

The Saints of the Middle of the Alphabet
Revelation 21:1-6 and John 13:31-35
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“I am the Alpha and the Omega,” God says to John, “the beginning and the end.” The beginning and the end of everything, of the world, of the discussion. But sometimes I wonder if we think that God is only the beginning and the end, and not everything in the middle. Sometime we act as if, having been given a beginning, we are free agents until our end, and that our time, talent, and treasure is our own, to do with as we please. But no, we must proclaim, when God speaks of being the Alpha and the Omega, it also means everything in-between. Nevertheless, there are 24 letters in the Greek alphabet, and God has claimed only two of them for the divine use: Alpha, the first, and Omega, the last. That leaves 22 letters for the rest of us. But here’s an interesting fact about those twenty-two letters. No matter how you arrange them, they only spell one word. And that word is “love,” not only because the Apostle Paul has used a lot of letters in First Corinthians to tell us that, “faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love,” but also because Jesus said to his disciples, “Love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another.” And when we consider just how thoroughly Jesus has loved us, it will take all of those other twenty-two letters to do the job. And so, if God is the Alpha and the Omega, let me suggest that we are the saints of

the middle of the alphabet who are called to love from beginning to end, as Jesus has loved us.

Maybe if it takes twenty-two letters it is because if there is a word in the Christian vocabulary more stripped of meaning in the centuries between when Christ spoke it, and when we are considering it, I'm not sure what it is. The old saying goes, "Love is a many splendored thing," and that is surely true, but it is also a "thing understood in a great many ways." The word love is used to talk about our feelings in relationships, from family to romance to lust. It is used to signify that we *really* like something; I love cheesecake, for example. It can be used to express our admiration for ideas, incapable of reciprocation, as in "I love my country." Perhaps we owe the variety of its usage to the Greek language itself which has three words that are commonly translated into English as "love," but which are not as identical to one another as our one word "love" might suggest. Yes, love is an overused word and under-practiced behavior, despite being commended to us by the very author of love, Jesus himself. But since he has made it a subject of such great value, it is important for us to dig through the rubble to find what is really useful to live out his command.

We'll not do that tonight by going back over the difference between the New Testament Greek words of eros, filios, and agape, but rather by visiting the future as it was described to John of Patmos in the final chapters of the book of Revelation. I want to do that because it is very easy to get bogged down by

definitions and expressions of love and never get around to the living out of it, and that, I think, is the heart of what Jesus was sharing with his disciples that night. You see, the night on which he gave that new commandment was the night on which one of them would betray him, one of the many who said, with great loyalty, “Surely not I, Lord.” To be sure, loyalty is an expression of love, but love must go farther than that, into the kind of action that washes feet, and carries a cross, and proclaims good news. So what does the coming of the new heaven and new earth tell us about loving one another? I’ll tell, I’ll tell you. But before I do, let me just say that the reason we look to the book of Revelation for our clues is because this vision lays out for us God’s priorities, the basis for God’s idea of love, lest we confuse our ideas of love with God’s. Our priorities are so often to hoard love rather than give it away, protect it rather than promote it, expect it rather than project it. But in John’s vision is the antithesis of all that. And so that is where we must begin. And that vision is also somewhere in between the alpha of Christ’s first coming, and the omega of his final coming, an age in which we too find ourselves called to be faithful. Jesus is no longer here to take us by the hand, and so we need some other resources, and this vision is a good one.

The vision John of Patmos records, the one that we call the book of Revelation, was given in a time of empire running amuck. The virtues and the vices of the Roman Empire are well documented, and Christians were not exempt from either. The Gospel spread quickly through the Roman Empire because its

roads were good, but the Church suffered mightily as it appeared to be a threat to the very order that produced those roads. All religions were tolerated, including Christianity, as long as none tried to usurp the claim the Emperor made as the Son of God. And so, Christians found themselves on the wrong end of a system that did as it pleased to anyone it pleased, usually at a high price to those who could least afford it. But you couldn't really talk about it, not without getting into even more trouble, and so God provided a way to make a contrast between the life and love Jesus brought to the world, and the death and destruction the empire brought to the world. And so the vision, Code Name: Babylon, was given. Babylon, you may remember, was that ancient city in what is now modern-day Iraq, the city from which came the armies that ended the kingdom of Judah nearly five hundred years before the time of Jesus, and sent God's people into exile. And since it had played such a prominent role in the memory of God's people, it served as the perfect metaphor for the current competitor to God's kingdom, and it allowed the church some cover to proclaim God's victory over all such competitors without having to name any of them. And described in the chapters immediately preceding what we have read tonight is the fall of Babylon, and all the horrors associated with it.

