

Alpha and Omega
Kelly Roman
Fort Hill Presbyterian Church
Christ the King Sunday - November 22, 2015

Revelation 1:1-8 (NRSV)

¹ The revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show his servants what must soon take place; he made it known by sending his angel to his servant John, ² who testified to the word of God and to the testimony of Jesus Christ, even to all that he saw.

³ Blessed is the one who reads aloud the words of the prophecy, and blessed are those who hear and who keep what is written in it; for the time is near. ⁴ John to the seven churches that are in Asia: 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.

In the midst of the violent events that have shaken the world, there are stories of acts of kindness. I imagine you've read or heard some of them. One that stood out to me came from Texas where, on the Monday after the Paris attacks, an Islamic mosque was vandalized – near Austin. A seven-year-old named Jack learned of the vandalism from talking with his mom. He decided to gather up his pennies from his piggy bank, which came to a \$20 donation. A board member of the mosque said, "It's 20 bucks, but coming from Jack collecting his pennies it's worth 20 million to me and to our community."¹

The smile on Jack's face when he gave the donation reminded me of the children of our church. I think of how excited they've been to give Cyndi their paper turkeys of coins and bills for the Thornwell Home for Children.

Jack and the children of our church call to mind the vision of the prophet Isaiah in the Old Testament: “The wolf will live with the lamb, and the leopard will lie down with the young goat; the calf and the young lion will feed together, and a little child will lead them” (11:6).

The opening of the book of Revelation offers a word of hope to seven churches in Asia. At this time, Asia was a region of the Roman Empire in what is now Turkey. These churches were suffering from persecution under the Roman Empire. John, the author of the book, was exiled to the island of Patmos because of his Christian faith.

He delivers this message from God: “Grace to you and peace from the one who is and who was and who is to come.” Did you notice something unusual about the order of these words? The same order is used again at the end of the passage, which speaks of the “Lord God, who is and who was and who is to come.” It’s a different order from what we might expect.

Karoline Lewis points out that instead of chronological order, the phrase “who is” comes first: “Grace to you and peace from the one who is and who was and who is to come.” In her words, this “emphasizes . . . the promise of the reign of Christ here and now, the promise of God’s kingdom here and now, in this moment, and not just in the past and in the future.”²

People giving their time, talents, and treasures to help others reflects the kingdom of God already among us.

You may be familiar with this quote from Fred Rogers of Mr. Rogers’ Neighborhood: “When I was a boy and I would see scary things in the news, my mother would say to me, ‘Look for the helpers. You will always find people who are helping.’”³

In times of tragedy, acts of generosity and hospitality show us the will of God being done on earth as it is in heaven.

Every year, some of our PSA students participate in the Montreat College Conference. There are keynote speakers, and last year we had the privilege of hearing Jamie Tworkowski. Jamie is a Christian and the founder of an organization called To Write Love on Her Arms. To Write Love on Her Arms works to help youth and young adults struggling with depression, self-harm, suicidal thoughts, and addiction. Through storytelling and resource sharing, young people receive hope and healing. They get connected with therapists, doctors, and other forms of support.

I met one student who came to the College Conference simply because she heard that Jamie was speaking—that’s the kind of impact this movement has on people’s lives.

Jamie and his co-workers want to tell everyone they meet: “You are not alone, and this is not the end of your story.” These words are part of their vision statement. They are especially important words for anyone struggling with self-harm or thoughts of suicide.⁴

After Jamie’s morning keynote, campus ministers and other pastors were available to listen and pray with people. I also noticed the ways the college students cared for one another. Some stayed in the pews of Anderson Auditorium, sitting with their friends in need, waiting until they were ready to leave. The words, the silences, and the hugs communicated, “You are not alone, and this is not the end of your story.”

In our passage from Revelation, it is like God is saying to all of creation, “You are not alone, and this is not the end of your story.”

“I am the Alpha and the Omega,” says the Lord God.

God is the beginning and the end. God didn’t simply create the universe and sit back to watch what unfolded. God is still our Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer, always working for good—even in places where we can’t imagine good things happening.

As we heard, John of Patmos praises Jesus, “To him who loves us and freed us from our sins by his blood, and made us to be a kingdom, priests serving his God and Father.”

Jesus has “made us to be a kingdom, priests serving . . . God.” To put it another way, we are Christ’s body on earth—his eyes and ears and hands and feet. God has called us together so that we can make a difference in a hurting world.

One of my friends, Tara Woodard-Lehman, serves as the Presbyterian chaplain at Princeton University. A couple of years ago, she wrote an article called, “Do You Really Need Church?” She wrote the piece after a conversation with a college student. Tara writes, “He asked, ‘I mean, I get why you’re into ‘being spiritual’ and ‘helping people’ and everything, but why bother with Church? I just don’t get that part. Do you really think you need it?’

