

A STORY WE DON'T TELL ENOUGH

Revelation 1:4-8

*A sermon given by Larry R. Hayward on Sunday, April 28, 2019, the Second Sunday of Easter,
at Westminster Presbyterian Church in Alexandria, Virginia.*

John to the seven churches that are in Asia: Grace to you and peace from him who is and who was and who is to come, and from the seven spirits who are before his throne, and from Jesus Christ, the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth. To him who loves us and freed us from our sins by his blood, and made us to be a kingdom, priests serving his God and Father, to him be glory and dominion for ever and ever. Amen.

*Look! He is coming with the clouds;
every eye will see him,
even those who pierced him;
and on his account all the tribes of the earth will wail.*

So it is to be. Amen. 'I am the Alpha and the Omega', says the Lord God, who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty.

I.

Last week on Easter Sunday, I referred to words of a prayer that I say at virtually every funeral or memorial service I lead. The prayer reads, in part:

We thank Thee that deep in the human heart is an unquenchable trust that life does not end with death; that the Father, who made us, will care for us beyond the bounds of vision, even as He has cared for us in this earthly world....our hope has been so wondrously confirmed in the life and words and resurrection of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.¹

In the sermon, I then said:

Of all the promises I make as a pastor this is the one of which I am most sure: "Life does not end with death."

I remember as a teenager hearing a seemingly ancient but vibrant Presbyterian minister say that the surest aspect of his faith was his belief that when he died, he would be reunited with the grandmother and grandfather in rural Kentucky who took him and his twin brother into their home when their parents were killed and who reared them to become, respectively, a minister and physician. "I know I will see their faces again," he said. "I know it."

I have that same sense of trust.

II.

But there is another aspect of the resurrection of Christ that we don't talk about as often, an aspect that is part of a larger story we don't tell enough. This aspect is the redemption not just of *our own lives as individuals*, but the redemption of *the whole of the created order*. Just as there is a "life to come" for individuals, so also there is a "life to come" for all of creation.

¹ *The Book of Common Worship* (Philadelphia: 1946), 211

This story of the redemption of creation – which is of course *not separate* from the redemption of individuals – is told, *from Genesis to Revelation*, through five major acts that unfold in scenes across time as we *know* it and across eternity at which we can only *surmise*.

- The story opens in *Genesis* – “In the beginning” – when in a both divine- and human-seeming way, God “began to create the heavens and the earth”² and as part of that movement created *us* and placed *us* in the midst of creation “to till it and keep it.”³
- The story moves quickly into the next scene – only three short chapters later – to what we in Christianity call *the Fall* – the Fall of the human race – that instance in which we as humans first expressed our desire to exceed the rather minimal boundaries with which God had surrounded us, an exceeding that occurred when we tasted from the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, the one tree from which we were forbidden to taste.
- This leads to the third scene – in Genesis 12 – where God chooses *the people of Israel*, plucking them from among the peoples of the world scattered and confused after the disastrous attempt to reach heaven through the Tower of Babel. God chooses *one* people that God might work with them to receive and pass on God’s blessing to *all* the peoples of the world. This election on the part of God thus begins God’s long history – covering centuries and narrated across the entire remainder of the Bible – of seeking to restore the human race to all it was created to be. Two millennia into this effort – at least as humans measure time – God personally takes up residence in the world in the person of Jesus Christ; being conceived in a way no other human was said to be conceived; being born into the simple beauty of an obscure village manger; then growing in wisdom and stature to teach first as an adolescent then as an adult the life-giving law God gave Moses, parables like those of the best of the prophets who preceded him, and wisdom like the sages whose penchant for proverb and aphorism he sometimes adopted. In addition, in the way Christ lived, he welcomed and healed people of all nations, races, and stations in life; ran afoul of authorities political and religious whose interests converged in having him silenced if not eliminated; was ultimately put to death publicly by those authorities; and three days later overcomes death through resurrection into the world in a transformed appearance in which he was not immediately recognizable to those who knew him best but in which he was clearly the same person who had been put to death and was now triumphant over death, a triumph we celebrated last Sunday and celebrate this entire season.
- After this lengthy and crucial third scene, while we may long for an intermission, the fourth scene follows immediately, in which *we* take *our* place as part of the *continuation* of God’s people – guided and empowered by God’s presence as Holy Spirit – seeking as our forbearers sought to pass the blessing on to all people and nations by bearing *particular* witness throughout God’s created world to the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.
- And the fifth scene is one whose *fulfillment* we await in both promise and hope, much as we await the end of a novel, a play, an opera, a movie; a scene in which we expect God’s final action in and through the return of Christ of whose time, date, and form we have only hints and images primarily from the Book of Revelation, but whose purpose lies in bringing the human race and all of the created order to its final culmination and redemption.

