

Alpha and Omega

A sermon preached by the Rev. Roger Scott Powers
at St. Andrew Presbyterian Church in Albuquerque,
on Sunday, May 29, 2022.

Revelation 22:12-14, 16-17, 20-21

Alpha and omega are the first and last letters of the Greek alphabet. They are spelled out together like this only three times in the entire Bible. And all three instances are found in the book of Revelation.

In the first two instances, they are spoken by God. In chapter one, verse 8: "I am the Alpha and the Omega, says the Lord God, who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty." And later in chapter 21, verse 6, after "making all things new," "a new heaven and a new earth," and "the holy city, the new Jerusalem," then God says to John of Patmos: "It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end."

But this time, here, at the very end of the book of Revelation, the very end of the entire Bible, it is Jesus who uses the title for himself: "I am the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end."

As one of the three persons of the Triune God, Jesus, the Christ, existed from the very beginning. That's what the gospel of John is driving at when it describes Jesus Christ as the divine Word present at Creation. "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. . . . And 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." (John 1:1-3, 14)

Jesus Christ, coeternal with the Creator, was there at the very beginning of all things and will be there at the very end. To put it another way, he always existed and always will exist. As God incarnate, he has no beginning, nor will he have any end with respect to time, being from everlasting to everlasting.

The Roman Christian poet, Aurelius Clemens Prudentius, writing in the 4th and 5th centuries, at the same time that the Apostles' and Nicene Creeds were being codified, put the same idea into poetry: "Of the Father's love begotten, ere the worlds began to be, he is Alpha and Omega; he the source, the ending he, of the things that are, that have been, and that future years shall see, evermore and evermore!"

In the end, Christ will come again with a reward to repay everyone according to their deeds. And while we wait, we are encouraged to be about the everyday work of the faithful, getting our dirty laundry done, cleansing a world that has been made unclean. We will then be blessed and "will have the right to the tree of life and may enter the city by the gates."

I don't know about you, but the past week has been a rough one for me. At times I have been on the edge of tears, wondering if I would be able to hold myself together. Tuesday's mass shooting in Texas, in which an 18-year-old first shot his grandmother and then went to an elementary school where he fatally shot 19 children and 2 teachers, and wounded 17 others, shook me to my core. That it happened just 10 days after the mass shooting at a Buffalo supermarket, in which 10 black people were killed and 3 other people were injured, only compounded my grief. And let's not forget the Irvine Taiwanese Presbyterian Church in Laguna Woods, California, where just two Sundays ago a gunman killed 1 person and wounded 5 others at a church luncheon.

But it's not just the mass shootings that have deeply saddened me. It's the growing impact of climate change, no longer a future threat but a present reality, which we are now experiencing in New Mexico in the Southwest's worst megadrought in 1200 years and the largest wildfire in our state's history, currently the largest wildfire burning in North America.

Then there's the pandemic, which has killed more than a million people in the U.S., more than 6 million people worldwide. And just when you think it's winding down, it keeps coming back. Here at St. Andrew we have weathered it pretty well over the past two years. Most of us are fully vaccinated and boosted, and we've been careful to follow public health guidelines of wearing masks and social

distancing. But COVID cases are increasing once again. The 7-day average of COVID cases in Bernalillo County has slowly and steadily risen from a low of 33 cases/day on April 2 to 245 cases/day as of Friday. That is still fairly low when you compare it to our county's peak 7-day average of over 2,000 cases per day this past January.

But in just the past two weeks, the 7-day average has more than doubled and seven St. Andrew folks have tested positive, which is troubling. We've never had that many people come down with COVID at the same time. The anecdotal evidence coming from just our congregation in the past two weeks suggests that the omicron variant currently circulating among the general population may be even more contagious than previous variants. That is why the Session postponed today's Potluck/Picnic/BBQ and strongly encourages wearing masks in worship until such time as COVID infections in Bernalillo County start trending downward again.

Between horrific mass shootings, the catastrophic impact of climate change, and the coronavirus pandemic that seems to have no end, it kind of feels like we are living in apocalyptic times. It's overwhelming. It's too much to deal with. It's traumatic. It's stressful.

Under the circumstances, it's easy to understand how some Christians would latch onto the idea of the so-called "rapture," in which believing Christians are to be rescued from the trials and tribulations here on earth, taken up to heaven with Christ, while those who remain on earth are left to perish. Stop the world—I want to get off! Beam me up, Jesus! Please! Get me out of here!

But as we've seen, what is described in Revelation is the exact opposite of "the rapture." God doesn't take Christians up to heaven. God brings heaven down to earth. God doesn't destroy the earth. God renews it. God remakes it. God transforms it. God makes all things new, a new heaven and a new earth, even a new Jerusalem. God doesn't stay in heaven, apart from us, watching us from a distance. God moves from heaven to the earth to live with us, to be present with us.

That's what God has always promised us—to be present with us. God doesn't promise to protect us from suffering, from pain and loss, from trials, from difficulties. These are all a part of life. What God promises

is to be present with us through it all. I will be with you, says the Lord.

God loves each and every one of us, and God wants the best for us. So, when tragedy strikes, God's heart is the first to break. God cannot protect us from illnesses, accidents, disasters, or death. We are fragile human beings, and we are mortal. But God is always present with us and will support us in the worst of times as well as in the best of times. God provides us minimum protection, but offers us maximum support.

In the seemingly apocalyptic times in which we are living, I can relate to the people to whom John was writing in the late first century. They, too, were suffering. They, too, had experienced traumatic events. They, too, had seen as many as a million people die, not from the spread of a deadly virus but from the advance of a brutal army. They saw their Temple destroyed and the city of Jerusalem left in ruins. We are seeing buildings and livelihoods destroyed as well, and once green forests left in ashes, not as the result of war but of wildfire. I can see how they would find hope in the book of Revelation, that their present sufferings would not last forever, that in the end God would see justice done, that God's reign of peace would eventually prevail.

This morning's passage has Jesus saying not once but twice: "I am coming soon." Amen to that! As far as I'm concerned, Jesus can't come soon enough! Come, Lord Jesus, come! We need you, our bright morning star, to guide us and comfort us.

I can imagine the first-century hearers of that promise responding with great enthusiasm. They had longed for Christ's return. Yes, Lord Jesus, come! Come and be with us. Indeed, the text goes on to say that the Spirit and the bride (the new Jerusalem?) chime in to say, "Come." And then the text invites us all to join our voices. "Let everyone who hears say, 'Come.'" **Come!** Let all of us who hear say, "Come!" **Come!** Come, Lord Jesus. Come and be with us. And let everyone who is thirsty come. **Come!** Let anyone who wishes take the water of life as a gift. **Come!** Let Christ quench your thirst! And may the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with us all. Amen.