

“Alpha and Omega”

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⁴Grace 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, ⁵and 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, ⁶and made us to be a kingdom, priests serving his God and Father, to him be glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen.

⁷Look! 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. (Revelation 1: 4b-8)

Let me begin by saying that I have been wondering something – not just this morning, but for a good part of the past week. I have been wondering how many of you would open the Friday email, or open the worship bulletin this morning, see that today’s sermon is based on the book of Revelation, and think to yourselves, “Things are about to get weird... especially on “Bring a Friend” Sunday!”

It’s fair to say that, at the very least, we have a complicated relationship with this final book of the Bible. It’s visions and images can at times come across like a hallucinogenic fever-dream, and the primary subject matter, which focuses on the end of the world, is uncomfortable for many of us. Recently an editorial writer for the LA Times used a familiar R.E.M. song to make her point. “It’s the end of the world as we know it,” she wrote, “And I do not feel fine.”¹ That writer was Karen Stabiner, and she was lamenting the abomination of bakeries selling bagels without holes, which is not at all where you thought I was going with that. But it does illustrate the fact that, because we are mortal creatures bound by earthly limits, any human story with a beginning must also have some kind of an end. Still, most of us would rather not talk about the end.

I am hopeful, however, that a little context might put you more at ease. We turn to Revelation today because today is what is known as “Christ the King Sunday,” also known as “Reign of Christ Sunday.” It marks the end of the church’s liturgical year. Next Sunday, which is the first Sunday of Advent, begins a new cycle in the life of the church. We began this current liturgical year last December 3rd, when we starting preparing ourselves to greet Jesus Christ as he was in what the Swifties might call his “Infancy Era” – when Christ was the meekest, mildest, and gentlest version of himself. We then passed through key moments of Christmas, Lent, Easter, the season of Pentecost, and a long period in the summer and fall we call “ordinary time.” Through it all we follow the ups

¹ “Just Don’t Call it a Bagel,” Los Angeles Times, <https://www.aol.com/news/opinion>, April 8, 2024.



and downs of the story of Christ through the lens of the biblical text. And we end that year this morning with a vision of Christ in the fullness of his power. That is why this passage pops up today, because in these verses Christ is described as *“the ruler of the kings of the earth,”* the one whom *“every eye will see,”* *“the Alpha and the Omega, who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty.”*

Just to clarify, Alpha is the first letter in the Greek alphabet, and Omega is the last letter. So, when scripture says that Christ is the Alpha and the Omega, the Word is saying that Christ reigns over everything from A to Z, soup to nuts, from beginning to end, from one end of creation to the other. This proclamation represents the summit of Christ’s power and authority. So, we begin each church year on the humble ground floor of a Bethlehem stable, and we end each year at the summit of Everest, with the cosmic Christ fully in control, looking down upon everything and everyone from the very pinnacle of creation.

This morning we will not focus on the stranger images or messages of Revelation. Instead we will concentrate on a foundation upon which everything in the book rests, one that offers great comfort. That foundation is this language of Christ as *“the Alpha and the Omega.”* It is no coincidence that the phrase appears in the very first chapter of the book, and in the very last chapter... reinforcing the idea that it is Christ who is both first and last... both the beginning and the end. What does it mean for us that Jesus Christ is both Alpha and Omega?

The first thing it means is that Christ will be with us from the start, all the way to the end, and at all points in between. *“And lo I will be with you always,”* Christ says, *“even to the end of the age.”*² Christ is leaning there on old, old wisdom from the psalms, which recognizes that there is never a time when the presence of God is not with us and close to us. *“O Lord, you have searched me and known me,”* the psalmist writes.

