

I AM ALPHA AND OMEGA

Revelation 22: 12-17

Fifth in a series of six sermons

Fifth Sunday in Lent

“Palm/Passion” Sunday

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First Federated Church

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A little boy had been too sick to go to church on Palm Sunday, but when his brother and sister got home, he noticed that they were carrying palm branches. “Where’d you get those?” he asked.

“Oh,” they replied, “we got them at church.”

“Church?” he asked. “What did you use them for at church?”

The boy’s siblings explained that there had been a big parade to start the worship service that morning, and people had waved the palm branches in the air as Jesus came down the aisle.

“Jesus came down the aisle? Oh, great!” he exclaimed. “The one Sunday I’m sick and that the day Jesus decides to finally show up!”

When I was a kid, outside of fundamentalist churches, the ones that we derisively referred to as “holy rollers”, worship occurred only one day a week; Sunday. The only truly “special” Sundays were today—Palm Sunday—and Easter. On one Sunday we waved palm branches, sang “Hosannas” and were told of Jesus triumphal entry into Jerusalem. It was the same story, year after year. The next Sunday Easter lilies would fill the chancel and every nook and cranny. Their sweet fragrance filled the sanctuary. Women and girls wore new “Easter” dresses while dads and boys would sport a new “Easter” tie or even a suit. People I’d never seen before were in church. Sometimes the church would add an extra worship service or two to accommodate the influx of worshippers. My dad didn’t particularly like going to church on Easter. It was too crowded for his taste.

As I reflect back on those Palm Sunday and Easter worship services I realize that it was quite possible for Christians to go from what I call “glory to glory;” from the triumphal entry into Jerusalem to the triumphal Resurrection. There was nothing “messy.” It seemed like we could go from victory to victory, from mountain top to mountain top.

As I grew older this bothered me because instinctively I *knew* that this was not how Life really is. We live in a broken world. I know that the world is broken because through the Reading Buddy program I was reminded of the scourge of homelessness in our community. I was told that in some of our schools a third to half of the students live out of a paper bag and are not sure when they leave school where they will sleep that. At a recent Trewyn honor roll breakfast I met a 7th grader who had moved ten times in his short school career before he landed in a home operated by Catholic Social services. That institution has been the healthiest and most stable home that he has known!

I know that we live in a broken world because parents should not out live their children, but sometimes they do. I am reminded that we live in a broken world every

time I watch the Jerry Lewis Telethon for Muscular Dystrophy, sit beside the bed of someone who is dying by inches or hold someone who is consumed by grief. I know that we live in a broken world every time I worry about losing a few pounds knowing full well that someone else in this community or halfway around the world is worrying about getting enough to feed their family, let alone themselves. The truth of the matter is that we spend an awful lot of time in the valleys between mountain tops.

Our reading from the book of Revelation today was written in such a valley-time. Please note that the book is not called “Revelations” but “The Revelation to John.” There was only *one* revelation not a series of revelations. In other words, the writer took a long time to get his point across. We will look at this “revelation” but in order to more easily understand it, we must have some sense of the context in which it was written.

The Book of Revelation was written during a time of severe persecution of the Church. Scholars debate whether the letter was written before or after the fall of the Jerusalem Temple in 70 a.d. There is evidence suggesting that the epistle was written in two parts—one before and one after the destruction of the Temple.

For at least a generation the fledging Christian community, which was simply known as “the Way,” was largely protected by the umbrella of Judaism. In the eyes of Rome, Christianity was another unfathomable sect of Judaism not unlike the Pharisees, the Sadducees and the Essenes, to name only a few.

The earliest Christians were Jews who believed that the messiah was the son of a Jewish carpenter. The first Christians followed the Law of Moses and worshipped in the Temple on the Sabbath. On the first day of the week, Sunday, they would either early or late into small faith communities to celebrate the Resurrection of their Lord and to care for one another. This worked out well, as I said, for nearly a generation, but then something happened to knock over the apple cart. That something was the Gentiles—or more specifically, Gentile Christians.

The Christian community hotly debated whether or not someone had to be circumcised in order to be a Christian. Circumcision was a deal breaker for Gentiles, so a compromise was struck. Circumcision was not required but certain dietary laws were to be observed.

This compromised opened the faith to the Gentile world and it exploded throughout the Roman Empire. But as often happens with the law of unintended consequences, something unforeseen happened. The two faith communities split. I’m not sure who cast the first stone. Knowing human nature, I suspect that there were plenty of stones to go around!

On their own the Christian community became a convenient scapegoat for Rome when things went bad. Periodic persecutions were not uncommon.

