

Alpha and Omega, Trustworthy and True:
Community and Communion for the Long Haul
Caldwell Presbyterian Church
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Text: Revelation 21:1-6a

Yesterday was a great day for the kingdom, as another class was graduated from Union Presbyterian Seminary in Charlotte. Last Sunday, as I recalled my own graduation, I said that maybe the diploma they give graduates ought to have the words from the old military ad campaign – that ministry “is not just a job. It’s an adventure.”

Another piece of advice that they ought to give seminarians is this: If you want to put the fear of God deep in the heart of unsuspecting Christians, read from the book of Revelation.

Or ... if you want no one to show up for worship on Sunday morning, tell your flock in advance that you’re going to preach Revelation. I mentioned in my blog last week I would be doing just that. So you all get credit for being here. Or maybe you just didn’t read the blog.

Why is it, anyway, that we steer clear of this last book in the Bible?

Well, for one thing, Revelation is full of scary imagery. Hail and fire mixed with blood. A mountain that is thrown into the sea. A beast with ten horns and seven heads. A giant red dragon that is about to eat a newborn baby but is then defeated by an army of angels and hurled into the depth of hell.

To be sure, Revelation plays into that human tendency people have to see things that aren’t really there. People do that, don’t they? They conjure up conspiracy theories and all sorts of wild ways to rationalize their individual convictions, fears and anxieties. Sometimes it’s a single person who is sure he alone is right and everyone else is wrong. Sometimes it’s a group of people who just can’t believe that there is another reasonable way to see things. There is something of that in all of us. The trick is being able to see it in ourselves before it does harm to the larger group.

Preachers – and even those who call themselves teachers – have used Revelations to fuel all sorts of false mystery and bad theology, to justify what they believe and what they insist others must believe about what God is doing in the world and across time.

Despite all of that, friends, buckle up. We are, together, going to (Star Trek theme) “boldly go” where few congregations go. Because, at its core, The Revelation to the man known as John of Patmos is not a vision of a madman. It is, in the end, a reassuring word, a comfort to those who are living through all manner of difficulty and discouragement. It is a promise:

“See the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them; and they will be his peoples, and God will be with them; God will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more.”

We need to hear that, don’t we? We need to hear it just as Revelation’s first readers needed an encouraging word amid their persecution at the hands of the Romans, who wanted Christ’s followers to give up and bow down to the emperor, who claimed he was divine. Yes, the imagery in Revelation is crazy and, yes, it’s scary. But the message is that, however scary life gets, however frightened we may become, however anxious or discouraging or disillusioning or downright depressed life may seem it’s not as bad as it looks.

John of Patmos wants us to remember what he says in today's reading, how "the one who was seated on the throne said, "See, I am making all things new."

So, John said, the one on the throne instructed him to write these words that are "trustworthy and true."

"I am the Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end."

So, John's message to his readers is this: Keep the faith. Hold to the vision. Don't give in. Take the long view and stick together, for it is only then that the world will see that God is doing a new thing in us.

The question at the heart of the Revelation to John is this: What does it take to persevere? What's required for God's people to endure in the face of the most frightening, soul dismantling signs all around us? For, when you find that, then you will know what is, as John of Patmos says, is "trustworthy and true."

We don't need visions of mountains plunging into the sea or of seven-headed beasts or of giant red dragons. We have other visions all around us.

Yes, we see plenty that may shake our faith and rattle our life together.

This week we mark a year since the unimaginable murders at the Mother Emanuel AME Zion Church in Charleston. And we know that in that year America has not advanced as much as it should – as it can – in bringing about racial justice, equality and equity.

We know that the wealth gap between black and white in America has only widened in that year.

We look around and see that our nation's criminal justice system is still stacked against young African-American males.

We look around and see that our schools in Charlotte-Mecklenburg are as segregated as they were 30 years ago and that even the act of raising questions of fairness about that has inspired our white, affluent, suburban neighbors to arms, lest their children might lose out in the sharing of our community's resources for all of our children.

