

May 15, 2022 Rev. Katheryn McGinnis

Let us pray.

Guide us into your word, God our helper, that we might hear the message you intend for us today. Amen.

Our scripture for today comes from the book of Revelation, Chapter 21, verses 1-6. Listen now for the word of the lord.

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. ² And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her spouse. ³ And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them; ⁴ he will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away." ⁵ And the one who was seated on the throne said, "See, I am making all things new." Also he said, "Write this, for these words are trustworthy and true." ⁶ Then he said to me, "It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. To the thirsty I will give water as a gift from the spring of the water of life.

The word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.**

What happens next? Wouldn't you love to have the answer to that question? What happens next?

I lost my job. What happens next? I lost my beloved. What happens next? My wages were frozen for the fourth year in a row. What happens next? Another shooting in the name of white supremacy. What next? 13 more dead. What next? The war in Ukraine continues. What next? Covid is still among us. What next? Our nation's leaders are stuck, stagnant in a stalemate. What next? Our environment is groaning in travail with the warmest temperature ever recorded at the polar ice cap. What next? Waters rising. Earth shaking. Mountains exploding. People dying. What next?

We would love the answer to the question, what next. We long for the answer to the question, what next? Sometimes we are desperate for the answer to the question, what happens next?

Our text this morning won't give us the answers. We don't get answers to our questions about our political leaders, the violent loss of lives, the pandemic, loved ones, or environment.

We won't get specific answers we want, but what we do get is better than specifics, even better than what we hope for.

The book of Revelation is a strange book. It is different than the rest of the New Testament. It isn't a story like the gospels. It isn't direct communication with particular churches in particular cities like Paul's letters. Revelation is different.

That's because Revelation isn't just a set of words on a page. It is a collection of pictures in our heads and sounds ringing in our ears.

Revelation shapes the Christian imagination the scholars tell us. Music and art have been inspired by the Revelation of John, the seer. Novels and poetry and film have been inspired by Revelation. Revelation inspires the imagination more than a logical train of thought.

Revelation is a type of literature that is called “apocalypse.” Apocalypse is best described as a first-person narrative where the author tells revelatory visions about the future, or about the heavenly world, or both.” Jewish apocalypses, specifically, often reflect a sharp distinction between the present evil age and the imminent future age of blessing.”

All of this is to say that while Revelation’s use of symbolism and imagery might seem weird or strange to us, it is actually quite common in its own type of literature. It was used strategically to represent conflict between a righteous minority and a wicked majority, or between Israel and its Hostile foreign neighbors.

Reading Revelation through this lens for our lives today it a gift. A gift that proves fruitful and helps us to embrace Revelation for what it is....a message of eschatological hope.

What is eschatology, you might ask? In its simplest terms, it’s a theology of the end times. It’s a theology that aims to answer the questions of what happens next? These questions of time and structures of time, and what happens within time, are at the very heart of Revelation.

In today’s reading when God is described as the Alpha and Omega – those two terms refer to the first and last letter of the Greek Alphabet. So, God is both the beginning and the end. But chapter 21 verse 6 isn’t the only time God is described in this alpha and omega language.

God does so as well in Chapter 1, verse 8. “I am the Alpha and the Omega, says the Lord God. But, verse 8 also adds “says the Lord God, who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty.”

This addition and the use of Alpha and Omega in and of itself challenge how we see and typically understand time in relation to God.

A good example that more clearly illustrates how we view time comes from the popular contemporary writer Anne Lamott. In her book, *Bird by Bird*, she writes about a time growing up when her brother procrastinated on a big school report about birds. Procrastinated so much that it was now due the very next day. In all of his stress and anxiety about the project, about how to even begin writing about all these different birds, the task just seemed too large in such a short amount of time. Their father stopped him in his spiraling, and simply told him “bird by bird, buddy, just take it bird by bird”.

Instead of becoming overwhelmed by the size of the whole project, her father tells her brother that he must simply focus on one part at a time. One bird at a time.

In this way, we break our lives down into more manageable segments when the entirety of our lives becomes too overwhelming.

Day by day, bird by bird, we measure time in beginnings and endings. Each day starts and ends. Each Sunday service has a beginning and ending.

In every way we live and order our lives we do so with a beginning and ending – yet in Revelation God challenges this. God says “I am the alpha and omega. I am the beginning and the end.”

God is not restrained by time. No. God is, God was, and God is to come. In God, our human restraints on time are liberated. In God we find our beginning and our end.

