

Alpha and Omega

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Texts: Revelation 21: 1-6

At the beginning of New Year, we are met with profound theological imagination about what happens at the end of time. I started off this sermon already feeling a bit lost in time. If you are like me, you are still feeling a betwixt and between the end of the holidays and the start of the year. This past Wednesday, New Year's Day, felt more like a Sunday. On Thursday, I kept thinking it was Monday. Last night the Pats played *on a Saturday*, in a wild card game no less and lost. This is all profoundly confusing, and talk about the end of an era, at least. Today, is Sunday, I think! Indeed, it is the last of Christmastide and yet the first of the New Year!

To add to the jumble of it all, there's been all the requisite looking back and looking forward. There were the year- and decade-in-reviews. And let's be honest, it was not a great year to look back on. The humorist Dave Barry nailed it last week when he said: "As New Year's Eve approaches, the nation pauses to look back on 2019 and throws up a little bit in its national mouth." Amen! With the retrospection comes introspection, surely, and prospection, too. Barry continues. "But then the nation looks forward to 2020, and it feels faint stirrings of hope in its national heart." Frankly, that seems optimistic. Given recent headlines, a more honest assessment would be that we are overcome by a sense of wariness if not outright fear of what is happening in our country and world. A distressing rise in violence against Jews and expressions of antisemitism. A President who has proven himself volatile and reckless elevating an already precarious situation in Iran with reports of dire, global consequence for his lone ranger actions. Horrific flooding in Indonesia and cataclysmic wildfires raging in Australia. The Times reported a sign that is hanging outside a bookstore in the fire-ravaged New South Wales: "Post-Apocalyptic Fiction has been moved to Current Affairs." Funny! Not Funny!

As we turn the page to a new year and new decade, some of us may well be ready to hang up our escapist party hats and be longing for a return to routines and to business as usual yet even those are somehow less than settling. Returning to the same old same old? How's that been working for us? More deeply, how on earth can we find our moral and spiritual bearings amidst all the saber-rattling doom and climate crisis gloom?

Enter the Book of Revelation which starts by reminding us that how on *earth* may the wrong question. Believe me, Revelation is not my usual go-to when I'm looking for grounding and orientation! A bizarre ride to the far side, yes? Wild, sometimes scary end times imagery? But if we can let ourselves go a little cosmic for a moment, we may find that our text meets us right where we are and offers some helpful orientation amidst all the surrounding, chaos, confusion and fear.

For starters, Revelations speaks of time *not* as we know it but of time as God knows it. In John of Patmos's vision here, the historical time that we count on our watches touches eternal time. We are on God's watch now and God says, "It is done." As in history as we know is done! As in Times Square countdowns and celebrations are done! God then says, "I am the Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end." Quoting from my trusty 5 volume Anchor Bible Dictionary: "As the Alpha, God is creator of all things; everything has its beginning in God." Hold that thought! Meanwhile, "To refer to God as the Omega is to affirm that all of creation find its meaning and purpose in God, for God will bring the

universe to its final consummation. What God commenced “in the beginning,” God will direct to its conclusion.” This theology raises huge questions for us, living as we are somewhere between the A and Z. If God is there to guide the start and finish, why isn’t God using some of that directorial discretion in the here and now? But let’s not give up on John or God just yet! According to this vision, at the end of time as know it and as we have been given agency to direct it, God enters in and says, “I’m doing a new thing!” There’s a next chapter yet to unfold! This is far more than a matter of wondering about whether Brady will sign a new contract with the Patriots or whoever else! Will there be a next chapter for him, who knows? But for God, there is always a new thing, a new beginning. Revelation tells us that God, being God, is creating an entire new heaven and a new earth! The sea of chaos, the one that was at the beginning out of which this old creation was created will be no more! The heavens that have been held separate the living and the dead will be no more! Death and crying and mourning will be no more! For God is the Alpha and Omega of being itself and there is yet a new heaven and a new earth that awaits. How can we ground ourselves in such a lofty and seemingly detached vision?

For one thing, we can start at the beginning and by asking about the Alpha! Some of you will remember the poetry exercise, called Where I’m From, that we did after church this fall. Like a mad-lib, we filled in the blanks on a template that told where we were from by suggesting things like foods in our kitchens, the smells in our neighborhoods, or trees outside the windows of our homes when we were young, and the people that surrounded us. I’m from “Saturday morning pancakes, from Al and Linda, from the backyard willow tree in Wayne NJ, from Dutch, English and German ancestry. You get the idea. In this case, we need to extend these so-called origin stories, way back in time, and take it back to the very beginning, as in the story of creation itself for that is where we are from, too. We remember the stories of our baptism, and that of Jesus, as we will do tomorrow night at our Epiphany service. We need to remember these stories of our truest sense of identity, as a beloved child of God!

