

“Both/And: Endings and Beginnings: Going Forward as One”

Revelation 22:12-14, 16-17, 20-21; John 17:20-26

Sixth Sunday of Easter

Message for May 29, 2022

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As we mark the seventh Sunday of Easter, we are in the in-between time - between the Ascension of the Lord and the coming of the Spirit at Pentecost. At this liminal point, the Bible Wisdom teachings point to what has been and what is to come. Since Easter, we've been doing a bit of time travel as we've explored texts that tell us of the appearances of the resurrected Christ among the disciples, and yet over the past few weeks we have returned to the scene of the last supper, just before Jesus was taken away and crucified. We are reminded in these moments of the many things that Jesus said and did, what he attempted to teach and the many ways that he healed those around him.

In our readings from both the Book of Revelation and the Gospel of John today, we hear invitations of love. We are shown what it means to live a rich and full spiritual life. We witness that if we live in this way, we can create heaven here on earth.

We hear language and take in images that illustrate a range of emotions, experiences and realities as Jesus tells us, “I am coming soon.” (Yet the concept of “soon” is likely much different for God than it is for us!) “I am the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end.” He prays to God, “The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.”

In this in-between time, when we know what has happened for Jesus and the disciples, and what is to come, each of us continues to move through our days, in this time and place, much like the disciples: caught between waiting and pain. To be human is to witness and experience suffering and pain. We lose our bearings and lose hope. The text from Revelation reminds us that Jesus is not far away, but rather, walking alongside us. The presence of Jesus is woven into the foundation of our lives – he is the “root... the bright morning star.” The water of life is a gift offered to everyone. These elemental aspects of being are present to us in all times

and places, reminding us of the proximity of the Divine, even when we are feeling separated from it.

These passages remind us of our interconnection and the relationship with the Triune God. Certainly, the Triune nature of God is another opportunity to think beyond dualism, beyond “either/or.” As we attempt to understand the trinity, I came across a writing that I thought beautifully articulates the concept and want to share with you what the Lutheran minister and public theologian, Nadia Bolz-Weber lifts up for us as we “...dwell and wrestle with the sacred mystery of that which is one, being multiple, and the multiple, one. God is three in One...what some call the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit; Yahweh, Jesus, and Sophia; the divine parent, liberator, and advocate; the creator, redeemer, and sustainer. God is these three identities, and yet one identity. These three...being so deeply connected and interwoven so as to be indivisible. I in you and you in me and us in them. This is the nature of who God is – relational, but in a particularly intimate way – a way marked by deep connection and knowing and love.”

The first reading comes from the Book of Revelation. Of course, this is credited to the Apostle John, and is placed at the end of the New Testament, at the end of the Bible. And now, we’re in the final chapter of the final book. It’s rather like a benediction – it’s a lovely, hopeful chapter...the kind of passage that, if it were the end of a movie, would be shot at sunset with a gauzy filter and soaring music. This part of Revelation is all about the resolution to the drama and struggle of the rest of the book, and it’s about the peace that John sees coming at the culmination of the cosmic struggle.

On this particular Sunday, when so many of us are weighed down by what is happening around us and what we are reading in the headlines: climate change, pandemic, hate crimes, mass shootings and unrelenting violence - this passage speaks directly to us. Certainly, John was living in the midst of terror and tyranny himself. Imagine him sitting in a prison colony writing his apocalypse. He was probably animated by fear, anger, hope, piety, revelations from God, and an abiding sense of needing to comfort others. The bulk of the apocalypse provides that kind of comfort in many ways, some of which is quite terrifying. There are calamities and catastrophes, and the cosmos is undone bit by bit.

All of that was probably meant to be comforting to his fellow Christians; in the end, he was saying, God will win out. And here at the end, comfort comes in a different way: in a scene of restful triumph, where all is well and all is right. I have to imagine that John sighed and smiled as he wrote this chapter, feeling that he had accomplished what he wanted to accomplish. “Let anyone who wishes take the water of life as a gift. The one who testifies to these things says, ‘Surely I am coming soon.’”

If the Revelation reading was benedictory, then so is this passage from John. On his last night with the disciples, Jesus shares a meal with them, washes their feet, gives them a new commandment, and answers question after question about the fact that he is about to leave them (John 13-16). And after all that, Jesus begins to pray.

Here, Jesus is looking forward, in almost-wistful kinds of ways, to the future of his disciples, but also of others who are yet to come. What Jesus wants for those people—his followers present and future—is unity. “That they may all be one.” The meaning and nature of that oneness is left a little bit vague, but we can get the sense. Jesus wants his followers to be unified. This has, of course, in no way been the case.

It's interesting that Jesus' prayer is so different from the other Gospels. In the readings of Matthew, Mark, and Luke, when Jesus prays before his arrest, he is in Gethsemane, and he prays alone. Even his most trusted disciples are sitting apart from him, and rather than listening, praying, or keeping watch, they fall asleep.

In John's Gospel, the scene is different. Jesus and the disciples have not yet traveled to the garden where Jesus will be met by Judas and betrayed. In John, when Jesus prays, the disciples are within earshot. Throughout the earlier part of the evening Jesus had given them as much information as he could about what was about to happen and how he would provide for them in the future. He shifts now into praying for them. This is a special moment – Jesus isn't preaching or teaching or healing in this moment – he is in intimate conversation with God. We have the opportunity to overhear this prayer, a prayer in which Jesus is discussing the likes of us and our little community of faith.

This week as I've been reflecting on this reading, I've thought about Jesus' emphasis on unity as he faced his own death. Was being “one” a challenge

for that community? Could Jesus tell that it would be an ongoing problem? It's hard to know for sure, but whatever the reason for it appearing here, it's clear that Christians have not done a very good job of it.

It's not really about oneness of opinion, is it? What makes Jesus and God "one," and what might make humans "one," is "glory," love, and knowledge. Glory of the kind shared by Jesus and God, and the love of God, and the knowledge of God's name, are the foundations for unity. Jesus pointedly doesn't suggest that unity will come through unanimity of doctrine; it will come through sharing in God through Jesus. That's a *really* interesting thing to think about.

If one-ness comes through glory, love, and knowledge, and if one-ness was what Jesus prayed for, how then do we seek it? How do we come to possess this unity that Jesus wanted? Is that a job for individuals? For governments? For the church? For God? For another day?