*“Where can I go from your spirit? Or where can I flee from your presence? If I ascend to heaven, you are there; if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there. If I take the wings of the morning and settle at the farthest limits of the sea, even there your hand shall lead me, and your right hand shall hold me fast.”*³

That kind of knowledge, that Christ is present with us at every moment, no matter how critical or how mundane, frees us to see life in a completely different way, because it makes every moment holy. This idea is captured in a poem by Ann Sexton called *“Welcome Morning”*:

*There is joy in all:
in the hair I brush each morning, in the Cannon towel, newly washed,
that I rub my body with each morning,
in the chapel of eggs I cook each morning,
in the outcry from the kettle that heats my coffee each morning,
in the spoon and the chair that cry “hello there, Anne” each morning,
in the godhead of the table that I set my silver, plate, cup upon each morning.*

² Matthew 28:20.

³ Psalm 139:7-10.

*All this is God, right here in my pea-green house each morning
and I mean, though often forget,
to give thanks,
to faint down by the kitchen table in a prayer of rejoicing
as the holy birds at the kitchen window
peck into their marriage of seeds.
So while I think of it, let me paint a thank-you on my palm
for this God, this laughter of the morning, lest it go unspoken.
The Joy that isn't shared, I've heard, dies young.⁴*

Because Christ is Alpha and Omega, and all points in between, we are able to experience the shared joy of being in communion with the loving presence and power of God.

Another comfort we take from this abiding presence of Christ is an assurance that the end of the world will not be about retribution. Some people say that it is, but when we look at the actions, the emotions, and the character of the Christ we encounter in scripture, we do not see the story of an angry tyrant. On the contrary, the consistent portrait of the Christ we meet in the Bible is of a Lord who loves us and is on our side... a Lord who sees faith as a journey of growth, not as a grading scale or scoreboard... a Lord who is more interested in reclaiming and renewing the world than in punishing the world. Faith in Jesus Christ is about finding steadfast love, enduring hope, and real joy in the here and now. The Savior we worship always leads with love, is always ready to offer grace, and is always willing to take pain that could or should be ours and bear it himself, so that we will not have to live in darkness, but instead abide in the light. The Reign of Christ is not about retribution. It is about love.

And that leads us to the final point I want to make about Christ as the Alpha and the Omega, and that is this: Christ does not and will not transform into some malevolent judge or heartless executioner at the end of time. With Christ, what we have seen and have experienced will always be what we get. The nature of Christ does not vary. The great pastor and theologian John Wesley said it this way. The beginning and end set the standard for the whole, he says. Those bookends, in his words, "style the whole thing." God as the Alpha and the Omega, Wesley concludes, "is always the same."⁵

Or, to put it another way, the Christ of the Revelation Era will be the same as the Christ of the Infancy Era. The Christ we meet in the manger will be the same Christ we meet at the end.

It's interesting to me that this passage we read in the first chapter of Revelation begins with a greeting of peace. "*Grace to you and peace from him who is and who was and who is to come,*" it says. Most of the people who would hear that greeting were not at peace. Under the iron fist of the Roman Empire, the only people enjoying peace were those in the favored and privileged classes of Rome. Very few of the early Christians were in that group. Most of them lived with spears pointed at them, with the risk of imprisonment or death always

⁴ Ann Sexton, "Welcome Morning," <https://www.graceguts.com/poems-by-others/welcome-morning>

⁵ <https://www.ccel.org/ccel/wesley/notes.i.xxviii.ii.html>

looming.

The same was true at the birth of Christ. The Christmas story is bathed in light, graced with the songs of angels, the faith of gentle shepherds, and the reverence of peaceful kings. But the world Christ was born into was hostile to the poor. The infant Christ, like the adult one, would be hunted by jealous leaders who wanted him dead.

At the beginning, at the end, and at all points in between, the mission of Christ is to bring light to a world that is mostly dark, gentleness to a world that worships might, and grace and love to a world that is much more comfortable with revenge and hate. The good news for us is that this story ends with victory, a victory that was, is, and will be accomplished by "*Jesus Christ, the faithful witness... the ruler of the kings of the earth... the Alpha and the Omega... who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty.*"

So, on this Christ the King Sunday, we can be assured and comforted that Christ reigns, so that even if it's the end of the world as we know it, we can feel fine. *Amen.*