We don't need visions of the sun scorching people with fire. We don't need psychedelic dreams of earthquakes and imposing riders on majestic horses coming down from the sky. The news is quite enough, thank you.

We see a woman advance as one party's nominee to be president of the United States, one that follows the first African-American to serve in the White House.

But then we have our own ongoing national nightmare of the man who would be king – or maybe, like the Romans, even emperor – who thinks America is a nation of fools with five-minute memories and that global statesmanship in a time of unprecedented dangers is really about the same as closing a real estate deal.

But in the face of all of this, the author of the Revelation says persevere. Write a different story with your lives. Pick up a pen and submit an alternative narrative with your whole being.

I am the Alpha, God says to John of Patmos. Alpha is the first letter in the Greek alphabet. God is the beginning. God has begun our story.

I am the Omega, God says, the last letter in the Greek alphabet. I will bring the story to a close. Meantime, keep writing. Keep writing what is trustworthy and true.

Today as a community of faith we complete some chapters and we begin others. We say thank you, farewell and Godspeed to four remarkable servants of God, who have given their blood, sweat, tears, hearts and mind, hands and feet to help stand this church back up and lean into its exciting future.

I am the Alpha and Omega, God reassures us. I have the big picture. I know how the story ends. You keep writing.

We welcome in worship all of our Buddies and their families and all of our Mentors. We give thanks for the 3rd year of this vital ministry that elevates young lives.

I am the Alpha and Omega, God says. You keep writing.

So, we also give thanks for three youth members of our congregation who have taken months to look deeply into the claims and the obligations of our faith and who present themselves in confirmation of their baptism to take their place alongside all of our other adult members.

I am the Alpha and Omega, God says. You aren't nearly done yet. Keep writing.

So today we elect an associate pastor nominating committee to venture forth, guided by the Holy Spirit, to find the servant God is already calling to come and work alongside us in building the kingdom of God on earth. And we also raise prayers for the other two search committees that seek a youth leader and an interim worship leader to join us in our work.

What does it take to persevere, to endure over the long haul as a community of faith?

Perhaps what the vision of John of Patmos says is that we should let God deal with the multi-headed beasts and the great red dragons and all the riders on the horses swooping across the sky.

Instead, perhaps we should focus on knowing the difference between minor – even petty – disagreements among God's people and the great systemic and institutional injustices in the world that oppose God's will.

We should unfailingly invoke the Holy Spirit over any of our small, puffed-up ideas, that what we build here is not just community in the short term but communion over the long term.

We should take care that our lives are about more than just being against things, that we can be people who are for the things that matter for the sake of the gospel.

We should know when to rise up, as one, together, against those who would oppose God and when to be still and know that God is God.

Perhaps we are to remember that life together is a gift that is more fragile than we might think, just as each individual soul is more precious than we might always remember.

Perhaps, in all things, we are to be people of vision, a vision that comes from beyond any one of us ... a vision that is worthy of our trust and patience, a vision that is true because it transcends any momentary bad dream or misguided illusion we may have.

So, then, can you see it?

Can you see that what we are doing is building a cathedral, a structure that is meant to reach for the heavens but that is only as sturdy as the one stone we put in place today or any day.

Can you see that we are called to walk as if we already reside in the holy city on a hill that John of Patmos envisioned, and that we are to use that promise to stand with all of God's children here and now against any who would hold back God's justice and mercy for all?

So we journey on, between God's Alpha and Omega. We travel together as a communion of saints, past, present and future.

Look alive, then, brothers and sisters for what is trustworthy and true. Do not be misled by wild-eyed conspiracies or thrown off course by small-mindedness or small faith. Keep your head up so that you see more on the journey than just the immediate step in front of you or the person next to you.

This life together, you see, will take us past all kinds of mile-markers, all kinds of scenic vistas, through deep valleys and over high mountaintops - if our eyes in the right places to see them.

Amen.