

“We Know How This Ends”
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Overbrook Presbyterian Church
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November 4, 2018

First Scripture Lesson: Isaiah 25:6-9

⁶On this mountain the Lord of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wines, of rich food filled with marrow, of well-aged wines strained clear. ⁷And he will destroy on this mountain the shroud that is cast over all peoples, the sheet that is spread over all nations; he will swallow up death forever. ⁸Then the Lord God will wipe away the tears from all faces, and the disgrace of his people he will take away from all the earth, for the Lord has spoken.

⁹It will be said on that day, Lo, this is our God; we have waited for him, so that he might save us. This is the Lord for whom we have waited; let us be glad and rejoice in his salvation.

Second Scripture Lesson: Revelation 21:1-5

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. ²And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. ³And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them as their God; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them; ⁴he 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.” ⁵And the one who was seated on the throne said, “See, I am making all things new.”



Sermon: *We Know How This Ends*

If you watch sports, just for the pure enjoyment of seeing talented people perform at a high level, and you don't really have a team for whom you pull, then games are probably just that, games. They're low-stress entertainment; a good excuse to throw a party or to spend time outdoors enjoying a sunny fall afternoon with friends, but not much more.

But if you're a *normal* person, and you actually have a favorite team that you pull for as though the fate of the world depended on it; if you live and die with every play, every pitch, every shot; if seeing your team win puts a lift in your step and a smile on your face, but losing puts you in a general funk for hours or even days, then you know that sports is not a game. It's not about relaxing. Sitting through one of your team's games can be stressful and dramatic.

But I have a solution. When I've got something else to do and can't invest three or four hours watching my team, I'll record the game to watch later and then go about my day. Then I go into a media blackout. I don't check social media, I don't answer calls from friends or family, I don't check my texts. Too much risk that someone will spill the beans. Then later that night I'll watch the recording as if it were happening live. Added bonus here is I can skip commercials and timeouts.

But yesterday, this all went sideways. My South Carolina Gamecocks were playing at Ole Miss right in the middle of the day and we have family time on Saturday afternoons. So, I hit “record” and we went about

our regular Saturday family stuff. But last night at dinner, Will Grey asked me a question, and not thinking, I did what I often do when he asks a question I can't answer: I took out my phone and opened Google.

Have ya'll noticed that for mobile users, Google has started showing news stories on their search page that they think are relevant to your interests? Yes... so when I opened Google, there was a headline big as day, proclaiming Carolina had won.

At first, I was annoyed. But then as I sat down to watch the recording, I realized something: Knowing the outcome before it started made watching that game a lot more relaxing. One of my players missed a tackle? No problem. I know it turns out okay. One of my guys gets a penalty? No problem. I know it turns out okay. My team gets behind by ten points in the fourth quarter and the eventual outcome seems seriously in doubt? No problem. I know it turns out okay.

Knowing how the story ends makes everything that happens leading up to that ending far less stressful and worrisome. It's easier to accept the difficulties and the challenges that pop-up along the way when you know that everything is going to turn out okay. And believe it or not, that is essentially the whole point of the book of Revelation.

Now, I'll understand if you're confused. Revelation as we've come to see it seems much more like a horror show appropriate for the Sunday after Halloween and less like a book of comforting reassurance. It's intimidating - what with all the horsemen and the apocalypse and the beast and the anti-Christ. Presbyterians tend to shy away from it and leave it to the more fundamentalist parts of the Christian church to study. It's always been portrayed in art and literature as this odd and disturbing picture of a future apocalypse with trials and tribulations and fire and brimstone. Frankly, it can be frightening and difficult to reconcile with our understanding of God as peaceful, and loving, and merciful.

One writer has noted "The images and obsessions of the book of Revelation have perhaps wreaked more havoc in people's lives -- created more strife, fomented more demonic fantasies, misled more people, -- than any other book in the Bible."¹ We struggle to understand Revelation because of its highly symbolic imagery and we've been beaten over the head with it by Christians who interpret its symbolism for their own purposes so much that we just don't even bother reading it. It is a curiosity; a sort of Biblical haunted house to which we turn when we want a thrill, but not for spiritual edification.