He went on to describe how irrelevant the Church was. In his view, all the Church once provided can be found elsewhere in civic life. From community service projects to book clubs; from outreach to the poor to potlucks; from meditation groups to

support groups, he described the many other places that provide much of what the Church used to (and occasionally still does) provide.

I did my best to listen.

And you know what I concluded? He was, at least in part, right. If the Church is only what he described (a sort of glorified community center or service provider), it is a wonder anyone shows up.

I began to seriously ask myself, do I really need Church?

Why don't I just hit the bagel shop, join another yoga class, buy some more U2 tickets (you know, for a little transcendence) and volunteer at a soup kitchen every once in a while?

Why bother with Church at all?

After giving it much consideration, I've decided that there is at least one very good reason why I need Church: I have a really bad memory.

It's true. I have a terrible memory. Especially when it comes to remembering who I am as a child of God. Especially when it comes to remembering what God has done, and continues to do, in and through Jesus Christ.

I forget who I am. I forget who God is. I forget God's Epic Story of Redemption and Liberation and Renewal and Beauty and Hope.

I forget. A lot."

Tara goes on to say, "I need Church, because Church reminds me of everything that's important.

And when I say Church, I'm not talking about a building. I mean the people. I'm referring to the organic, collective, flesh and blood Body of Christ. I'm talking about the beautiful but undeniably imperfect community of people who help me remember who I am, and to Whom I belong, over and over again.

But don't get me wrong.

I still love piping hot Sunday morning bagels. Preferably with veggie cream cheese. But more than that, I need to be fed by the Bread of Life.

I still practice yoga and I'm enormously grateful for its presence in my life. But it's no replacement for hearing God's Story, read and proclaimed, week after week.

I absolutely love the adrenaline-pumping-bass-thumping-heart-pulsing intensity of a good rock concert. For me, it really can be a transcendent experience. But I still sing the old hymns of the Church that have sustained followers of Jesus for generations

...

I still think service projects are (usually) good and important. But I find it better to serve others with an eye toward long-term, institutional, sustainable, biblically inspired justice-making and peace-keeping.

I'll be the first to say I discover God's Spirit working in and through the wonders of creation. But I still need to worship the Creator and be reminded that all good things come from God."⁵

Today we remember "[our God] who is and who was and who is to come." We remember that Christ has died, Christ has risen, and Christ will come again. We remember, and give thanks, even as we long for God's promised future. Later in Revelation, in chapter 21, we hear this vision from John:

21 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. ² And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband.³ And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying,

"See, the home of God is among mortals.

God will dwell with them;

they will be his peoples,

and God himself will be with them;

⁴ God 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."

Since the beginning of time, God has shown us, "You are not alone, and this is not the end of your story."

Jane Fahey writes that "[the opening of Revelation] subversively declares to a Christian community under imperial threat that *with the Lord God*, there is always *more*: more transformation to come than the earth has yet seen, more power and authority than that claimed by earthly rulers, more dignity for God's people than earthly rulers recognize."⁶

This is good news for today's world. As we face events like the Syrian refugee crisis, may we trust that God's vision for our world far exceeds anything we can imagine.⁷

May we trust "the Alpha and the Omega . . . [the God] who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty."

The God who sent Jesus to love us and free us from sin lives among us today. God is with us during final papers and exams, at the hospital bed, around the dinner table, and when we go to work. God is with us when we feel depressed or anxious. God is with you wherever you find yourself today.

God embraces the world with love and compassion and a desire to make all things new.⁸

When we forget this good news, may we be living reminders to one another. May our lives reflect the love of Christ who reigns forever and ever. Amen.

¹ <http://www.cnn.com/2015/11/19/us/boy-piggy-bank-mosque-vandalized/>

² Karoline Lewis, "Sermon Brainwave Podcast #447 – Christ the King," November 14, 2015, <https://www.workingpreacher.org/brainwave.aspx>

³ Fred Rogers, <http://www.fredrogers.org/parents/special-challenges/tragic-events.php>

⁴ twloha.com (To Write Love on Her Arms website)

⁵ Tara Woodard-Lehman, "Do You Really Need Church?" August 14, 2013, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/tara-woodardlehman/do-you-really-need-church_b_3751147.html

⁶ Jane E. Fahey. "Theological Perspective on Rev. 1:4b-8." Eds. Bartlett, David L.; Taylor, Barbara Brown (2011-05-31). *Feasting on the Word: Year B, Volume 4, Season after Pentecost 2* (Propers 17-Reign of Christ) (Feasting on the Word: Year B volume) (Kindle Locations 11633-11636). Westminster John Knox Press. Kindle Edition.

⁷ Ephesians 3:20

⁸ Revelation 21:5