"Fallen, fallen is Babylon the great...Alas, alas, the great city, Babylon, the mighty city. For in one hour, your judgment has come." And so, the old, worn out creation with its center of that old, wicked city, is replaced by the new, glorious creation, and it wondrous, holy city: "Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth...And I saw

the holy city, the new Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband.”

And so, our first clue about how to love between the Alpha and the Omega is that it must be concerned with overcoming the death and despair peddled by any empire, any institution, any church, any family, any self that pretends to compete with God’s vision for its human community. God is the beginning and end of all things, but not everyone acknowledges that, not everyone acts like its true. Most of the time we don’t! And so we must be ever watchful of ourselves and of those groups of which we are a part for when we do as empires do: when we treat people as it pleases us to treat them, rather than how Christ would treat them, how Christ loves them; when we exact a price in a relationship that is too high, when we demand too much from someone who cannot possibly fulfill our expectations. I remember one Sunday during Seminary when I was a guest preacher at a local church. And after I had given the sermon and sat down, the elders of the church took over to celebrate Communion. And as they marched down the aisle to the front of the church to begin serving, the old woman next to me who was helping to lead the service leaned over and whispered none too quietly in my ears, “Just look at ‘em, the little Napoleons.” In her none too gracious expression of disgust, she showed that she recognized the emperor in others, but not in herself. It is just as hard to confront the tyrant in ourselves as it is the tyrant in the palace.

So, the New Jerusalem supplants the old Babylon, life replaces death, justice prevails over oppression, all great stuff, but just how does that work? What does it mean for you and me and the rest of the saints of the middle of the alphabet? How do we do that? How do we love? Well, we love in the ways God shows love coming down with that holy city. The first way is that we recognize that God isn't taking us anywhere, but rather that God is coming back to us. When it is all said and done, God redeems all creation, declares it very good once again, comes down from heaven to dwell with us, it says in the text, to dwell with us. Maybe you recognize that phrase from the beginning of the Gospel of John where it says that the Word, Jesus Christ, came to dwell with us, literally, to pitch his tent with us. Not to make a pit stop or a presentation, but to live side by side with us, to be our neighbor, our friend, our co-worker, our fellow sufferer and celebrant of life. God has, and God will again, make a home among us. And in the meantime, God calls us to live side by side amongst those same people. We love when we stop and to really, really get to know people, when we get past the superficial question and answer stage of "Hi, how are you? Oh, I'm fine, thanks, and you?", to a kind of concern which doesn't need to ask the question, because it sees the state of the life, the soul, of the other in their eyes. We love by being constant, slow to anger, and abiding in steadfast love. We love by being who God has made each one of us to be, instead of what others think we ought to be. We love by bringing casseroles to church dinners and grieving families. We love by showing our children and

grandchildren what love looks like in the relationships in their lives, how we treat each other as spouses and brothers and sisters ourselves. We love by opening ourselves to what others have to teach us, by being vulnerable, even by risking getting hurt when we put ourselves out there.

You see, being hurt is nothing new. It won't kill us. It might sting for a minute or it might have us down for a decade, but you know what? There is someone there to wipe every tear from our eyes, someone to remind us that death will be no more, that mourning and crying and pain will be no more, that the first things have passed away. Is it Jesus? No, it's not Jesus with a handkerchief. It's you and me, and other people who have learned how to love. Maybe the people who know best how to love are those who have experienced to the most pain and sorrow in their lives, and who have found the comfort described in our passage tonight offered by an unexpected other. Those who love are those who have experienced, one way or another, through one person or another, little by little, sorrow by sorrow, the one who sits on the throne and proclaims, "See, I am making all things new," because they have seen things become new in their own lives, and are a living testimony. The famed preacher David Buttrick makes this observation about the new Jerusalem: "Now, do you want to know a secret? *Making new; that's what's going on in the world; that's what's happening.* The Holy City is not future perfect -- it's present tense. (Check out the Greek verbs in the text!) *Now* the Holy City is descending. *Now* God is making things new. Right *now* God is wiping

tears and easing pain and overcoming the power of death in the world. *Now!*

There's nothing otherworldly about the vision; it's happening *Now* in the midst of our worn, torn, broken world. And with the eyes of faith, you can see it happening."

It is said that John, the disciple who first recorded Jesus' words, in his old age would remind those around him to love one another. When questioned why he told them this so very often, his reply would be, "Because it is what our Lord commanded. If it is all you do, then it is enough." God is the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end, and everything in between. But you and I are there in the middle of it all, loving, because it is what our Lord commanded. And if it is all we do, then it is enough, and God's vision is fulfilled, now and forever more. Amen.