
The End

Revelation 5:6-14

A Sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on April 14, 2013 by the Rev. Dr. Luke Powery

The end. My sermon isn't over but that is my sermon title. The end.

I realize that because the sermonic text for this morning is from the book of Revelation, some of you may be a bit worried. But I have no end of the world predictions to make like Harold Camping nor will I talk about being left behind and make it into a book series. Yet, I do want to speak about our end, the end, or what in theology is called the doctrine of 'the last things' or eschatology. The eschaton. The end. Streets paved with gold. Many mansions. Harps and golden bowls. I got a robe. You got a robe. All of God's children got a robe. When I get to heaven gonna put on my robe. Gonna shout all over God's heaven. The end. Heaven. Paradise. Dante's Paradise, in his 14th century *Divine Comedy*, is a series of nine concentric spheres surrounding the Earth, which finally ends in Empyrean or the abode of God. There he says, "Such was the living light encircling me, leaving me so enveloped by its veil of radiance that I could see no thing." Light. We've heard how some who are nearing death, the end, say they see a bright light. Paradise. Home. Heaven.

Just this week when I was taking my kids to school, my seven year old son asked me whether I would see the cats I owned as a child in heaven and would I recognize them. Just a regular morning conversation on the way to school. Then he asked, "Is heaven the sky? Do you walk on the clouds?" He's not the only one with questions about heaven or the end. We have questions too. Will I see and recognize my loved ones there? Will our relationships be the same? Will we have bodies? What will I look like? Will I have clothes? Will we need to eat or drink? Will the chapel choir be the lead angelic chorus? Is there a Krzyzewskiville? Questions about the end. The end is important. As T.S. Eliot wrote, "the end is where we start from."

And this is exactly what those who organized this week's lectionary Revelation reading did. They stress the end, the latter part of chapter five. But it does not include the beginning or earlier parts of the same chapter so I took the liberty to request that the reading begin with at least verse six to give a broader context for our future, our end. Singing is at the end and this is significant and you know I love singing. But at the beginning, it is helpful to realize that John, the revelator, weeps because "no one in heaven or on earth or under the earth was able to open the scroll or to look into it." If we look at his canonical face close enough, we might even see the tracks of his tears. We might even hear him sing, "So take a good look at my face, you'll see my smile looks out of place, if you look closer, it's easy to trace the tracks of my tears." Motown singer, Smokey Robinson sang the lead on that song with the Miracles and in describing this song he says that if you look at someone's face close enough, you can see the tracks left behind by their tears because they've cried so much. In the beginning, John wept so much that you could see his tracks far away through the binoculars of biblical history. At first glance, we might think John is in his first year of college away from home because he's weeping bitterly. But he's weeping because of his own finitude and powerlessness. He weeps because he can't see into the future. He's fraught over the future. It's unknown and he doesn't even have power over his own future. It's out of his hands but we'll soon see it's in another's hands.

"No one was able to open the scroll or to look into it." That's the reason for his weeping. The scroll was the book of destiny about God's will. The scroll was God's final plan for the world, the script for the end. The scroll represented God's future for us and no one could open these pages about the future of human history. No one could sneak a peek into God's plan for the end. No one, nowhere.

No one knows what is to come. That includes us as many face budget deficits and corporate downsizing, uncertainty about the threatening political rhetoric of North Korea, unknown job prospects for college

students with lots of educational debt, unknown prognosis about one's health. Fears of the future when we do not know what to expect. When our powerful pedigree no longer gives us a foot in the door or at least a little peak into the scroll. When we were taught, "I am the master of my fate. I am the captain of my soul" (William Ernest Henley), "Immortal, invisible, I'm only wise," how hard it must be when the mighty angel proclaims, "Who is worthy to open the scroll and break its seals?" and we raise our hand but aren't chosen. And then we hear John say to us, "No one is worthy to open the scroll or to look into it." If we don't get it then, he makes his point again, using God's ancient southern language and tell us, "Not ya'll."

In this vision of the end, humanity is not on the throne, a symbol of the center of the cosmos. Someone else is. We don't have power over the future, which may be ironic in university settings where we speak of changing the world. We don't hold the future in our hands. So who does? Who is at the end? And, what is our end? The whole notion of 'the end' could paint a picture of doom and gloom but John sees something else.

