gone by, or like a watch in the night."*

Repeatedly, we are assured of the bigness and grandeur of God. So, let us end where we began in July. Our God is the Alpha and Omega, our past, present, and future all at the same time.

God of our past. Israel shows us story after story of a people who drew power and strength from remembering their past as God's beloved children. Stories from their past were critical to their survival. In times of great trials, it was important to them to recall God's many saving acts in their behalf. Those wonderful stories concerning God's faithfulness in the past gave them hope and inspiration for the present.

If I have my Jewish tradition correct, the father in the Jewish family bore the responsibility of burning into the minds and hearts of his children the history of Israel. They were never to forget the fact that God had brought them with a strong hand out of Egypt. They were never to forget the Passover Lamb and its sacrifice for them that gave them protection from the hand of the angel of death. They were never to forget the opening of the Red Sea. They were never to forget being preserved in the wilderness for forty years. They were never to forget crossing the Jordan River. They were never to forget the battle of Jericho.

These things were engraved on their memory. The Old Testament is the chronicle of God's saving acts in the life of the people of Israel. The overall theme of this chronicle is the permanence and faithfulness of God.

God's faithfulness toward Israel is for eternity. Our God is the God of the past who gave a covenant to Abraham, to Isaac, to Jacob, and through God's people to us today. Our God is our God of the past and is faithful to God's promises to love us for all eternity.

God is also the God of the present. How important it is that we see God's hand in the present moment. Many people want to enshrine God in the past. Because things seem so bad now, others focus solely on a future called heaven. But friends, our God is a God of the now! Our God is alive and at work in our world. Our God is available to us now. Our God is a God of faithfulness, Our God of patience, and our God filled with infinite love.

In the 1979 film titled, “The Miracle Worker” Patty Duke and Melissa Gilbert played the roles of Annie Sullivan and Helen Keller, respectively. Recall the story. Helen Keller was left both blind and deaf. And was trapped in a world where she could only communicate through a few hand signals with the family cook, who her parents arranged to work with their daughter. This cook was named Anne Sullivan.

At first Helen Keller did not get it. These random motions being pressed into her palm did not connect with experiences she felt. But Sullivan refused to give up. She kept spelling words. She kept giving references for everything Helen encountered.

Finally, there was a “watershed” moment, which was indeed like our Revelation promise “water powered.” Helen’s breakthrough moment was as she was having water pumped over her hands and Anne Sullivan kept spelling the word for “water” over and over into her palm. Suddenly Helen “got it.” Suddenly she realized those gestures meant something real and tangible. They were naming what she was experiencing.

The miracle moment was made and found. The lost began to find a path. The true “miracle” Helen received was the miracle of her committed, loving family, and of her relentlessly optimistic and patient teacher Anne Sullivan. Our God is like Helen’s family and teacher/friend Anne Sullivan. Our God’s steadfast love does indeed endure forever! No matter the burden we are carrying, God is available to us NOW.

Our God is the God of the future. Friends, we live in an uncertain time, and many of us are fearful of the future. We are a bundle of anxieties concerning our health, our finances, our children, even the safety of our world. Our constant anxiety reminds me of a story that Mark Twain once told. Twain spoke of a friend of his who came to him and asked him to buy a train ticket back home. He said, “Mark, I do not have money. I wish you would buy me a ticket back to town.”

Twain said, “Well, I am broke myself, but I’ll tell you what to do. You hide under my seat, and I will cover you with my legs.”

So, the guy agreed! Then Twain went to the ticket office and bought two tickets, without saying anything to his friend. When the train was under way and the “supposed stowaway” was snug under the seat, the conductor came by, and Twain gave him the two tickets.

“Where is the other passenger?” asked the conductor.

Twain said, “That is my friend’s ticket. He is a little eccentric and likes to ride under the seat.”

Aren’t we a lot like Twain’s friend? We make no sense by hiding under our seats, afraid of our future. Many of us ride around daily under the seat filled with our anxieties and fears. Friends, God has already purchased the train ticket for us. We have a prepaid train ticket to ride on God’s train ride. Do not hide under the seat. Let’s sit tall and straight backed claiming our place and boldly offer the conductor our prepaid ticket bought by the bleeding yet still standing Lamb! We are not alone and like my experience in school, our God will always have our back.