



WESTMINSTER
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

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In the Midst

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Scripture contains several apocalyptic visions of how the universe operates and predicts our future events within our Judeo-Christian tradition, most notable is The Book of Revelation.

Presented as the final book in our Bible, it was written during a time when Rome persecuted the Christians and destroyed the Jerusalem Temple, and it includes frightening imagery of God's wrath, beasts from the sea, and dragons. Like most apocalyptic literature, it is not for the faint of heart. It disturbs us. And, yet such horrors do not hold the final word. The writer takes us through such violence before unfolding the hoped-for promise of faith's reward.

On this All Saints' Day, a day to acknowledge our grief and the absence of our beloved who have died, we try on this writer's lens of God's creation and redemption to see his vision of a time and place beyond the horizon of death, beyond suffering, and imagine the glorious destiny to which Christ leads us.

Before I read, please pray with me:

God, our lives are filled with mysteries: beauty surrounds us and love swells within our hearts. And we ache from tragedy and death. Why? As we lay bare our deepest anxiety, hold us gently. We pray you will fill these words with your spirit that we trust...and our lives become bold testaments to these promises. Amen.

Revelation 21:1-6

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 husband.

³ And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying,
“See, the home of God is among mortals.

God will dwell with them;
they will be God’s people,
and God will be with them;

⁴ God 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, “All is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end.

By jumping to the end of Revelation, we skipped over the nasty bits. Its six-headed monsters, anguished existence, and grotesque beings surpass whatever Hollywood could conceive in sci-fi films or depicted in *Game of Thrones*.

The imagery within Revelation stirs our engines of hate, fear, and love with the three basic elements all apocalypses contain – a journey, a final battle, and a new world order. Revelation’s plot line provokes us to see three things about how to live as Christians.

We are to be ready. We might become complacent in a comfortable life or presume what we’ve achieved in the past will guard us. This journey of a Christian compels us to be ready to respond when called to serve another and to know we will one day relinquish our life at a moment’s notice. Live without regret – forgive and seek reconciliation. Accept each day as a gift.

What we do today matters. The way we treat our neighbors and teach our children makes a difference and shapes how our journey ends. Actions have consequences and we are responsible for the consequences of our actions.

The writer of Revelation clearly believes in the promise of grace for those who stumbled and strive towards. Although not a part of today’s reading, for those who ignore or reject the call to love God and neighbor, this writer predicts their just reward.

Lastly, the journey is not easy. Everyone’s life in some deep or persistent way demands we confront what we’d rather avoid. Is there anyone who hasn’t said at some time, “life is unfair”? And while we endure such trial or trauma, faith

reminds us to hope, knowing that on the other side of the cross is an empty tomb.¹

Revelation ends with a new world order, a final battle when the home team wins. For those Christians struggling to stay alive 2,000 years ago, and for those today anxious about the future, receive this promise of hope. The world ends not in our triumph, but God's ultimate triumph. God seeks to dwell with us.

As the writer pleads, "write this, for these words are trustworthy and true." This truth brings penetrating comfort to those of us with tears still streaming down our faces.

We know stories of those whose lives could have been swallowed in tragedy but instead were somehow able to marshal onward by being ready each day, doing what mattered, and persevering even when life was hard.

Thirty years ago, theologian and professor, Jerry Sittser, his wife, their four young children, and his mother took a field trip to a Native American reservation near their home in Spokane, WA.

After the children learned to dance and play with other children their age, they enjoyed a dinner with tribal leaders, opened themselves to a different culture, and listened to their indigenous story of tragedy and renewal.

¹ Terry C. Muck, "Everyday Apocalyptic," preached at Faith Presbyterian Church, Austin, TX, March 28, 1993, and included in *The Fifth Sunday of Easter, Interpretation*, by Tom Ulrich, 1994.

Ironically, at this dinner they heard from tribal leaders about the ravages of alcohol addiction among members of the tribe. “Ironically” in that on their drive home, Sittser’s vehicle was hit head on by a drunk driver. Three generations of his family died that night: his mother, wife, and youngest daughter. Sittser and three of his children survived.

Thirty years later, he continues to carry this grief and as a theologian writes and speaks of how he made it through the days and years.

His late wife was a professional musician, and they found a common love in singing hymns – that mysterious mixture of faith entwined with melody that makes its way into our hearts. Early in their marriage, before children, when they had to make do with only a few pennies, they spent a vacation memorizing fifty hymns.

Without his wife and trying to parent alone, he sang those hymns to his kids as his way of pouring her memory into their foundations. It was as if she were giving their young souls the words of hope that might sustain them. He sang to his children and now, he sings to all his grandchildren. Same hymns. Same practice.

Sittser has tended his grief in an intimate circle of men since that tragic day, and more broadly with others in his writing and teaching.

He learned that you do not compare the magnitude of one person's loss against another. Regardless of how many years you were married or your child's age at the time of death, one person's grief cannot be rank ordered against another's. Not just death, we cannot compare the other losses we experience – job, physical impairment, divorce, economic hardship – as more or less than what another person endures. Sittser has observed, though, for some people whose landscape of life is narrow or limited, even a small loss may become gigantic and crippling.

Those with a narrow landscape may have little reverence for God and God's promises. Or they imagine God pulling the strings of heaven. Or their circle of relationships remains very confined.

On the other end, people who live with an expansive landscape and whose losses seemed catastrophic, were actually able to integrate the loss, not to deny it but to find a way to live in the midst of it.

When I read this, in the context of our scripture lesson, I immediately connected his description of an expansive landscape within God as the Alpha and Omega and trusting.

Those with an expansive Alpha and Omega view trust that God chose to roll up God's sleeves and get involved, coming into our world, not to pull strings. God stepped into the story as a human being who became himself a victim of that same suffering and brokenness. And will come again.

Those with an expansive landscape, an Alpha and Omega view, includes all of creation, you and me, grandmas and spouses, children, six-headed monsters, and leviathans, from the beginning to the end. An end when death will be no more. Mourning and crying and pain will be no more.

Even if we cannot wrap our heads around such an expanse, merely trying to live our lives one day at a time in this vastness, by holding on to the promise that we individually are loved by God, who will come to dwell with us, keeps us going.

I wonder if Sittser sang “*Our God Our Help in Ages Past*, our hope for years to come” to his kids. Or maybe *Love Divine, All Loves Excelling*, or *God of the Sparrow*, or *The King of Love my Shepherd Is*.

He sang the songs from the ancients who kept the faith and sends this faith into his future generations.

In his humility, he would not say he sang to expand his children’s landscape of faith thirty years ago, he was just taking it day by day.

Our journey is not easy. What we do each day matters. We need to be ready.

On All Saints’ Day, we remember those who died in the faith. By “saint” we do not mean individuals who were perfect, but

people who were complex, who stumbled, who tried, and by their baptism into Christ's body, will be redeemed by Christ. We remember them, and we come face to face with the knowledge that one day our lives will end. Am I ready? I'm not. I'm not for your days nor my days to end, but they will.

What will we do, today, to ensure those we love will know? What will we give, today, to establish a safer, brighter, more hopeful world?

In the midst of death, God promises new life.

In the midst of life, faith calls us to stare death in the face, without flinching.

Fully experience each day as within God's care. Love and forgive, win and lose, work and play, rest and rejoice. Swing out wide, for this life does not last forever.

Remain confident in the new heaven and the glad reunion.



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