

The End of the Story
A Sermon for Every Sunday, All Saints' Day
Revelation 21:1-6a

Last week I met with the worship team at my church to talk about how we could make All Saints' Day especially meaningful. We spent a good bit of time on that part of the service where my associate was going to read the names of those church members who had died in the last year and part of that time was spent wondering what we should call it. We finally settled on "Remembering the Saints," but one of the resources I consulted suggested "The Naming of the Honored Dead." Nobody liked that. "Why is that?" I asked. "Why do we have such a hard time with the word *dead*? We say that our loved ones 'passed away,' or that they 'went home to be with the Lord,' but we rarely say that they 'died.' Why is that?" "Because it sounds so final," someone said. "Like it's not only the end of their earthly life but the end of *them* somehow. And we don't want to believe that." No. We don't want to believe that. But what leads us to believe anything else? Where do we get the idea that death is not the end of our loved ones?

In Old Testament times people believed that when their loved ones died they went down to *Sheol*, the place of the dead, which was literally "down there" somewhere. It wasn't Hell—not a place of punishment for the wicked—it was just the place people went after they died, a kind of huge underground warehouse. I don't know if their loved ones thought they walked around down there like guests at a cocktail party or if they thought they were stacked like cordwood in the corner, but if you had asked somebody in those days where their great-grandfather was they would have pointed down at the ground and whispered, "*Sheol*": the place of the dead.

But sometime in the second century BC people began to talk about resurrection from the dead. You get the first hint of this in the Bible from Daniel 12:2 which says, “Many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt.” Whereas Sheol was understood to be simply the place of the dead—both the righteous and the wicked—the Book of Daniel suggests that the dead who are raised will be judged and will receive everlasting reward or punishment based on what they did in life, like the story Jesus tells in Luke 16 about Lazarus and the rich man. After poor Lazarus dies he is comforted in “the bosom of Abraham,” but the rich man, who didn’t lift a finger to help Lazarus in life, ends up in Hades. He calls out, “Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue; for I am in agony in these flames.” But Father Abraham says, “Nothing doing. You had your chance.”

The rest of the New Testament supports this same, basic view: that the righteous will be rewarded with everlasting life and the wicked will be punished with everlasting death. The question then becomes, “How do attain righteousness? How can we inherit everlasting life?” And while the Pharisees from the second century BC forward believed that it was a matter of being holier than everybody else, Jesus introduced the idea that it wasn’t our goodness but God’s grace that saved us, and Paul, who had had worn himself out as a Pharisee trying to keep the rules of righteousness, further developed that idea. In Galatians 2:16 he says, “We know that a person is not justified by works of the law, but through faith in Jesus Christ.” In Romans 10:9 he says, “If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord, and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.”

In the space of a few hundred years, then, some people went from believing that death was the end to believing that death was not the end at all. They even began to believe that the life that comes after death is the best life of all. And that was a huge comfort to them, especially under the circumstances.

I'm preaching from the book of Revelation today and I doubt that there is any book in the Bible that has been more misunderstood. Because it is full of signs and symbols some people try to "decode" it, as if it were the latest Dan Brown novel. Back when I was a boy there was a book called *The Late Great Planet Earth* in which Hal Lindsey supposedly explained all the mysteries of Revelation. He talked a lot about the Antichrist, a word that is not even used in that book. He talked about the Rapture which, again, is not a word used in Revelation, and an idea that is suggested only in 1 Thessalonians 4. He believed that there were references to Russia throughout the book although he couldn't find where the United States fit in. Finally, he predicted that the world would come to an end in 1988. He was wrong. In recent years the *Left Behind* series has taken up where Lindsey left off, as Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins have delved into the secrets of Revelation in novel form. It's exciting stuff, fascinating, but with no more basis in reality than *The Late Great Planet Earth*.

