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*"Alpha, Omega, and Now"*

## THE INTRODUCTION TO THE READING

It does us good to remember that the book of Revelation – the last book of the 'library' of our Bible – is actually *not* a book, but a letter. In the late first century, a Christian prophet named John wrote a pastoral letter to congregations in the parts of Asia that belonged to the Roman Empire because they were facing turbulent times.

Rome had been fighting and losing multiple wars, and it had gone through three emperors in two years. Vesuvius had erupted in 79 and famines had ravaged the Empire over the early 90s. All of this rocked Rome's sense of stability. Some emperors chose to enforce the state rules about worshiping the Emperor as "Lord." When Christianity was considered a part of Judaism, Christians were exempted from this requirement, but at this point in history, Christians were quite vulnerable, and were experiencing isolated incidences of persecution, which John perceived would increase. He encouraged them to persist, to uphold moral integrity, and to endure, if need be, to die, trusting in the *true* Lord.

These congregations *weren't* asking if and how the world as they knew it would end; they were discerning how to live in the present and wrestling with whether *God* would be faithful. John's revelation assured them the answer is "Yes!"

## THE READING Revelation 1:1-8

The revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show his servants\* what must soon take place; he made\* it known by sending his angel to his servant\* John, <sup>2</sup>who testified to the word of God and to the testimony of Jesus Christ, even to all that he saw.

<sup>3</sup> Blessed is the one who reads aloud the words of the prophecy, and blessed are those who hear and who keep what is written in it; for the time is near.

<sup>4</sup> John to the seven churches that are in Asia:

Grace to you and peace from him who is and who was and who is to come, and from the seven spirits who are before his throne, <sup>5</sup>and from Jesus Christ, the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth.

To him who loves us and freed\* us from our sins by his blood, <sup>6</sup>and made\* us to be a kingdom, priests serving\* his God and Father, to him be glory and dominion for ever and ever. Amen.

<sup>7</sup> Look! He is coming with the clouds;  
every eye will see him,  
even those who pierced him;  
and on his account all the tribes of the earth will wail.  
So it is to be. Amen.

<sup>8</sup> 'I am the Alpha and the Omega', says the Lord God, who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty.

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## SERMON

One of the features we really like about living in Hough's Neck in Quincy is the easy walk we have to three large bodies of water: Quincy Bay, Hingham Bay, and the ocean. I like to look out over the vastness, either at sunrise or sunset; it puts my problems and dilemmas into a different, grander perspective.

Even with the current state of our society and world, I can hardly imagine the problems and dilemmas that the church members to whom John wrote this revelation letter faced. Domitian was the Roman Emperor, and he had ordered his subjects to consider him divine and address him as "Kurios" – "Lord" – or else. Some members in three of the seven churches that received John's letter had already been arrested by Roman authorities, which were enforcing the decree of this egomaniac ruler.<sup>1</sup>

John the prophet wanted to put all the crazy chaos that these church members were experiencing under Emperor Domitian into a larger frame. **In this letter, John aims to put their problems and dilemmas into the perspective of the bigger story that God was and is writing.** So, as if they were walking out to look at the ocean, John uses *grand* language to put their situation into perspective. As part of the opening sentences, he describes God expansively as the "one who is, who was, and who is to come." He speaks of Christ as "the Alpha and the Omega!"

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<sup>1</sup>M. Eugene Boring, *Revelation* (Louisville, Ky: John Knox Press, 1989). I depend a great deal upon Boring's introduction to Revelation and his conclusions about date, authorship, and context. Since the letter doesn't straightforwardly date itself, he writes that the majority of scholars think it was written after 70 AD when the Romans destroyed the temple in Jerusalem and during Domitian's rule from 81-96 CE (p. 10). Domitian required "All hail to our Lord (Kurios)!" "He put police power behind the state's claim to absolute loyalty" also to "the goddess Roma, the deified state." (p. 21)

For us, it would have been “A to Z,” but John used the Greek alphabet: “alpha and omega,” equating Christ to “the beginning and the end.” In other words: “There is a bigger narrative, and God has already written the beginning and the end to it.” John is making a huge theological and Christological claim: that *ultimately*, despite the darkness and the evidence of humans who give into the temptation to evil, Jesus Christ *will*, in God’s time, rule in love, peace, and justice.