But what does that mean for our everyday life? If God is our beginning and ending, what happens next? Here and now each and every day?

Perhaps if God IS our beginning and ending it means that our conceptions of time and the importance we place on them do not matter for God.

In life, during stressful times, I often find myself comparing my linear timeline to others in terms of the milestones I have or have not reached in comparison to others. The places and adventures others have had that I have not. The path other people are on seems so much better than mine.

But just as we each are created uniquely in the image of God, our life, made of beginnings and endings, are uniquely our own, rooted in the love of God. They cannot be compared. They each bring both beauty and hardship.

Next month is Pride month - a month where we joyously celebrate, affirm, and give thanks for all who identify as LGBTQ, for all the ways the LGBTQ community has enriched our lives, our communities, our country, our world, and our faith.

And a time where we acknowledge and lament the all the ways society has historically has told us, and in many ways continues to tell us, that diverse sexuality, diverse gender identity, and authentic love, are wrong.

In all the ways the LGBTQ community has opened our eyes to the beautiful ways diversity adds to the fullness of life, time is one of them.

Our narrow conception of time, if we really think about it, limits the fullness of life, and marginalizes any who are different.

Our traditional conception of time, for example, a life where you grow up, go to college, get married to a man if you're a woman, and a woman if you're a man, get a 9 to 5 job, have two kids, etc...while fulfilling and inherently good for some, its ultimate nature is one of exclusion.

When its formula for life is applied to us all, it limits the creative possibilities of God's intention for our individual lives. But the LGBTQ community has shown us that specific life is not for everyone. Diverse understanding of gender, of sexuality - they open our eyes and challenge the narrative of what milestones are necessary for a good life. A good timeline.

If we view time through an LGBTQ lens, it opens inclusive possibilities where one's life is not measure by heteronormative, patriarchal milestones alone. In this view of time, one's timeline rejoices in the ambitions and creative dreams and diversity that make us each unique and created good.

Revelation seems to echo this. Chapter 21 describes a new heaven and a new earth – but without throwing away the old one. As Joseph Mangina in his commentary on Revelation writes, “The vision in Rev. 21 opens with a great divine act of re-creation. As only God can create, callings suns and stars, water and land into existence at the beginning, so only God can restore, bringing into being a new world in which his will for his creatures is fully realized.”

God's vision and hope for us is not a faraway time when we leave this world behind and begin anew. No! God restores our world to life and dwells among us. God takes a beginning and end to the world into God's own self.

And from it restoration and an entirely new concept of eschatological hope is born. A creation that is, was, and will be. A creation that is not bound to one heteronormative timeline. A creation that embraces and uplifts endless possibilities unified in their diversity.

To be honest, I don't know how to honor this. I don't know how to live in God's time. Where what is, what was, and what will be all seem to be at one, and beginnings and endings seem to be no more.

I don't think it's really possible for me. But perhaps I can love in God's time.

Loving in God's time means loving beyond the constraints of time. It means that when we tell each other "I love you" it means I strive to love you how God loves you - for all that you are, all that you have been, and all that you have yet to become.

It means looking into someone's eyes realizing that all you see presently standing before you is not all that they are, and holding that close. It means loving not unconditionally but embracing all conditions as part of that love.

Right after my first year of seminary I went through an anxious time. The reality of adjusting to life in New Jersey, plus in seminary, plus grad level academics and expectations caught up to me. And with the speed which the year went by - when it all came to end and summer break began, I found myself overwhelmed with all that had happened and feeling lost with how to cope.

A friend came to visit me during this time, and I kept apologizing over and over to her for being so anxious, so not my normal self. She told me not to apologize - that she was happy to see any version of me.

In that moment, she loved me beyond the restraints of time. She loved me in recognition that all that I am was not just the anxious me in front of her.

SO what happens next? What will happen tomorrow or the next day? I don't know. With all the unanswered questions that still loom around us, I still can't give you an answer. Revelations doesn't give us an answer.

But I can tell you that God is, and always will be, our beginning and our ending. Not a beginning that has passed, and an ending that is yet to come, but a beginning and an ending always present, always within us.

And this frees us not to live bird by bird, but instead to love. To love our lives, each other, for all that they are.

And in that liberation of a constructed linear timeline, God meets each and every one of us there and in love speaks to you, to me, to us all. I am your alpha and omega. Your beginning and your end.

The only beginning and ending that matters. Thanks be to God. Amen.