The book of Revelation *is* full of signs and symbols. There's no doubt about that. But the signs and symbols would have been readily understood by the people for whom it was written near the end of the first century. Revelation is apocalyptic literature, just like the second half of the Book of Daniel and some portions of the Gospels. It was written for people who were undergoing persecution, as a way of helping them stay strong in their faith. At the time Revelation was written Caesar Domitian was the emperor of

Rome, and he was persecuting Christians just as Caesar Nero had before him. Nero used to soak Christians in creosote and then set them on fire to light his garden parties.

Domitian had them put to death—sometimes boiled in oil—if they did not bow down before his statue and say, “Caesar is Lord!” And if they didn’t receive his mark on their hand or forehead they couldn’t buy or sell in the marketplace.

Under those circumstances the writer of Revelation begs Christians to stay true to the faith, and assures them that even if the worst happens, even if they are killed for insisting that Jesus is Lord, not Caesar, it will not be the end of the story for them. Earlier in the book he has written about how “The Beast”—Domitian—rose to power, and how he began to persecute the people of God. But then he looks to the future, and in the vision God has given him he sees how the Beast will come to his end, and how Rome—the great harlot—will be brought to shame. And then it gets worse—or better, depending on your perspective—as he talks about a time when God’s wrath will be poured out upon the earth in great bowls and the last battle will be fought, a time when dead bodies will be strewn in heaps across the landscape and blood will run as high as a horse’s bridle. Only then, he says, will this cosmic conflict be over, only then will the kingdom of the earth become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, only then will he begin to reign “forever and ever, hallelujah, hallelujah.”

I try to remember that sometimes when people come to my study wanting to talk. Sometimes they are in dire straits, facing trouble so deep they don’t know how they will get out of it. They talk to me with tears on their cheeks, explaining situations that seem impossible. And often in those sessions I am led to say, “You know, this is terrible. It sounds impossible, but we don’t know yet how this story will end.” A good storyteller

will tell you that every plot has to have some complications in it, some problems that seem impossible to resolve. A good storyteller will resolve those complications in front of an audience in such a way that they are amazed and astounded by how impossible situations have become possible.

“We don’t know yet,” I say, “how this story is going to end but let’s keep praying about it. Let’s keep asking God to help us see the way.” Seems like good advice and people often seem comforted by that. They dry their tears and go out of my study saying over and over to themselves, “We don’t know yet. We don’t know how this story is going to end. It could end beautifully, better than I ever expected. We don’t know yet.” Yesterday afternoon, when my family got email from an old friend letting us know that her father had died, I wanted to tell her something else. I wanted to say, “You know, we do know how this story will end.” The writer of Revelation has told us.

I picture it like you would see it acted out on a stage, all that carnage and bloodshed there on the stage, all those battles being fought, all that smoke going up. The story is at its worst in that moment and you wonder how it can ever have a happy ending. But then the writer of Revelation talks about the curtain being closed, the stage being cleared, and in the darkness we sit and wait to see what the next act will bring. There is silence in the theatre for some time and then the sound of music, maybe only a single flute, as the curtain begins to open and you see the stage bathed in light, heavenly light. And then the writer of Revelation tells us:

“Then 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. And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband.”

According to the author of Revelation, when God gets good and ready, this is the way he is going to end the story. He's going to clear the stage of all that bloodshed and carnage. He's going to mop up the awful mess we've made of things. He's going to make a new heaven and a new earth. And then he's going to bring heaven to earth quite literally. He's going to set the holy city smack dab down in the middle of things, like an enormous wedding cake, so that his people can come streaming in toward those pearly gates from every direction. But wait, that's not all:

“And 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; he 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.’” So the question we began with is answered: death is not the end. In the end God will make an end of death itself and the last word will be the word of life. I can almost picture him there, standing at the gate, welcoming one after another of his saints, wiping the tears from their eyes, pulling them close in a bone-breaking hug, and then ushering them into his kingdom. All those people who have suffered and died for their faith in Jesus. As well as all those people whose names were read earlier this morning. All those people who have loved God and been loved by him.

All those saints...

—*Jim Somerville* © 2017