Which is a shame, because the Revelation of John was actually intended to *comfort* first century believers who were persecuted and in distress. In a world dominated by the Roman Empire, it was intended to remind Christians that God is in control and that God has not forgotten about the church and the world around it; that the powers of this world, whoever and whatever they may be, though they may seem invincible, will ultimately crumble before God.²

We see this idea expressed in The Declaration of Faith (which we often use in worship here):

"We declare that Jesus is Lord. His resurrection is a decisive victory over the powers that deform and destroy human life. His lordship is hidden. The world appears to be dominated by people and systems that do not acknowledge his rule. But his lordship is real. It demands our loyalty and sets us free from the fear of all lesser lords who threaten us."³

That's Revelation in a nutshell.

Revelation was written for a first-century audience and references people and events of *that* time period. It may surprise you to hear that it does not reference the United States or Russia or China. It is not a forecast of global thermo-nuclear annihilation. Revelation is not meant to be an ominous vision of the future designed to inspire us to either get on board with Jesus or be cast into hell. Revelation is supposed to be a statement of God's power and of God's intention to bring the world into what God's vision for the world has always been.

In Revelation we find out the end of the story in advance. And we learn that everything is going to be okay. No matter how bad things get; whether threats of war or terrorism or despots rising to power or violence or all the things that give us pause, no matter what happens or how frightened and anxious we may become, Revelation is God putting an arm around us and saying, look, everything is going to turn out okay.

It reminds me of the grandfather in *The Princess Bride*.⁴ You remember that movie? It tells the story of Princess Buttercup and her quest to be reunited with her true love, the Young Farm Boy Westley. If you've seen the movie, then you may remember that all the action you see on screen, is actually being read from a book. Peter Falk is the grandfather who comes to read to his grandson who is sick and forced to spend the day home from school and in bed.

As the story unwinds, there is a scene where Buttercup is escaping from her captors who are holding her onboard their ship. She jumps into the water and starts swimming desperately for shore. Unbeknownst to her, she is swimming through an area known to be populated by Shrieking Eels. As the music builds in intensity, and the eels, large, with shark-like teeth, begin to close in on her, the eels' shrieking growing louder as they approach their prey, the movie stops.

We cut back to the bedside where we see the grandfather reassuring his wide-eyed grandson: "She doesn't get eaten by the eels at this time."

His confused grandson says "What?"

And so, his grandpa explains: "The eel doesn't get her. I'm explaining to you because you look nervous."

And his grandson relaxes and settles down as his grandfather begins to read again.

When our story starts getting chaotic and scary, knowing how it ends makes the rest of the story far less stressful.

Now, there is not time today to do a complete study of Revelation and all the ways its meaning has been twisted and irresponsibly interpreted over the millennia but, suffice it to say that the book does not depict a fiery end to everything that God has created. But rather a future in which God's will is fulfilled. In spite of the popularity of the *Left Behind* books and similar cultural portrayals, Revelation does not tell of the world's destruction, but rather the completion of God's creation. And this completed creation is characterized by the presence of God's eternal home, right here in the world, among mortals and by the end of those things which cause us fear and grief.

I'll give you a "for instance." There is a cryptic reference in the early part of the passage we just read where John of Patmos is describing what he sees. John writes "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.” Most people just read past that little remark about the sea, but why in the world would the disappearance of oceans be a good thing? As a person who grew up a 15-minute drive from the beach and who spent most of my summer days in the surf and sand of Pawley’s Island, SC the words “and the sea was no more” don’t sound so good.

But it makes sense when you consider that the Israelites were not seafaring people. The lack of natural harbors along the parts of the Mediterranean coast that they controlled prevented them from being actively involved in trade by sea. Aside from the reigns of Solomon and Jehoshaphat, the Old Testament never references Israel participating in maritime trade.⁵ This was at least partly because the sea was seen as a source of chaos and evil. In Hebrew tradition Leviathan, the Chaos monster lived just beneath the surface of the water. In the creation story of Genesis 1, God creates order and beauty out of the chaotic power of the sea. Only chaos comes from the sea, so it makes sense that with God’s reign would come the elimination of the deep and mysterious oceans.