The great preacher Barbara Brown Taylor puts it this way “For as long as there have been humans, there have been stories like these—stories of our beginnings, of our ancestors, that help explain who we are Call them our Alpha stories, since they are the first ones many of us learned. This makes perfect sense, since they are stories about things that have *already happened* to us. Whether they happened in our religious imaginations or in our real lives on earth, they are part of our past—a part that cannot be changed now, for good or ill, which gives the past a kind of solidity that the future does not have.” Amen! I’m feeling better already. Blessedly, most of us have a pretty good idea about our alpha stories and about where we are from!

But all this begs the questions. What about our Omega stories, that is, as Taylor writes, “our destination stories—the ones that tell us who we are by telling us *where we are going*? These stories may not have the same solidity that our Alpha stories do—at least not at first—because they have not happened yet, which means that no one can tell us which one is “right.” All we can do is choose one from the wide variety of end-time stories that we are being offered almost every day—and then hope that we have chosen wisely.”

At what can feel like the end of an era at least, at the beginning of a new year and decade, these questions are worth pondering. First, what is your alpha story? Where are you from? And what kind of anchor can we find there. And then ask, what is your omega story? As in, what is your purpose and destination? To what end are you living in there here and now! Locating ourselves inside of our own alpha and omega and God’s can be profoundly powerful and indeed orienting!

Will we choose to the story that involves a regurgitation of past patterns that have failed, the one that ends with us all in a proverbial handbasket or will we set our sights on a different vision guided by different values. With God as our Omega, our feet are pointed in one direction! When we know our true purpose, we know we are, quoting Taylor once more, heading “toward full communion with God and neighbor; away from evil and despair; toward justice and peace among all people, away from anything that might persuade you to respect the dignity of some human beings but not all.” Understanding our values and commitments as people of faith, we can find our bearings in any setting. What’s more, as we remember our way into an unknown future, we can remember and repent of where we’ve erred and lost the plot.

Remembering where we are from means remembering the good and bad. As Christians, it means remembering and taking stock our millennia old patterns of anti-Semitism and so resisting them all the more! As Americans, it means remembering the dire consequences of prior times when we have unadvisedly flexed our military prowess or of when we have been complicit with a capitalist machine that chooses profits over human dignity and equality. As citizens of our aching planet, it means remembering and repenting of our addiction to carbon and changing the focus of our reliance. The Time reported on the initial response to the wildfires: “Communities have rallied together, knowing that they will have to depend on one another. They are holding neighborhood meetings to come up with contingency plans in case the fires get worse and they need to head to safer ground. They are sharing food and supplies and taking others into their homes.” The tragedy there is seemingly insurmountable yet are these not the signs of a people heading towards a new beginning?

Today, we live betwixt and between the A and Z, but we stand in the midst of a story that has God at our beginning and our end, that knows God as our refuge and strength! As Christians, our omega stories - the stories of our individual ends, the end of our current earthly empires, the ends even of cities as we knew them, and this planet as we have known it, each and every one of these ends leads to a new beginning! In Revelation, it’s a brand new heaven and a new earth a new and ever beloved city of God where we can share and find unity in the alpha and omega stories that we hold in common, where no one can tell anyone to go back to where you are from because we all know we share the same origin and destination!

It’s not on us alone to bring this old earth to a heaven, vision. God is drawing near, as God did at Creation and at Christmas. God’s holy city comes down to us, not the other way around. “The arc of heaven is bending towards this earth.” Verse 21: And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God. God is ever meeting us where we are with the promise of new beginnings.

Friends, like Tom Brady, we can feel like free agents now, living in a time when hope is scarce and waning! The Book of Revelation provides a tool of theological imagination, a resource that we can choose to use and rely on now. If we can’t quite believe in the truth and reality of such a transcendent and lofty promise, can we at least hear the invitation to live our lives in hope *as if* these things are true and *as if* they are already underway! Can we orient our lives with God as our true beginning and true end? As we wonder about returning our same old routines, hear these words from the theologian Frederick Beuchner: “If you think you are seeing the same show all over again seven times a week, you are crazy! Every morning you wake up to something that in all eternity never was before and never will be again. And the you that wakes up was never before and will never be the same again either.” When you wake up tomorrow, try locating yourself in God’s time and orienting yourself into this story of God’s unfolding, trusting that God is doing a new thing, always, and inviting us to take part. Amidst

whatever Senate trials and planetary tribulations to come this year, remember where you are from and where you are going, held in the abiding eternal love of God, our alpha and Omega! For God is ever inviting us into a new story, a new way to be in community, to a new table set in as we set our feet on the path towards and find just a taste that heavenly banquet that is yet to come! Know your alpha story and step into the Omega story that God is creating even now! Amen.