² This is an alternative translation of Genesis 1:1 in the New Revised Standard Version.

³ Genesis 2:15, not dissimilar from the role of humanity depicted in Genesis 1:28, in which God commands the human creature: “Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth.”

As a major fulcrum and turning point in this five-scene story:

- The resurrection of Christ is not only a promise to us as *individuals*, but also a promise to us as a *human race* and as a *created order*. Again, as the funeral prayer says: “*Our hope has been so wondrously confirmed in the life and words and resurrection of...Jesus Christ.*”
- The promise of redemption is thus *both* personal and communal; individual and corporate; solitary and global.
- The promise of redemption is as *personal* to God as God’s numbering of the hairs on our head,⁴ and as *transcendent* as “a new heaven and a new earth”⁵ God promises to bring.
- It is *personal* in that we are both solitary individuals noticed by a God whose “eye is on the sparrow”⁶; while at the same time we are a miniscule part of a universe – like grains of sand or stars in the sky⁷ – whose boundaries far exceed our ability to know or measure and yet which – like us – longs for redemption and healing, what the apostle Paul describes as “the whole creation groaning.”⁸

This story comes to a grand conclusion in the final book of the Bible – The Revelation of Saint John. Like many great works of literature – sacred and secular – this book has been received as confusing and daunting. It has been misinterpreted, marshalled for political or theological purposes, misused as a club for fear and judgment, reduced in beauty and power when its figurative symbols, numbers, and images are transferred into literal points in time or places on a map, and when its poetry is converted into prose, proposition, or prediction. Perhaps most of all in many churches – especially those like ours – the Book of Revelation has suffered a long and slow neglect, like family lore tucked away in the attic because no one feels equipped to speak about its more troubling aspects, especially when the family is gathered for Thanksgiving Dinner and football. Better to just eat turkey and let sleeping books lie.

Yet most of all this aforementioned Book of Revelation bears witness to the *nature of God’s promised redemption for all of creation*, and consequently, when we avoid it, we deny ourselves the resources at the very least of a *beautiful expression of a welcome promise*, as well as the *encouragement to action that promise issues*.

Listen for example to the way this final book of the Bible bears witness to the *individual* and *personal* nature of our “life that does not end in death.”

God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes; and there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain; for the former things are passed away.

Who among us has not derived some measure of comfort when – even upon the death of someone we dearly love – we have been able to say “at least she’s now at peace”? “Neither sorrow, nor crying...nor any more pain.”

⁴ Matthew 12:7; Luke 10:37.

⁵ Revelation 21:1.

⁶ Matthew 6:26; Psalm 84:3. The African-American spiritual was written in 1905 by Civilla D. Martin and Charles H. Gabriel. Available at <https://elev8.hellobeautiful.com/341485/behind-the-song-his-eye-is-on-the-sparrow/>.

⁷ Genesis 22:17.

⁸ Romans 8:22 RSV.

Listen as well to the *communal* nature of the promise, found in this same section of Revelation:

And I saw a new heaven and a new earth: for the first heaven and the first earth were passed away; and there was no more sea. And I John saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down from God out of heaven, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a great voice out of heaven saying, Behold, the tabernacle of God is with [people], and He will dwell with them, and they shall be His people, and God Himself shall be with them, and be their God...⁹

III.

Of this communal section – at the conclusion of Revelation and therefore of the Bible – the late Presbyterian scholar Brevard Childs wrote¹⁰:

Revelation *pronounces* and *enacts* ultimate divine *victory* so as to *energize* and *encourage* each generation of God's people.