In the new world of God’s reign, the things we fear; the things that throw our lives into chaos and disorder will be no more. Not just the seas, but also death, and mourning and crying and pain. “See,” says the voice from the throne, “I am making all things new.” The world as we know it is to be transformed to more closely resemble God’s original intent for creation. Note that the voice does not say “I will make *all new things*,” but rather, “I will make *all things new*.” This is not a new act of creation, but a prolific act of redemption. The world will not be replaced, it will be transformed!

As we think about God’s intentions for the world, it is hard to not think of the Garden of Eden. In the beginning, the story tells us, God created the first humans and placed them in paradise; a garden where they lived in community with God. Yet God’s Kingdom is here in Revelation described as a city, a new Jerusalem.

Presbyterian pastor Will Pender has an interesting explanation for that. He writes that “Gardens tend to be quiet and apt for individual meditation; cities are busy, loud and crowded.”⁶ The new Jerusalem, God’s Kingdom on earth, is no escape from community. It is no retreat into solitude or monasticism; it is no solitary walk with God. This will be a city filled with all of God’s people, living together in communion with God and each other. There will be no divisions, no classes; there will be no pain or hatred or any of the things that fracture relationships. But instead there will be peace and cooperation and appreciation for the grandeur and majesty of all of God’s creation. It will be not a return to what was, but a fulfillment of what God has always intended the world to be.

That is the hope that sustains us. It is the promise that inspired the early Christians who faced persecution at the hands of the Roman Empire, just as it has sustained Christians across the centuries who have faced powers and principalities that laid claim to their loyalty. The promise of God’s ultimate victory; of the inexorable advance of God’s Kingdom; the assurance of the inevitability of God’s reign being established here among us is what has driven the church onward throughout the years. It is reassurance that the tragedies and drama and evil we find along the way do not ultimately win.

It is tradition on All Saints Sunday to read the names of those friends and family members who have died in the past year. When we think about difficulties we face in life, the death of loved ones is right up there at the top of the list. For many of us the wound is still fresh, the pain of loss still sharp. But this is where we hear God’s comforting words to us, that the story does not end here. Loss feels awful, but this story turns out okay.

So, as we read the names of those who have passed away this year, we will do so not as a sort of wistful tribute. We won't play *"Thanks for the Memories"* and flash a slide show of them and their accomplishments like they do at the Academy Awards. Because what we will be doing is thanking God for blessing us with these men and women in our lives and in the life of the church. And as we remember them, we will be looking forward with anticipation to the future when we will be reunited with them and all the saints in the Kingdom of God.

We all lose loved ones. Death is a part of life. And we will all one day be the loved one that someone else loses. That might be a morbid thought, or simply a fatalistic one, except for the assurance and the hope we have in God's coming Kingdom. We will not be afraid. We will not be disheartened. We know how this ends.

To God be all glory, honor, power and dominion in this world and in the world that is to come. Amen.

Notes

¹ Ferlo, Roger A. "Revelation 21:1-6a, Pastoral Perspective." *Feasting on the Word. Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary*. By David Lyon Bartlett and Barbara Brown. Taylor. Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2008. 230. Print.

² Ferlo, pg. 232

³ A Declaration of Faith (PCUS, 1977), Chapter 5, Section 4, Lines 135-143

⁴ Reiner, Rob, director. *The Princess Bride*. Performance by Cary Elwes, et al., Act III Communications/20th Century Fox, 1987.

⁵ Coogan, Michael D. "Sea." *New Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*. Ed. Katherine Doob Sakenfeld. Vol. 5, S-Z. Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 2009. 139. Print.

⁶ Pender, William C. *Revelation*. Louisville, KY: Geneva, 1999. 94. Print. Interpretation Bible Studies.