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Christ Church Exeter

An End is Something New

If I had to sum up my message this morning it would be this: what looks like the end is often God showing us something new. Something new about God. Something new about ourselves.

On the topic of endings: We have two calendars in the life of the church. The liturgical filled with Advents, Christmases, Epiphanies, Lents, Easters and Pentecost's – and the unofficial that we share with the wider public that begins after Memorial Day and ends on Labor Day. Before we slide into summer church hours next Sunday, we hear a perfect Bible passage for a day like today: From Revelation: "It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end."

Over the next three months our choir will take a much-needed break after many Sundays of offering their gift of song and praise. If we were to count the hours of dedication to the life of a parish community – being a member of our choir is right up there. We thank them.

When people ask me where they should start reading the Bible to learn more about God and faith, I will often advise against starting at the so-called beginning. Instead of Genesis, try a gospel. Luke is my favorite and filled with many parables. Get lost in the Psalms. Pick one of Paul's epistles – Ephesians perhaps (not Romans). Do not start at the end, I advise, with the book of Revelation – a book filled with great mystery and controversy. To say that it is dense and confusing would be an understatement. The book is filled with symbols and language that believers steeped in the Hebrew Scriptures would have understood in the first century. Readers today: no so much. It was written to and for Christians living through terrible days. The power of the Roman Empire was coming down upon them with suffering and persecution rife.

That fact alone makes it a leap for us – living in a majority Christian nation with the mightiest military power the world has ever seen. This letter was written to believers under siege to encourage them to hold fast against the evil Empire and wait for Christ to return to make things right.

Everyone needs something and someone to hold onto when life seems to be falling apart. When times are hard.

So, from Revelation we can hear: Hold onto your dignity. Hold onto your values. Hold onto your soul. You are not forgotten. We hear these words: "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.

God himself will be with them; he 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.” (Chapter 21)

Who is in the majority or minority – who is on the inside or on the outside – impacts how we see the world.

When bombs go off in churches in faraway places like Sri Lanka, Egypt, and Pakistan and northern Nigeria – places where Christians are in the minority and suffer ongoing persecution – we wonder what these words of hope, newness and perseverance might mean to them. At the same time, I believe we in the majority in this country can become more aware and sensitive of what it means to hold a minority faith. To live on the outside: to be a Muslim in Detroit, a Sikh in New Jersey or a Buddhist in Louisiana.

It should not surprise us that the early followers of Christ, Peter and Paul and the rest, grappled with this same basic question. Who was in and who was out?

As we hear today from Acts, Peter had to see a vision of non-kosher animals comes down from heaven in a sheet for his eyes to open – to find a new way of looking at the other – in his case a non-Jewish Gentile believer. His epiphany was no small matter for a Galilean fisherman turned leader of the new church: The Spirit told him to go... and not to make a distinction between them and us.

Far too often, we do make distinctions. Color of skin. Faith. Class. Language.

It seems true in many societies that when times are tough and people are scared, we often look to for someone to blame. The latest to arrive to our shores is a classic historical example. Benjamin Franklin was worried about all the Germans moving into his Pennsylvania, the Boston Brahmins were fearful of the Irish, many European Jews were turned away from our shores as Hitler was gaining power, and now, poverty-stricken and violence torn Central Americans are living through unimaginable ordeals. And lest we forget before the summer days get long and hazy – their brown children sleep on the floors of make-shift detention centers and we ask if that is the best we can do for our sisters and brothers, children of God?

Where is God in our world today? Where is Christ? What does our faith teach us? How do we live out the last and most important thing Jesus told his disciples on the night before he was betrayed: “I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.”

When under immense pressure, when we feel under seize or persecuted, the book of Revelation helps us imagine the way in which God lives and moves through our lives and history. What may look like the end can be in fact a new beginning to understand something about who we are and how it is that God desires us to live and breathe.

Many might say that we are living through tumultuous apocalyptic times – but the word apocalypse itself does not have to mean the end of the world as we know it, but rather that something of God is being shown.

God's will is being shown and revealed... the revelation. And we begin to imagine something different for our world and in our lives. Some new.

I return to the central arc of today's message: what looks like the end is often God showing us something new. Something new about God. Something new about ourselves.

Today we welcome some new or newish faces of folks who have found their way to us. When people walk through the doors of Christ Church, I hope that we they hear and experience is a community that both welcomes and challenges them. A place to belong to be sure, and a community that asks something of more of us.

We don't always do a good job at this. I don't always do a good job at this. We can always do better, for this is a not place to escape or hide from the problems, hardships and losses in life. But we can be a place to face and overcome them with God's help.

"I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. To the thirsty I will give water as a gift from the spring of the water of life." Revelation 21.

We are thirsty for something real. We want our lives to matter. And, as it turns out, we have been given and shown how to live and how to love. All has been revealed. Now what?