What we read in Revelation, then, can be summed up by the same claim you may have noticed on bumper stickers or associated with movements: “Love Wins.” As the sign near Bob’s office door puts it: “Everything will be okay in the end; if it isn’t okay, it’s not the end.” John puts things in perspective for the present.

Last Sunday’s worship service with the Joyful Voices of Inspiration choir had a similar effect upon me. It paved the way for me to truly celebrate Thanksgiving. I often put too much stock in the trappings of holidays, upon the day, the feast, and which family, where? We are also often advised to count our *material* blessings in order to feel gratitude. Our worship service, by contrast, focused on Christ, the gospel faith, and what’s really important NOW.

There’s another reason John greeted his readers with the language of “Alpha and Omega – the one who is, who was, and who is to come.” He wanted to get across, not just that God was writing a bigger story, but that no matter how crazy their context would get – and the rest of John’s revelation indicated that it might get worse before it got better! – **Jesus Christ would be, not only their Kurios, but their companion, enabling church members to act with moral integrity right NOW.**

I believe that there is significance to the order of this title. In our Western linear mindset, you and I are accustomed to saying “past, present, and future.” When *John* writes of the Lord God, he says *first*: “the One who is,” follows it with “who was” and finally, “who is to come.” To put it differently, the past (Alpha) and the future (Omega) come *after* the present – dimensions of time that are secondary to NOW.

This order also coincides with the story of Moses meeting God. On Mount Sinai, from out of the burning bush, when God calls Moses to lead the project of liberating his people from slavery, Moses asks for a name: “which god are you?” The reply comes: “I am, who I am.” The identity of the Divine is very much here and now in Hebrew.<sup>2</sup>

Isn’t this a comfort to us when we are traveling the road of cancer treatments? Or if we are trying to deal with a divorce? Or walking the hard way of honesty in our jobs? If you and I are fighting the temptation to abandon our beliefs or our commitments, or we are succumbing to the vacuum of moral imagination in our culture, it is good to remember that within our dilemmas and problems whatever they may be, that the “One who IS” will enable

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<sup>2</sup>Three commentaries concur on linking John’s phrase “who is, who was, and who is to come” to the Exodus story: Boring’s, JB Caird’s, and Christopher C. Rowland’s.

us to discern and discover how to do what is right right NOW. When we walk in this manner with Christ, you and I are also contributing to the depth and details of the story that God is still writing.

In the case of the congregants who were hearing John's letter, the stakes were high, and they probably didn't feel like they had any good options. What would be the right thing for Christians to do in the Roman Empire? Their options were to quit Christianity, lie to the authorities, or try to lay low and avoid arrest. If you were caught, you might try to convince yourself that when you called Domitian "Lord," God would understand that you were still really loyal to and worshipping him. The final option was to refuse to do a worship oath to the Emperor and die! Christians in this time period couldn't realistically work within the system to change the law or the Roman system; nor could they mount a military coup and stay true to the Prince of Peace!<sup>3</sup>

Nevertheless, John reiterates that even in this horrendous circumstance, they *still* had a choice. They could act with moral integrity even if others in power did not. Christians can still walk as faithful witnesses today when the way is narrow, even if it leads through death.

In the case of Domitian, we don't know if Christian steadfastness wore him down at all, but full-out persecution as the end of the later chapters of Revelation describe did *not* happen during the period when John's letter was circulating. Domitian died and the demand for emperor worship relaxed, until later.

You may have heard this reflection offered at graveside services. Engraved upon a tombstone, what *really* counts is not the birthdate or the death date, but *the dash* between. This hyphen represents the story that God is writing through you! The way you live in the NOW, between your beginning and your end – your Alpha and Omega – is what matters to the bigger story that God is completing!

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<sup>3</sup>Boring, *Revelation*, pp. 21-23. I have adapted here his list of options: Quit, Lie, Fight, Change the law, Adjust, Die.