

September 11, 2011

Revelation 1:4b-8, 21:1-6

“I am the Alpha and the Omega”

Fifty-two weeks ago we began a journey through the Bible, using J. Ellsworth Kalas’ guiding materials, called “The Grand Sweep”. This week we read the last book of the Bible: Revelation, concluding our reading through the entire Bible in one year.

A year ago, in July of 2010, our Associate Pastor, Bromleigh McCleneghan, and our Youth Director, Jim Best, met with me to plan the coming year. We looked ahead to this date, knowing that THIS SUNDAY would be our last Sunday to preach on the texts of the Grand Sweep. This would be the Sunday we’d focus on the Book of Revelation, with its drama, symbolism, visions, sounds, blood and apocalyptic struggle.

Then we realized- oh, of course this will be Kickoff Sunday- the week all of our programs begin. Sunday School begins today for all ages; the Chancel Choir worships with us once more, sharing their God-given gifts of song. At noon we’ll gather at Delnor Woods Park for our Annual Picnic, with balloon animals, face-painting, a bouncy house and games.

Then we realized- oh my..... This day is the tenth anniversary of the terrorist attacks on Sept. 11, 2001. It will be a day of deep emotion and remembrance. It’s like a lifetime of experiences are all coming together in one day.

There is one other day in my life that I will never forget, that was also like a lifetime of experiences in one day.

It was almost twenty years ago. I was serving the United Methodist Church in Crystal Lake. A family in our church had been traveling home from a day at Great America. Their vehicle was hit head on by a drunk driver. One person survived, the father, who was driving. In one moment he lost his 13 year old son, his two daughters, aged 11 and 6, and his beloved wife.

His family and friends surrounded him, preparation was made, and a Saturday morning was selected for the funeral service. That morning, when I entered the sanctuary, my eyes fell upon the four caskets in a row at the front. It was like a blow to my heart and my spirit to see them.

We began to worship; to celebrate the lives of these precious ones, beloved to many, God's own. The family had asked that we provide an open time of sharing, during which I moved through the gathered people with a microphone.

I cannot tell you how moving it was to hear people speak. One young friend of Danny, the 13 year old boy, stood to share. It was obvious this young man was not normally someone who would speak in front of 300 hundred people. He was nervous, he was tall and gangly, he was self-conscious. But he spoke, telling us how much he cared about his friend and how much he would miss him.

Then a little girl, dressed in a cheerleading costume, raised her hand at the back. Dallas, the 6 year old, had been in a cheerleading group for little girls. Her entire group was present at this funeral, all of them dressed alike. This child told me, "I want to do a cheer for Dallas." I asked her if she would come up to the front where everyone could see her, and she nodded. At the front, she clapped her hands and established a rhythm. Standing straight she executed a perfect cheer. There was not a dry eye in the church.

We moved from the church to the cemetery. I walked toward the four graves, all standing open, and once again felt a blow to my heart and spirit. Following the graveside service, we all returned to the church fellowship hall for lunch. I sat with the little girls who did cheerleading with Dallas. We talked about many things, about God, and heaven, and this world. It was such an honor to be with them.

Then I returned to my office to prepare for the wedding I would do in about an hour. When I slipped into the sanctuary again, it was a different place, adorned with lace and tulle and flowers. I had told the young couple about the funeral. I needed them to know there might be a few parking challenges, as the mourners left and the wedding guests arrived. This couple was such a blessing to me—they had no concerns or objections—they just said, "What can we do? If we could help somehow, we want to do that.... Should we change the time of the wedding?" I thanked them, and told them to pray for the grieving community. We did not need to change the wedding time.

During the ceremony God's Spirit was powerfully present, as we celebrated with this young man and woman their promises of lifelong love and faithfulness. What a wonder-filled time- a time of a new beginning.

Then I went back to my office to prepare for our Saturday night regular worship service. This was a contemporary service, in which dress was casual and a praise band led the singing. As I worshipped that night, sharing a message, praying and singing, I felt the steadfast love of God and the power of God's Spirit once again.

I felt like I had lived a lifetime in that day. And here we are today: ready to celebrate the new beginning of a program year in our church-- ready to laugh and play games and picnic. But we're also wondering about God's Word, and the messages that emerge from the apocalyptic images of Revelation. And we're also remembering with sorrow the lives lost on 9-11-2001- the people on the planes, the first responders to the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, the collapse of the buildings, the needless suffering and death.

