

First Presbyterian Church
Bozeman, Montana
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7th Sunday of Easter
Revelation 22:12-14, 16-17,20-21

When It's All Said and Done

Light and darkness are used as metaphors to speak to a wide variety of contrasts in the world and in our lives. They can be used to reference the amount of understanding one has around some topic or another. We often speak of “seeing the light” when some new understanding is achieved. In cartoons and illustrations, a light bulb brightly burning over someone’s head is a shorthand way of communicating this new insight or “ah-ha” experience. In contrast, to be in the dark or be kept in the dark indicates that one has not yet caught onto some truth or understanding. The contrast between dark and light can refer to moods and stages in which we find ourselves along the way of life as well. Darkness is a descriptive way to speak to those times when we feel alone, isolated and disconnected; or when we feel burdened or oppressed. In contrast there is a brightness or lightness to those times when all is well and there is a spring in our step. Although the term lightheartedness mostly speaks to lightness in contrast to heaviness, it can also speak to the light that shines on us in those bright moments and occasions. Historians will speak of dark periods in which there was much trouble, angst and despair—one such 20th century example would be the depths of World War II. Whereas again those historic events of light have been related to the likes of the end of slavery or the advances of civil rights.

Religion has adopted these metaphors as well. Over the ages the Christian church has organized its retelling and recalling of the story of Jesus by tying the Christian year to the changes of seasons which after all are caused by the increasing or decreasing amount of daily light and sunshine. The birth of Jesus, near the darkest days of the year around the winter solstice, signals God’s breaking into that darkness with Jesus who has been called among other names, the light of the world. And the resurrection of Jesus happens in the spring when signs of new life are abundant in the natural world—again the result of the increasing sunlight after the vernal equinox that signals plant and animal life alike to begin their regeneration cycles.

So much of what we read in the Bible is about how God tenaciously seeks to bring light into darkness, warmth into the cold, and ultimately life into the face of death. In this Easter season this year we’ve been finding our inspiration for hope and encouragement, for this light, in the New Testament book of the Revelation to John. Today is the last of those Easter Sundays. Next Sunday we will celebrate Pentecost in which the coming of the Holy Spirit is remembered, So it’s appropriate on this last Easter Sunday that we look to the very last words of that last book in the Bible.

This mysterious book containing amazing descriptive imagery was written during a time in the late first century when a part of the Christian church was experiencing threatening oppression by the dominant Roman government in the northern Mediterranean region. It was a dark time for these Christians and they were looking for some encouragement and reason for optimism. This revelation to a church leader, a pastor of sorts with the name of John, is understood to be a message from God to them that there is reason to hope, that good is stronger than evil and that in the end, God wins.

Through the ages the book of Revelation has been used by some as a way to predict the future with great detail and specificity. Over the centuries it has been the source for such prognosticators to suggest particular dates for the end of the world as we know it. Oftentimes those specific dates were tied to nice round dates on our human-devised calendars such as the turn of the century. Which turn of the century would that be? Well most every one of them! And of course most of us here today are old enough to remember all of the hubbub and hoopla around the last turn of the century that was the turn of the millennium as well. Remember all of the Y2K frenzy? Well, it like every other such predicted dire date came and went with nary a whimper. The only truth that resulted from these end-of-time dates was for us to be reminded (and humbled) again that such predictions are not helpful and in fact are a very poor use of our time on this earth. For when we are sidetracked from our living today in anticipation that there will soon be no tomorrows as we know them, we lose our vitality in the here and now.

So while Revelation does indeed concern the future, we today could gain by looking back over the 2000 years since it was written to see that there are abundant examples of the promised future being realized over and over again. In that first century context in which Revelation was first written, when Christians were being persecuted for their faith, when the future survival of the church was in question, the church not only survived that time, it has flourished over the intervening centuries to the prominent place it now occupies among the world's great religions. And while there have been times and places through history in these last 2000 years where Christians were oppressed and where the future looked bleak, the promised hope for the future contained in Revelation was realized again, not in the detail of the minutia, but in the broad strokes of history in which the Christian faith not only survived but lived on into the future. Could it be in the present day when there is a sense that the future of the church is uncertain, that we might take solace and comfort as we recall our forebears who faced similar uncertainty? For we know that in the end, when it's all said and done, God wins.

But as we draw to a close this reflection on Revelation, there is one last matter to address that comes up throughout and that is the return of Jesus that is mentioned, often called the second coming of Jesus. As we read in the second to last verse of Revelation, "The one who testifies to these things says, 'Surely I am coming soon.' Amen. Come, Lord Jesus!" (Rev. 22:20) What does it mean for us to be looking to that day when Jesus will return? If it's not for us to calculate and commiserate on establishing a date for such, what does it mean for us? If it's not to be in our lifetime as it has not been in the lifetime of every Christian who has gone before us, what does it mean to say, "Come, Lord Jesus!"?

Darrell W. Johnson in his study of Revelation called *Discipleship on the Edge* (2004, Regent College Publishing, pp. 384ff) suggests that there are three reasons for us to live as if the time is near for Jesus to return. First, for Jesus to be coming again means that he is already moving toward us. "[H]e is not standing off somewhere," (p. 384) passively waiting for a particular cue to precede his re-entry on the world stage. As part of his ongoing work in our midst Jesus is moving in and among us toward that day of return. Jesus, who loves us and wants to walk with us is on the way, on our way, as he makes his way toward that future return.

Johnson suggests in the proclamation that Jesus is the Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end, a declaration that resonates throughout Revelation there is a second reason to live as if the time is near for Jesus to return. “Everything has its source in Jesus Christ! Everything finds its pattern, its way of being in Jesus Christ. Everything in the universe is stamped with the character of Jesus Christ. Every person on this planet owes her or his existence to Jesus Christ and finds his or her pattern for living in Jesus. . . . The inherent destiny of every human being is to be like Jesus Christ. He is the [end] because he is the [beginning].” (p. 385) Jesus is inescapable, meaning that Jesus is not watching over your shoulder to see how you might trip up and fail. Rather Jesus is inescapable in his presence connecting us to God’s love. Jesus, in the end is actually irresistible.

Thirdly and “finally, the time is near for humanity, and all creation to finally realize our inherent destiny!” (p. 386) It is here that the name given to Jesus, “the bright morning star” (Rev. 22:16) provides a powerful pointer to that destiny. The morning star is that light in the sky that appears at the darkest and coldest point of the night which is actually very shortly before the first hints of the morning sun begin to appear. The planet Venus is that heavenly body appearing in the dark night sky that has been known as the morning star signaling the promise of the rising sun that is not too far behind. When it’s all said and done, the coming of Jesus Christ the first time was a light shining in the darkness. The second coming of Jesus in a similar way is that light that promises a full and complete light that will ultimately and finally put an end to all the darkness of our lives and indeed of the cosmos themselves.

It doesn’t really matter that we don’t know the precise timing of the “when” of when it’s all said and done. More important, indeed most important is that at that time, when it’s all said and done, our destiny is with Jesus Christ with all the saints in light.

Johnson challenges us to “Enter the darkness of night with the light of the day. Enter the remaining darkness as children of the light, as citizens of the day. Knowing that the time is near does not call us to go hide in a safe cave and wait for daybreak. Knowing that the time is near calls us to enter the fray with the good news.” (p. 387)

The story that began with starlight pointing to the birth of the light of the world in a stable in Bethlehem on a cold dark night, ends with the light of the morning star signaling the end of all darkness of all kinds forever.

“The grace of the Lord Jesus be with all the saints. Amen.” (Rev. 22:21)