

Hold the Railing Down the Stairs

November 21, 2021 at First Church in Cambridge, Congregational, UCC

Rev. Lexi Boudreaux

Texts: Revelation 1: 4b-8

As Dr. Sharon R. Fennema prayed as a way to process the verdict of the trial of Kyle Rittenhouse this past week, let us pray now:

“Christ, who is our only Sovereign, we are longing for your kin-dom to come. Find us in our pessimism and lead us in the ways of accountability that transforms, that our hope may be renewed by your vision of just mercy. To the one who loves us and frees us, we lift up our prayers, that our anger might become sacred fire, cleansing and renewing the earth; that our despair might become hopeful vision, guiding us toward freedom; and that our confidence might become humble curiosity, bringing your promised reign ever closer to us. Amen.”

As I’m sure many of us are in our workplaces or at school, staff here at First Church are navigating being back in the church building during the week on a hybrid schedule. One of my favorite things about spending a couple of days in the physical office during the week is hearing the children from the preschool that shares our space, Newtowne. The life they bring to our hallways, doorways, and space outside my office door puts a smile on my face most days. Lately, the teachers have been singing a song to guide the children down tricky stairways and ramps in our building and it goes like this: “Hold the railing, hold the railing, hold the railing down the stairs, hold the railing, hold the railing, hold the railing down the stairs.” These words echo at regular intervals through the hallways, helping

these young hearts and toes get to a place that is more stable for them to frolic and play, to learn and to grow.

And lately, these lyrics have prompted me to acknowledge that this is indeed a time and a season to remind ourselves to hold the railing as we transition from the end of one liturgical year to another, as we come out of this week even. Especially as we constantly navigate the steep staircases of this ongoing pandemic, racial and economic injustice, the polarization of our country, the brokenness of our systems, our personal grief and regrets. As we hold the feeling of the ongoingness of it all. It's enough to make you feel like you're tumbling down the stairs instead of walking. It's enough to make you want to stay under the covers, so if that was you this morning know you are loved beyond measure. Hold yourself gently. The world is pulling out all the stops lately. Sometimes, it can be hard to see a way through. and that's where stories of apocalypse come in handy.

On the last day of our liturgical year we are reading from the last book of the Bible, Revelation. A book that falls under the genre of apocalyptic narrative. The word apocalypse most often is associated with the end of the world, but the closest meaning of the word in Greek is a disclosure, an unveiling, or a revealing of some kind of consequential knowledge. For John of Patmos, the author of this text, he sees something other than the Roman Empire's oppression and rule of peace for only those who submit to the power of Caesar. He takes the framework of empire and invites his readers to see something different. He introduces the possibility to see the world in a new way, a way that speaks against the terror of the empire and leads his reader into a reality where God is at the center.

And while the use of the same hierarchical structure of kingship and empire to uplift God and Jesus in John's reimagining of the world is unsettling (at least to me it is), I think what we can learn from this subversive re-orientation of the world doesn't necessitate us picking up that same framework. Perhaps even, it calls us to see the ways in which, in our past and present, we ourselves have been on the side of the empire. We learn from John's vision that another kind of world is possible, not only possible, but that it is here among us, if we dare to seek it. Apocalypse narratives are most often associated with the end of things: the last day of the world, the end-times, the destruction of life as we know it, which is partly true, but it isn't the whole story. Every ending necessitates something new beginning. Every last day of the liturgical year makes way for the first day of a new one and the beginning of the season of Advent. Endings and beginnings are tied up in one another. God is bound up in both as well. The only thing spoken directly by God in this vision is this: "I am the Alpha and the Omega." These are the first and last letters of the Greek alphabet, implying that God is the beginning and the end of all things.

William Loader, in a commentary from Australia says about this portion of Revelation we read this morning, "In the beginning: God; in the end: God; in the midst of life: God. These are less statements about time and place as they are statements of hope and trust." I would add that these are statements about a God that is closer to us than our very breath. A God who is with us in our experiences of this life and does not sit on a throne far away from us. There is no beginning or end when it comes to God's presence, for God is the beginning and the end, present in all things and at all times. God's hope and trust in the plausibility of a world born out of Jesus' kin-dom is available to us if we just reach out and hold that railing.

Sometimes it feels as if there is too much in this world that tells us that holding onto faith in God's kin-dom in this world is impractical. The violence is too much, the injustices continue, our trans siblings continue to be killed, the cases continue to mount, the answers don't seem to come when we need them.

When there is too much for us to hold, our tradition and our faith point our weary hearts towards the possibility of something else. They lift the veil of fear and uncertainty and make room for a kin-ship of love and joy, something that we can imagine and create together in community. In the covenant we share together we continue to have the collective will to seek out crevices of hope in despairing places, tastes of God's way in our day to day. When we listen to the encouraging song of Love to hold the railing down the stairs, we find hope and trust in our God who is both Alpha and Omega, to see the world as Jesus saw it. We find a way into our imaginations.

A Scottish poet John Davidson speaks of the power of imagination in times of despair. He says in his poem entitled Imagination,

There is a dish to hold the sea,
A brazier to contain the sun,
A compass for the galaxy,
A voice to wake the dead and done!

That minister of ministers,
Imagination, gathers up
The undiscovered Universe,
Like jewels in a jasper cup.

Its flame can mingle north and south;

Its accent with the thunder strive;
The ruddy sentence of its mouth
Can make the ancient dead alive.

The mart of power, the fount of will,
The form and mold of every star,
The source and bound of good and ill,
The key of all the things that are,

Imagination, new and strange
In every age, can turn the year;
Can shift the poles and lightly change
The mood of humans, the world's career.

Imagination, new and strange in every age, can turn the year. On this pledge Sunday, on this last Sunday of our church year, on this Thanksgiving Sunday, we have come together to pledge our gifts in service of the work of this church for the next year of our ministry together. By participating in giving collectively, whether we give of our time or financial resources, or both, we are making a statement about what kind of world we believe is possible. A world where love has the final word. A world where there is healing, justice, and liberation for all of God's children. We are imagining together what we can contribute to this project of hope and trust in what God is doing and who God is being in this world. That commitment to hope we are making together continually is a piece of the kingdom Jesus spoke about in his life and ministry. And that is something to be thankful for. Amen.