It was in such a time of dire straits that John of Patmos wrote an open letter of encouragement to the Seven churches of Asia. Drawing largely on the rich apocalyptic images of Old Testament prophets like Ezekiel and Daniel, John set out to strengthen faltering knees and weak hearts.

In his vision he wrote,

*I am the Alpha and Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end...
It is I, Jesus, who sent my angel to you with this testimony for the churches.
(22:13,16)*

“Alpha and Omega” are the revelation. *Alpha and Omega* are the first and last letters of the Greek alphabet. It was the writer’s way of saying that no matter how things may appear, appearances *can* be deceiving. No matter what the evidence is to the contrary, God’s will cannot be thwarted.

*This is my Father's world, the old hymn reminds us.
O let me ne'er forget
that though the wrong seems oft so strong,
God is the ruler yet.
This is my Father's world:
why should my heart be sad?
The Lord is King; let the heavens ring!
God reigns; let the earth be glad!*

Shortly after World War Two on the cellar walls of a home in Cologne, Germany, a place where Jews had hidden from the Nazis during the time of the Holocaust, someone wrote these words.

I believe in the sun even when it is not shining,
And I believe in love even when there’s no one there.
I believe in God even when he is silent,
I believe through any trial there is always a way.
But sometimes in this suffering and hopeless despair,
My heart cries for shelter, to know someone’s there.
But a voice rises within me saying
“Hold on my child, I’ll give you strength,
I’ll give you hope; just stay a little while.
May there someday be sunshine,
May there some day be happiness,
May there someday be peace.

Does God cause the bad things that I mentioned earlier? Some would say “yes,” I really don’t think so. I am very cautious to attribute to God what we would call criminal if any of us did it. I think that God grieves with us; that God hurts with us; that God cries with us.

I am reminded of the story of Cain and Able in Genesis when Cain rose up and killed his brother Able. God comes to Cain and asks, “Where is your brother Able?” Cain replies, “How should I know? Am I my brother’s keeper?” Well, that was really the wrong thing to say because the short answer is “Yes. Yes, you are your brother’s keeper, otherwise I wouldn’t have asked you.” The LORD then says to Cain “What have you done? Your brother’s blood is crying out to me from the ground?”

The Deists believed that God created the world but then left it to spin on its own. To this way of thinking, God is like an absent landlord. But the author of Revelation didn’t see God as being absent, at all. Instead he saw God as this great Presence who is intimately involved in this world.

If, as the first epistle of John says, God is love, then I think that it is this spirit—the spirit of God—that opens our eyes to see that we have more in common with one another than we may realize.

In writing on love that reflects the love of God for us, the Apostle Paul wrote:

*Love is patient; love is kind.
Love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude.
It does not insist on its own way;
it is not irritable or resentful;
it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth.
It bears all things,
believes all things,
hopes all things,
endures all things. (I Corinthians 13: 4-7)*

*God is our refuge and our strength, the Psalmist sang;
a very present help in time of trouble.
Therefore we will not be afraid,
though the earth should change,
though the mountains shake in the heart of the sea;
though its waters roar and foam,
though the mountains tremble with its tumult.
The LORD of hosts is with us;
the God of Jacob is our refuge (46: 1-3,11)*

I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end; no matter where Life may take us, no matter what happens to us in Life, no matter what happens to our loved ones whom we have entrusted in God's care, no matter what—God is with us. God is with us in the deepest valley and in the darkest night of the soul. God is with us when we feel lost and alone. God is with us even when we do not feel or know or recognize the Almighty's Presence around us.

The gospel of John has one of the most fascinating stories of Easter. Turn to page 107 in the pew Bible, if you wish. In the 20th chapter of that gospel Mary Magdalene goes to the tomb of Jesus and sees that it is empty. She stands weeping outside of the tomb and then she bends over to look into the tomb. She sees two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had been lying, one at the head and the other at the feet. They said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping?" She said to them, "They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him."

After she had said this she heard someone behind her. The stranger asks, "Woman, why are you weeping? Mistaking him for the gardener she pleads, "Sir, if you have taken him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away." And then the supposed Stranger speaks her name. "Mary." And she recognized him.

Sometimes like Mary Magdalene our tears keep us from seeing the Presence of God in our midst.

I wish that we could live from glory to glory. I wish that we could go from the triumphal entry of Palm Sunday immediately to the glory of Easter's Resurrection. I

wish that we could, but I know that we can't. You know it to. You really do. We must all go through the valley that separates the one glory from the other. We must all go through that valley in one form or another; the valley of being misunderstood or misrepresented; the valley of betrayal; the valley of injustice and persecution.

Unlike the child that I began this morning's sermon with, whether we see him or not, whether we are ill or well, we didn't miss Jesus. The Risen Lord is with us; from beginning to end.

I am the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last and everything in between. To God be the glory. Amen.