

Endings & Beginnings

Revelation 20:11-21:1-5

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We've skipped over a lot of material from the Book of Revelation this Advent season, mainly because I'm not preaching a series on the book itself. The church staff was drawn to Revelation during worship planning because of our theme "Be Not Afraid." Revelation is full of encouragement to persevere in the midst of dangerous and uncertain times. It is also filled with imagery of light in the darkness.

We've skipped over all the battle scenes during which the forces of good and evil array against one another in cosmic battle over the meaning of history and the purpose of human existence. These are worthy passages that we will explore sometime in a future sermon series.

Included is one version of Christ's birth. Everyone knows Luke 2: "And behold a decree went out from Caesar Augustus . . ." or the visit of the Magi in Matthew's gospel. Most people don't realize that there is a third story about the birth of Jesus, found in Revelation 12 in which there is a dragon, a war in heaven, and a woman with eagle wings who can fly. (I've never found a nativity set that includes those things.)

Clearly, Revelation 12 is not a literal, historical rendition of what happened between Mary, Joseph, and the Baby Jesus. Instead its images are metaphors that reveal how the way of life incarnated by Jesus is a direct challenge to the powers-that-be, embodied here by the Roman Empire.

The Book of Revelation was written to encourage the early Christians to persevere in the midst of tribulation. Instead of succumbing to their fears, they were to hold out hope, believing that in the end they would be victorious.

The passage I read this morning is a glimpse of the end, when all creation gathers together to celebrate the victory of God over the forces of death. It is a story about the end of the world, but you will notice that it is also a beginning—"See, I am making all things new."

And so the Sunday before Christmas, in the midst of this service filled with beautiful carols, I want us to think about the end of the world. I guess I have a sick sense of humor.

But what is this "end-of-the-world?"

Brian McLaren wrote,

Yes, this is the *end* of the world—but not *end* in the sense of the discontinuation of our story; rather, it is the *end* in the sense of the goal toward which we move. Yes, it is the end of the world *as we know it*—a world dominated by suicidal machinery driven by a suicidal . . . story. But is the beginning of the world *as God desires it*, a new story, a new chapter, a new way.

It may be the end of the world as we know it, but we contribute to this new world being born. Eugene Boring (not a great last name for a Bible scholar and author) wrote that this new world being born is “a world in which all that is human is taken up and transformed.” Think about that. All of our work, all our effort, all our struggles, have meant something, as together they contribute to God’s work of renewing creation. Boring explained it this way:

Every ditch dug, every brick laid, every vote cast, every committee decision that has contributed to the decency of human life is preserved, and built into the eternal city [envisioned here at the end of Revelation].

But that isn’t even the most powerful thing Dr. Boring wrote about this vision in Revelation. Get ready, for here is the most amazing thing. Boring wrote, “at the End we meet not an event but a Person. . . . God does not merely bring the End, God *is* the End.”

The “end-of-the-world” is not an event, but an encounter with God. The God who is making all things new. The God who is defeating Death and Hell. The God who loves us like a mother and a father. The God who will make a home for us and wipe away all our tears. The God who has told us again and again, “Be not afraid.”

Yes, then, I’m ready for that ending. Ready for that new beginning.

I am drawn, once again, to those beautiful words that close C. S. Lewis’ final Narnia story *The Last Battle*:

[The] things that began to happen after that were so great and beautiful that I cannot write them down. And for us this is the end of all the stories, and we can most truly say that they all lived happily ever after. But for them it was only the beginning of the real story. All their life in this world and all their adventures in Narnia had only been the cover and the title page: now at last they were beginning Chapter One of the Great Story, which no one on earth has read: which goes on for ever: in which every chapter is better than the one before.