

The Beginning and the End

Ascension Sunday

June 1, 2003

Sermon Background Study

Scripture Passages

Genesis 1:1-2

¹In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, ²the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters.

John 1:1-4,14

¹In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ²He was in the beginning with God. ³All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being ⁴in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. . . ¹⁴And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth.

Revelation 21:1-6

¹Then 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. ²And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. ³And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them as their God; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them; ⁴he 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." ⁵And 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." ⁶Then he said to me, "It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. To the thirsty I will give water as a gift from the spring of the water of life.

Today, we continue a nine-week sermon series on all the symbols in our glorious Rose Window. Our third symbol is the Christ monogram, Chi Rho, Alpha and Omega.

The Big Picture

Sometimes it can be very difficult for us to see the Bible's unity. The sixty-six books that comprise the Bible are diverse, written over thousands of years in a variety of literary genres. Yet, they do tell a single over-arching story about God and his creation. Our readings for today are all key markers in this story, which we might think of as a three-act play.

Act 1 – God Creates

The opening verses of Genesis set the stage for all that follows. God creates all that is and, a few verses later, pronounces it "good." He creates humans in his own image and gives them a beautiful garden in which to live and work. He asks only one thing of them, that they not eat the fruit from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Regrettably, indeed terribly so, the humans, desiring to be like gods themselves, disobey and eat the forbidden fruit. God's creation is ruptured. No longer can the humans walk in the garden with God (Genesis 3:8-10). Now, all creation groans awaiting its redemption (Romans 8:22). But, thankfully, the story doesn't end there. God sets about to restore humans to right relationship with himself and to renew



Chi Rho

The Chi Rho is one of the most ancient sacred monograms of Jesus Christ. *Chi* and *Rho* are the first two letters of the Greek word, *christos*, meaning Messiah. Over the centuries, this monogram has been stylized in many ways. Ours in the Rose Window is an ancient form that incorporates the Greek letters, Alpha and Omega. These are the first and last letters of the Greek alphabet. Thus, the symbol could be translated as "Jesus Christ, the first and the last, the beginning and the end," similar to today's passage from Revelation.

all of the cosmos. God chooses a people who are to be his agents in this renewal, those who are to be the light to the world. Yet, despite God's relentless pursuit of his chosen people, they are not up to the task. This is the story of Israel. The people of God prove unable to live up to the covenant they had made with God, bringing us to Act 2.

Act 2 – God Saves

In the opening verses of his Gospel, John makes clear what is to happen in the second act. God is about to send someone to do and to be for Israel, and thus for all creation, what Israel has been unable to do and to be for herself. God sends someone who, though completely human, is much more. "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. . . and the Word became flesh and lived among us." Indeed, Jesus is God himself and through his sacrificial death on the cross, God's people are restored to right relationship with God. In truth, the reality of God's kingdom bursts like a bright sun into the broken creation. Before his departure from this world, Jesus charges his disciples, then and now, with the responsibility to bring peace, justice, and mercy to all humanity – making the kingdom of God a present reality. But after 2000 years, this story is not yet finished, which brings us to Act 3.

The Book of Revelation

Certainly, no book of the Bible is more mysterious to most Christians than Revelation. Filled with all sorts of bizarre and sometimes shocking imagery, we tend to do one of two things with the book. We either dismiss it as too difficult and inapplicable to our lives, or we pore over it in excruciatingly literal detail, treating it as if it is some sort of movie script.

But neither of these is the right approach. Revelation is a powerful work of apocalyptic literature. Apocalypses were very popular in Jesus' day. The writers used powerful symbols and metaphors to convey the cosmic significance of the events they chose to write about. Apocalyptic literature dealt with "last things," the end, the coming of new worlds. Little wonder that the writers used such powerful language. We use special effects in movies to tap into emotional power; these ancient writers, like John, had only words.

In the fall, I am going to teach a Bible Academy class on Revelation. It will be offered on Monday mornings and Tuesday evenings. I'm subtitling it,
*Cracking the code:
Why you won't be left behind!*

Act 3 – The New Heavens and New Earth

Drawing on the richness of Isaiah's ancient imagery (see Isaiah 65:17-25), John's visions bring our story to its stunning conclusion. John knows that our language and our experience are incapable of expressing the God who awaits us at the end of all things. Nevertheless, John uses a vivid palette of symbols and colors to help us see the glory of God's kingdom.

The beauty of Revelation 21 & 22 needs to be meditated upon, chewed over and gnawed on. Spend some time with even the six verses in today's passage. In biblical imagery the sea is always a symbol of chaos and trouble.¹ But in God's kingdom, there will be no "sea" (21:1). There will be no death . . . no mourning . . . no crying . . . no pain – all the brokenness and tragedy of the present world will have passed away. Indeed, God will wipe the tears from the eyes of his people! This is the new heavens and new earth, the long-promised holy city of the new Jerusalem where God will dwell with his people. Whereas Moses could not behold the face of God without dying, in the new Jerusalem, God's people "will see his face and his name will be on their foreheads (22:4)."

We make a mistake if we try to read John's language too literally. Instead, John uses immensely powerful metaphors in his attempt to convey to us the glory of God and the sheer wonder that will be our communion with him when we and all creation are fully renewed and restored. John doesn't give us a vision of only a new life but a new world – the marriage of heaven and earth. Our ultimate destination is not some disembodied existence in some place we might think of as "heaven." Rather, our final end is a renewed earth, a new Jerusalem, in which we live as God's people, in right relationship with him and one another, as has always been God's hope and our own.

¹ After all, the Israelites were desert people, not sailors! In the Book of Daniel, the last six chapters are apocalyptic literature that is very similar to Revelation. In it, the sea is a symbol of chaos out of which arise beasts that assault and oppress God's people (see chapter 7).

Daily Bible Readings

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

<p>Day 1 Genesis 2 The story of creation told from the perspective of the humans.</p>	<p>Day 2 Genesis 3 The story of the humans' rebellion.</p>
<p>Day 3 John 1:1-18; Colossians 1:15-23 Jesus Christ, the center of the story</p>	<p>Day 4 Isaiah 65:17-25 Isaiah's vision of the renewed cosmos</p>
<p>Day 5 Revelation 21:1-22:5 Visions of the new heavens and new earth, the new Jerusalem</p>	<p>Weekly Prayer Concerns</p>

