

THE BEGINNING AND THE END

A SERMON FOR EASTERTIDE
SUNDAY, MAY 12, 2013
FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
MARIANNA, FLORIDA
TED W. LAND, INTERIM PASTOR

REVELATION 22:12-14

This is the third and final sermon in a mini-series coming at the end of Eastertide, focusing not on the Gospel lessons of the lectionary, but on the lessons from the Revelation of Saint John the Divine.

Revelation is a controversial book, and we've steered a course that has avoided many of the controversial passages.

We come this morning to the final chapter, to some of the final words. Jesus is speaking to the churches, the scattered, diverse, fledgling churches, established by people like Paul and Silas and Barnabas, and Apollos, by people who heard the stories of Jesus and shared them with others.

John was an old man, at the end of his life, and the Christian church was an infant, at the beginning of its life, a life that stretches to the present day.

In the final moments of his vision, John hears Jesus tell him that He is coming soon. All the New Testament writers seem to share that hope, that vision: that Jesus will be coming soon.

In every age, there have been preachers, teachers, devout men and women, who believed that they were living in the last days, that Jesus was coming soon. And nearly two thousand years later, it seems as though He hasn't yet returned.

Well, let me tell you what I think: I think if you are waiting for His return in glory, His final return, you may have a while to wait. But on the other hand, I think Jesus is coming all the time.

Remember what He told His disciples in the Upper Room on the night in which He was betrayed: "I go to prepare a place for you, and if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and receive you unto myself, so that where I am there you may be also." That's John 14:3.

Well, here's what I've come to believe: Jesus is coming all the time. He comes every day. He doesn't come in glory, riding on a white horse or on a cloud. He comes quietly, like a friend, or as he once said, "like a thief in the night" and when He comes, He receives unto Himself the one for whom He has come, and they go away, to the place that He has prepared.

The first person I knew who saw him coming was Mary Jacobs. Mary was the matriarch of the Leland Presbyterian Church. She was something, the mother of the first woman alderman and mayor of Leland, and the mother of the first woman to coach both a boys basketball team and a girls basketball team in the state tournament. In the same year!

Mary had a big heart, but one described by cardiologist as a bowl of jello. He said it didn't beat, it quivered.

Mary spent a lot of time in the hospital, in Delta Medical Center in Greenville, Mississippi. When she thought she was dying, she'd tell the nurse, "Call my preacher, call my preacher." And they would, and I'd come a runnin', so much so that it got to where the Highway Patrol would give me an escort.

One day Mary looked over my shoulder and said, "Ted, do you see Jesus?" I turned, and saw a picture of Jesus praying in the garden on one of the get well cards she'd received. I said, "Yes, Mary, I see him right there on that card."

She said, "No, silly, he's standing right there next to you. He's come for me, and it is time for me to go with him."

She died that night.

A few years later, Hugh Rushing, Elder Emeritus in the Arcadia church, was in the ICU at DeSoto Memorial Hospital. His beloved wife Pauline was with him.

Hugh told her, "Pauline, Jesus is here, and I don't want you to be sad, but it is time for me to go with him." And he did.

My hope is that some day, some night, I will become aware that Jesus has come for me, and that I can grasp His hand in mine and walk with Him into the land that is fairer than day, to the place where there is no sickness, no sorrow, no grief, no pain, no tears.

That is my hope for each of you: that on the last day of your life, Jesus will come for you, and receive you unto Himself, that where He is, there you may be also.

Jesus said, "I am the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end."

Now you don't have to be a Greek scholar or member of a fraternity or sorority to know that Alpha is the first letter, and Omega the last, in the Greek alphabet. Jesus three times makes the same point: that He is the beginning and the end. It must be an important point.

John made it the starting point of his gospel. He didn't start, as did Matthew and Luke, with the birth of Jesus, he started in the beginning, literally at the start of time, at the creation. And John tells us that the Word (and the Word is Jesus) was in the beginning, and the Word was God and the Word was with God, and that all things came into being through Him and without Him nothing was made that was made. Jesus was there in the beginning, co-eternal with the Father, the Creator, and the Spirit.

The Apostle Paul re-states this in his letter to the Colossians, saying, "He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation, for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible...all things have been created through him and for him." (1:15-16).

For many of us in the church, Jesus was there with us in our beginnings. I don't really remember a time in my life when I didn't know who Jesus was. I don't remember a time when I didn't know that Jesus loved me. I suppose that "Jesus loves me" is the first song I ever learned, followed closely by "Home on the Range".

In the prayers of my family, in the prayers of the church to which my parents belonged, the blessings of Jesus Christ were called down upon me at my birth, and I am sure during the time that I was being formed in my mother's womb.

For those of us who grew up in the church, for those of us who grew up in a Christian home, that is true. It is true for our children and our grand-children and to each succeeding generation.

The rose on our pulpit this morning represents Colton Wayne Hinson, born Friday to Jeff and Amanda, grandson of Robert and Beverly, great-grandson of "Miss Emmie" Granger. Colton will never know a day in his life without the love of Jesus. He has been surrounded with prayers even before he was born, and we've prayed for his mother and his father, and we will continue to pray for him and for them and for his brother Ryder. We must pray for all our children and all our young parents, that the children will know Jesus from the beginning, and every day of their lives.

From the Creation of the world, from the beginning of our lives, Jesus has been there.

And we can take great comfort in the fact that Jesus will be there at the ending of our lives, to claim us as His own, to receive us to Himself, to take us to the place that He has prepared for us.

You know, when we die, the dates of our beginning and of our ending, of our birth and our death, will be there for all to see, carved in stone, cast in metal, printed in the newspaper.

It will not be noted anywhere, for anyone to see, whether or not we walked with Jesus any of those days, whether we served Jesus any of those days, whether we knew Jesus as our Lord and our Savior, as the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end.

I suppose it matters a great deal more that we know Jesus at the end of our lives than at the beginning of them. I suppose it is all that matters, in the end: that we know Jesus.

Time and time again, in moments of trouble, sorrow, danger, tribulation, I've heard folks say, "I don't know how people who don't believe in God, I don't know how people who don't have faith, who don't know the Lord, get through times like these." I have to honestly answer, "I don't know either."

It is like the Heidelberg Catechism puts it so well: "What is your only comfort, in life and in death? That I belong—body and soul, in life and in death—not to myself but to my faithful Saviour, Jesus Christ..."

There's an old hymn that goes, "Now I belong to Jesus, Jesus belongs to me, not for the years of time alone, but for eternity."

In the beginning and to the end, may we all belong to Jesus, the alpha and the omega, the first and the last.

And to Him be the glory, the power, the dominion and the praise, in the church and in the world, now and forever more. Amen.