

Sunday Jan. 31, 2021

Lesson 9: The Outcome of It All

Scripture: Revelation 21: 1-8; 22: 2-14

**Context:**

Our series continues to focus on God's hope for humanity with the sub theme of how the Word gives us the good news found in Christ. For today, we go to the last book found in the bible, the Book of Revelation. Today's lesson will focus on what it means for us that God is the Alpha and Omega.

The book of Revelation is perhaps one of the most misunderstood books in the Christian canon. The author of the book is attributed as John of Patmos, who is given visions and then records them. In the early Christian church and for centuries, the book was read as a book of hope with allusions to Christ as the mighty conqueror who is simultaneously a lion and a lamb.

However, within the past two hundred years, various groups and individuals have taken the book to move from orthodox teaching to contextual application based more on conspiracy and conjecture than anything else. While all groups and individuals are entitled to speculate and muse on the scriptures, to reduce it as some plot for a dystopian future misses the point of the visions. At its core, the book of Revelation is a book on hope and worship. Any attempt to use it as a form of modern allegory diminishes the intent of the author and also boxes God into a human timetable of cataclysmic events.

The passages for today certainly fall into that category. John is not necessarily saying the New Jerusalem is some futuristic event. Instead, he is given a vision of how God is already at work in the present. All of John's statements about "the End" are really about God.<sup>1</sup> God does not simply bring an end to the earth, God is "the End" as God states: "I am the Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end."<sup>2</sup> As such, John is making a point about God has brought hope in the past, the present, and will bring into the future.

To help drive home the point of God being never ending, John presents the New Jerusalem. The New Jerusalem is an ideal city, reflecting much of the Hellenistic/Roman aspirations as based on Herodotus' description of the actual Babylon and Rome's proud claim to be the Eternal City.<sup>3</sup> For John, God is at work in the ideal city through the Christians who dwell there. As God reigns and establishes the city, the Christians become the pillars as they worship and serve God. The phrase "God's dwelling is here with humankind" points to how this is not some distant reality. God is already at work in the lives of Christians in John's world and in the lives of the Christians in those decades to come. There is a reason John does not give us a timeline of the New Jerusalem. This vision is to be a reality for the decades and centuries to come in God's reign on earth.

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<sup>1</sup> M. Eugene Boring, "Revelation," *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 2011), 215.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.,

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 214.

## Application

How beautiful New Jerusalem appears in these words we read in Revelation. There is beauty and there is joy. Those who cry are comforted and have their tears wiped away from the giver of life. There is no pain and the things of old have faded away. God is the Alpha and Omega, the beginning and end who gives life to those gathered.

When I read this scene, I am taken to a place of worship. Sometimes I get a glimpse of this on Sunday morning or other special holy days. There are some scenes so beautiful, where we catch the glimpse of the holy, we barely have the words to describe the view. The Alpha and Omega show up and all we can do is marvel at the mighty power of our God.

Recently, I officiated over the funeral of a woman I had never met. One story of this woman's life reminded me of this scene from New Jerusalem. This woman was a devoted daughter to her mother when she was diagnosed with dementia. She would travel over four hours each weekend to stay with her mother and give the caregivers a break.

Each Sunday, she would help her mother dress in her Sunday best, pearls and make up on. Even though her mother sometimes struggled to remember if her daughter was a sister or a friend, she knew they were going to church. And when they showed up in the pristine sanctuary, something happened. The woman knew every word to the Apostles' Creed and every line to the hymns. For a moment, this woman was caught up in the timelessness of our God. She may not have known whether it was 2002 or 1964, but she knew she had a victory in Jesus and believed in the Triune God.

There are other scenes though to complement this vision of worship being the place where New Jerusalem is taking place in the here and now. It is the midst of a pandemic when clergy are putting worship videos together and splice in musical pieces from all over the conference. We hear the Spirit speaking through the gifts of others to make a joyful noise to the Lord. As they sing, even though we are not together in person, we are caught up together in awe of the life we have been given.

There is the scene of the child who comes forward to receive Holy Communion for the first time. They return home to ask their parents when they will receive Jesus again with the juice and the crackers. They then tell their parents this is their favorite Sunday to come to church.

There is the ringing of the church bells. Perhaps we hear it on Sunday morning while sitting in the pew and settle to prepare our hearts to worship. Or maybe we hear them during the week and we are reminded to stop and pray, to remember how God is at work in and around us even in the mundane tasks of life.

Perhaps the reason we are tempted to twist these scenes from Revelation into some end of the world portrait is because we have lost the ability to be in awe of God as well as the mystery surrounding God. The worship scenes mentioned above are not just about us. They are about honoring God and also being in awe of how God might speak in the midst of these glimpses of heaven here on earth. We are reminded God is the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and end. God has come before in the past, God is here in the present, and God will be with humanity in whatever comes with the future.

Where do you see hope in this passage? How does God as the Alpha and Omega give you hope for the future? Where have you seen God show up in worship, giving a foretaste of the New Jerusalem? Why do you think it is important to understand worship

is not about us, but about glorifying God?

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