Let's think about God's Word. What do we find there this morning? Apocalyptic writing, which involves the unveiling of future events, was common in the first century following Christ's life, death and Resurrection. The Book of Revelation was addressed to Christians living under severe persecution. Through Revelation's bizarre images, vivid pictures of death, supernatural creatures and cryptic language, the writer expresses his hope for a day when judgment would be rendered and all evil powers conquered.

Revelation has been interpreted in a variety of ways over the centuries, however, the book's central purpose is not to arouse speculation about the future. It's meant to encourage Christians in all times and circumstances, to hold fast to their faith, trusting in God's ultimate triumph over all darkness, sin and death.

The Bible is filled with words and witnesses telling us what God is LIKE. But the Bible also witnesses to the simple fact that God IS. God is. That may seem a simple or obvious truth, but it has profound meaning for us as we live our lives.

In Revelation's opening greeting we find this affirmed. The author offers *grace from him who is and who was and who is to come*. He quotes God, "I

am the Alpha and the Omega,” says the Lord God, “who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty.”

The “Alpha and Omega”- those are the first and last letters in the Greek alphabet. It’s like saying, “I am the A and the Z”, although it doesn’t seem to translate to our alphabet so well!

Back in the Old Testament we read about Moses, who led his people, the enslaved Hebrews, out of slavery in Egypt. The encounter that made this possible, was Moses’ experience with a bush that he saw burning, but it was not burning UP. God spoke to him from the bush, giving him the task of freeing his people. Moses wanted the name of this God (he lived in a culture of polytheism). He wanted to be able to tell others exactly who it was that sent him on this perilous journey. God’s reply, which we have adapted into a name in English: “Jehovah” or “Yahweh”, was this: *I am who I am*. Or, because verb tenses don’t exist in Hebrew as they do in English, *I am becoming who I am becoming....or I will be who I will be*.

Our God is a God of BEING. A God who **was, is and will be**. This is the God who came in Jesus. This is the God who rules over ALL. And God does not rule just over nations, or people, or creatures, or the world, or the solar system, or the galaxy or the universe. God doesn’t just rule over things or people or places. God rules over BEING. God rules over TIME and EXISTENCE. This is deep. But we witness this truth as we live day by day.

God was. God was present with my church member and his family when that drunk driver smashed into them. God was present ten years ago in the skies and in our nation. God rules over the past. Some of us have painful memories of past suffering and events. Christ is not bound by time.

In the writing of Flora Slosson Wuellner, a United Church of Christ minister, I have learned about ways to pray and open my being to God. She has a chapter in one of her books about sending Christ into the painful past. When we are haunted by painful memories, of wrongs done to us, or wrongs we did to someone else, we can pray, picturing Christ going back in time into those situations, bringing divine love, healing and power. God rules over all that WAS. God can help us NOW, through our realization that God’s power extends even into the past.

God IS. Right now God is. God rules over all that is. God is acting and moving in our world and in our lives. God calls us to be part of his triumph over sin, evil and death. God calls us to be part of his transformation of the world. I see our Refugee Resettlement Ministry as part of the work that God IS DOING in the world. Words we speak in each day that God inspires, actions and attitudes that challenge oppression and injustice, a phone call to a friend, money given to God's work, moments of prayer and reflection, ALL OF THIS is part of the work that God is doing in his transformation of the world.

God WILL BE. The Book of Revelation gives us the end of the story. It's filled with the promise of God's triumph over all that opposes him. The Book of Revelation provides an image of what will come—a vision of a NEW CITY, the NEW JERUSALEM. And the Ruler of that City, of that NEW WORLD, is Jesus Christ.

Kalas says, "Open the history of our human race at any page, and it is hard to be sure of the score in the battle between good and evil; the battle rages and wanes. But Revelation tells us how it will all turn out. Have we known tears? They will be wiped away. Has your life been a...struggle with pain? It will pass away. Have the nighttimes of your life sometimes seemed endless? There will be no more night."

Mourning will be finished. Life will be eternal. God, in Christ will triumph. Christ declares, *I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end.*

***I Am**, God said to Moses long ago. And God speaks yet today, No matter what people say about me, what they do in my name—and there is evil that has been said and done. That doesn't change the reality of my nature or of my existence... I AM. Even now. Even here. Even with all that's been done wrong. I am. I will be. I am God and will be who I am.*

THIS is the God who rules, our God and Lord Jesus Christ. God is the Ruler of all TIME. God will triumph. But, you see, Revelation not only gives us the end of the story, For the end is a beginning. Life will be eternal. God will be forever and ever, Amen.