

“Alpha and Omega”

21 November 2021: Christ the King Sunday

SUMC—Salado, TX 76571

Preaching Text: Revelation 1:4b-20

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“Jesus Christ is not valued at all until He is valued above all”—Augustine.

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Hear the day’s lesson:

4 John to the seven churches that are in Asia: Grace 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, 5 and 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, 6 and made us to be a kingdom, priests serving his God and Father, to him be glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen. 7 Look! 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).

On this last Sunday of the Christian year, we might prudently ask: “What About the End?” Addressing John’s Apocalypse, we naturally turn to issues of “the end.” After all, for most of us the end is frequently a key element of an experience. The conclusion of a movie or television drama is likely the most important aspect of the event. In fact, the end of films, plays, or books are as important for us in everyday life as the end of a semester is for a student—or the conclusion of a patient’s operation.

Revelation delivers many texts for Year C in Easter. And yet, mainline/old-line Christians consider Revelation a book to avoid at all costs. Other Christians, in opposition, fully embrace Revelation, nearly excluding many of the Bible's other sixty-five books. I suggest Revelation sums up the entire Bible. For although it is unusual that Revelation does not directly quote any other text of the Bible in its 404 verses, it just as remarkably echoes or alludes to 278 other scripture texts.

Revelation is an apocalypse. Thus, it is an "unveiling" or "disclosing." We use apocalypse as a description or genre as we use "parable" or "psalm." Revelation poses a vision which on one level foretells the future, but more honestly it presents a grasp of the past and the present. Revelation as apocalyptic literature tells of the struggle between good and evil, and Christ's ultimate victory. John writes in symbolic language, urging Christians to keep faith in times of persecution.

Our lesson's first theme reveals Jesus' three new messianic titles. Jesus is "the faithful witness,"—the one who by giving his life becomes a *martyr* (Greek = "witness")—both declaring and bringing to bear God's eternal reign. Without God's eternal reign, we would easily lose hope. Second of all, Jesus is "the firstborn from the dead." That is, Jesus is God's chosen, who by his resurrection and ascension establishes God's righteous new order. Last, Jesus' final messianic title in this triad is "the ruler of the kings of the earth." This claim for Jesus is difficult for modern Americans to grasp. We are too democratic to believe in monarchy. In addition, we wonder how Jesus can rule anything in 2021 or beyond when the political order seems to be fading. How can Jesus' rule when countries with many Christians engage in such ruthless political behavior? These messianic titles for Jesus (the faithful witness, the firstborn of the

dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth) help us not only understand Jesus. These titles also help us understand how God intends Jesus to function as messiah.

A key second theme is that the beginning of Revelation tells us what the rest of the book details: God realizes God's rule and will in Jesus Christ. After this note, the passage shifts rapidly into a doxology:

To him that loved us and freed us from our sins by his blood and made us a kingdom of priests be glory and dominion forever.

For those who take God's rule seriously, a fresh world of hope emerges. To those who have by their baptisms experienced this new order of grace, the apt response to this "faithful witness" is a hymn of praise, the first of many in Revelation. Some informed people suggest that Revelation is a first century worship book—something like our hymnal. Others say the book is about the just desserts of evil people. Other analysts say Revelation is a roadmap to the future. Some authorities say Revelation outlines for believers what comes next for those who are true disciples. Yet, I want to add one more voice and this is our third theme. More than anything, Revelation is a book of power—an ultimate kind of power.

There is a kind of power in this book that is different from the power of Egypt, Assyria, Babylon, Greece, or finally Rome. It is a power that God gives Christ's messenger John and to John's churches when they read or hear his letter testifying to God's glory. These churches are struggling, tempted, and experience an awfully hostile environment. Not only that but John's message to the churches—and to us—is that suffering for the sake of the gospel should not be a surprise. The entire New Testament is a steady witness to the conflict of Christians with all

other idols that claim our loyalty. I would lie if I told you my amusement when one of our soundest church members (a person I hold in high esteem) was “all worked up” because “they” are taking our churches away from us! What are we going to do about it? I said nothing. But I do think no one has to take the church away from us because we are all too willing to simply give the church away. Each time we decide for something other than helping build up the church and the believers in it, then we give a little piece of it away. People have asked me “do you think our children will have faith?” Today my question is this: “Will our faith have children?”

Revelation transfixes many people. Yet an irony remains. Revelation is speech by and for the oppressed, those suffering under the sword of Rome, not for a successful, affluent, or powerful church. Perhaps soon we will be lucky enough to find our faith as an oppressed minority. There, in our weakness, is the real power of faith.

Perhaps you remember the small portion of 2 Corinthians where Paul is candid about his afflictions, writing, “. . . but he [the Lord] said to me, ‘My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness.’ So, I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me. Therefore, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities for the sake of Christ; for whenever I am weak, then I am strong” (2 Corinthians 12:9-10). So, on this last week of the Christian year we have explored what this odd and marvelous last book of the Christian cannon has to say to us.

“What About the End?” was our original question. What this means on the last Sunday our Christian year is this: Despite all evidence to the contrary God rules and overrules God’s creation. We are not in charge and ultimately although we may feel surrounded by evil and

tragedy, eventually God will draw all things together and we will be God's people for eternity.

Human beings can exist in any circumstance as long as they recognize that within that circumstance there exists hope. God is our hope.

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