

Sermon for Trinity, Bend Christ the King, 2018

"I am the Alpha and the Omega," says the Lord God, who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty."

Several weeks ago, a reader got up to read, announcing a reading from the "Book of Revolution." That wasn't a mistake, that was an opportunity—an opportunity to hear the Book of Revelation as it was meant to be heard. This book is the announcement of a revolution, an announcement of a world turned upside down, upside down from a culture soaked in war, famine and blood into a world of peace and justice.

I've come to love the book of Revelation as an adult. As a child, I'm sorry to report that the book, with the best of intentions, was sometimes hung over my head. The fearsome punishments, dragons and lakes of fire, and demon angels everywhere, was truly terrifying to a childish mind. The problem, I discovered as an adult, was that those scenes were not intended to scare children into obedience; instead those visions were meant to caution and discipline oppressors, tyrants and dictators. Those brilliant, colorful scenes were meant to challenge and warn those who menace this world.

Since this is a Sunday with a particular focus on the "truth," let me share a couple of truths about the book of "Revolution." Many people have been brought up believing that religion is one thing with its own sphere, and economics and politics are other things and inhabit their own spheres. As you will hear, nothing could be further from the author, John of Patmos' mind. God is not the proper name of an apolitical observer, maybe a writer for the New York Times or the Wall Street Journal, but the Creator of everything, the creator who literally embraces the Alpha and the Omega of our world. What does this God want for us? That we be joined into a community of justice and love. As far as John is concerned those two words, justice and love, can't be separated in his book.

Here's another truth that may surprise you—this entire vision was rooted in one Sabbath morning worship experience. I suspect I know what a few of you are thinking—you've had some kind of visions during my sermons too! We do know something about John's vision—while elements of the vision are shaped in technicolor imagery meant to convey powerful truths, the vision itself is grounded in the real world. His vision is concrete and tangible, and when we get to the warnings for dictators and tyrants, John will be excruciatingly truthful and factual.

John begins by addressing the seven churches in Asia, seven churches that existed in his time, and in some instances, perhaps addressing people he knew

either in person or by reputation. John means for you to understand that while aspects of his vision are born of intense visions, in the main this revolutionary message is anchored to this world, this here and now, this history and people, now and in the future.

You may be wondering who's leading this revolution? John tells us this morning that it's Jesus Christ, the firstborn of the dead, the King of kings. Jesus became king of kings, not by being as tyrannical and dictatorial as the others, threatening death. Instead, Jesus became king by defeating our great enemy, death, with love. John writes, "To him who loves us and freed us ...and made us to be a kingdom, priests serving his God and Father, to him be glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen." That word "kingdom" is by no means a throwaway term; the word speaks of both a kingdom as a concept and a kingdom as fact. In short, Jesus came to make us, all of us, all of whom have gone before and those are yet to come, a kingdom of peace and justice.

Again, for all those who think the book of "revolution" is just figurative language, hear this from chapter 18. John has just seen a vision of the fall of Rome and now the aftermath: "... the merchants of the earth weep and mourn for [the empire], since no one buys their cargo anymore, cargo of gold, silver, jewels and pearls, fine linen, purple, silk and scarlet, all kinds of scented wood, all articles of ivory, all articles of costly wood, bronze, iron, and marble, cinnamon, spice, incense, myrrh, frankincense, wine, olive oil, choice flour and wheat, cattle and sheep, horses and chariots," and saving this for a last horrifying summary, John writes, and "slaves—and human lives....The fruit for which your soul longed has gone from you [tyrants], and all your dainties and your splendor are lost to you, never to be found again!"

John, who was a civil servant, apparently knew very well what was included on ship manifests; if historians ever wanted to know what the Roman empire traded, there's the list of costly cargo and including, horrifically, human lives. Here's the point, especially of the God of the Alpha and Omega: we may want to compartmentalize our faith. We may have been led to think faith is for Sunday morning, and commerce and politics for the other six days. But John doesn't think this. He believes the God of justice and love is the God of all seven days.

You may be rightly wondering if I haven't invited the camel into the tent; surely there are those who have sought to use religion to leverage and oppress God's people. That happened in John's time and continues to happen through history. People have tried to threaten the world with imagery from the book of Revelation just as I was warned as a child. But there's a test you can use to tell if the vision is cast for injustice or for good, a vision meant for destruction or for

love. If the outcome of the vision reads like the vision John writes, then the vision comes out good and right. John wrote, "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...And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them as their God; they will be his peoples, and 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..." That's the message, the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and ending, for which we were made a kingdom of justice and love. That's the great revolution. Death has been defeated in Christ. Tyrants, dictators and oppressors may threaten and rant, but God means for us to live and live forever.

Many Sundays, our scripture readers conclude their reading with a line that only occurs in the book of Revelation. I offer that line as a gift of life to you this morning; in the words of John of Patmos: "Hear what the Spirit is saying to the church." Amen.

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