The new heavens and new earth do not simply replace the old one, as though God starts all over. Rather, the world, God's good creation, is *redeemed, not replaced*. God does not make "all *new things*" but "*all things new*."

- This *world*, the object of the Creator's love, is ultimately *important* to God.¹¹
- The kingdom of God in this world is *not, however, a matter of human achievement*, but rather the end-of-time *action of God*.
- The *New Jerusalem* is not built, Babel-like,¹² from earth, but rather comes from *God's side* as the fulfillment of the divine promise and demonstration of the divine faithfulness.

In addition, Childs points out that the fulfillment of God's purposes lies in a *city*.

- In the biblical story, human history *starts in a garden*, and the first city is built by a murderer as a result of human sin.¹³
- The conclusion of this story in Revelation does not nullify human history and return to the Garden of Eden; instead, *it brings the garden into the city*.¹⁴
- A *city represents human community, life together...not individualistic but communal*.
- The *church*, the community of faith, is the *anticipation of this new city*.

⁹ Revelation 21:1-4.

¹⁰ The following material comes from Brevard S. Childs, *The New Testament as Canon: An Introduction* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), 497-517.

¹¹ Genesis 1:1; John 3:16.

¹² Genesis 11.

¹³ Genesis 3:1-4:7.

¹⁴ Genesis 22:1-2.

According to Childs, the final picture is true to the paradoxically *dual* emphasis throughout the Book of Revelation.

- There are pictures of *exclusion*: No sinner and nothing sinful; and pictures of transformation and ultimate *inclusion*.
- The city is not for the “faithful few” but is inconceivably *large*.¹⁵
- The *kings and nations* of the earth will be there.¹⁶
- The nations are not only destroyed,¹⁷ but finally are also *healed, walk* by God’s light, and bring their *gifts to God*.¹⁸
- The city has *walls and gates* that function as the boundary markers to separate insiders from outsiders, but the gates are *never closed*.¹⁹

IV.

The scripture we read earlier contains opening words from this book that closes out the Bible:

Grace to you and peace from him who is and who was and who is to come... ‘I am the Alpha and the Omega’, says the Lord God, who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty.

From the time we were children, we have loved to sing: “He’s got the whole world in his hands, he’s got the whole wide world in his hands.” The Book of Revelation promises “He’s got the whole created order in his hands.....”

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Many years ago, during the height of the nuclear freeze movement, in a seminar setting, I heard Professor Walter Brueggemann say (and I paraphrase):

I do not believe the world will be destroyed in a nuclear holocaust, as able and foolish as we might be to bring that about. I believe God is ultimately committed to his creation. But if we take that for granted, we defame the nature of God’s commitment. Rather, God’s promise to redeem the entire of creation should motivate us all the more to “till and keep the garden” in which God has placed us that it be as akin as possible to the redeemed creation God will ultimately bring.

I do not know if Walter Brueggemann was a supporter of the nuclear freeze movement or not. But what struck me was the rock-solid but not Pollyannaish *confidence* he expressed in God’s ultimate commitment to creation. Because God has promised to *redeem* all of creation, just as God redeems us individually, how can we respond in any way other than to strive to make the *earthly* city in which we live and for which we remain responsible as nearly akin to the heavenly city to come as we can?

- No more crying
- No more tears
- No more sorrow

¹⁵ Revelation 21:16.

¹⁶ Revelation 21:24-26.

¹⁷ Revelation 19:15; 20:7-9.

¹⁸ Revelation 20:24-26; 22:2.

¹⁹ Revelation 21:12-14, 21, 25.

- No more pain
- No more loneliness
- No more warfare
- No more greed
- No more tyranny
- No more authoritarianism
- No more hunger
- No more homelessness
- No more disease.

God is Alpha and Omega,
Beginning and end.

Why on earth shouldn't we
Rejoice in this,
Take comfort in this,
And act
Out of the power, hope, and courage
This provides?

Why in all of creation wouldn't we act
"to till and keep" the garden?

Amen.