As John's tears begin to be wiped away, he sees who really has the power over our future and what he sees may surprise us. Not Mary's pretty little lamb whose fleece was white as snow, but the Lamb of God whose fleece is red with blood. A Lamb standing as if it had been slaughtered. That Lamb took the scroll from the right hand of the one who was seated on the throne. A lame Lamb. Mary's crucified Lamb of God, Jesus Christ. Slaughtered but still standing. This weak and wounded—looking Lamb has the power, all power in his nail-pierced hands, holding our future, holding our end. He is worthy, which means that he is able and authorized, to open the scroll of the future. He holds the future in his hands. God's future for us. Not only does he hold the future, but he is at the center of the vision of our future. He holds the end. He is our end. He is the beginning and the end. Though the future may be unknown to us it is known to God. I know we would like some detailed insider information sometimes and we just don't get it. But here's some more information about this Lamb.

The Lamb of God, this Passover sacrificial lamb, the one who holds the scroll, is the one in whom we pass over from weeping into singing. From sorrow to joy. From heavy burdens to bliss and delight. The sacrifice of God in Christ is the portal to our future, our end, because the Lamb of God is the fulcrum of our future. Once the Lamb appears and takes the scroll, it is then that the praise party begins and the musical melodies of the harp begin to be plucked and the aromatic prayers of the saints begin to rise and then my favorite part begins—singing, full-voiced singing. What an apt response to the realization that the Lamb holds our future securely in his hands. And because of this fact, there is a doxological crescendo unlike any other in scripture.

Our wounded song leader, our saving maestro, with his slaughtered stance, stands in the center of this chorus, conducting the celestial victory chant. Holding the scroll, leading us in this scrollful song, guiding us in our primary vocation as Christians—that is, to worship. The scroll becomes a baton and with every wave of his baton, the singing gets louder and the choir grows in number. This Lamb sacrifices his whole self on the altar of the universe that we might truly sing. The living creatures and elders are joined by the voice of many angels surrounding the throne and "they numbered myriads of myriads and thousands of thousands, singing with full voice, 'Worthy is the Lamb that was slaughtered to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing!'" Choir members continue to be added because of the good news that the Lamb holds our future. And not just Duke Chapel choir singers are there but "every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea, and all that is in them, singing 'To the one seated on the throne and to the Lamb be blessing and honor and glory and might forever and ever!'" The heavens vibrate with this holy refrain. A cosmic chorus of creation, singing and worshipping at the end.

Song is so important. As we know, much of the church's theology comes from its hymns. People are prone to remember a hymn more than a sermon. The power of singing is evident even as the ancient church

adage declares, “he who sings prays twice.” St. Augustine writes, “Singing belongs to the one who loves.” The singing throughout this vision reveals love for the slaughtered Lamb and God. In the end, there is singing. In the end, there is love because in the end, there is God, and what better response can there be than a song. The end, our end, is music and worship.

In the end, we proclaim ‘amen’ and do as the elders did, who fell down and worshipped. We worship because our end is the eternal praise of God and the Lamb. ‘The end’ for a movie or a novel signifies completion and that something is over. The movie is finished and the lights are turned off. The book is shut closed. But through a Christian lens, the end is really the beginning, an eternal beginning in a world without end where Christ is the everlasting light.

The end is our beginning where we do what we were created to do—worship. To be in the words of Eastern Orthodox theologian, Alexander Schmemmann, *homo adorans*, a worshipping human being, a priest of all creation. Or, as the answer to the first question in the 17th century Westminster Shorter Catechism tells us—the chief end of humanity is to glorify God and enjoy God forever. In the end, we arrive at our end, the goal of our lives as a doxological people. And we realize, as the third movement of Brahms’ Requiem begins, “that there must be an end to me, [and] that my life has a goal.”

But the end begins now. The end begins every time we sing. Without a repertoire of song and doxology we falter as Christian disciples. But if we sing, we get a foretaste of what is to come, our future, our end, held by the wounded hands of Christ. Our singing releases our future to him and signifies trust about the end. There are many mysteries about the end. But we can be sure of at least two things: Christ is our end and we will sing in the end.

So as we continue to sing in this service, we sing because we remember our future reunion and communion. We remember the future present. We remember that there is a future for us and Christ holds it and guides it until that day when we will sing with all the saints in glory eternally, “This is the feast of victory for our God...For the Lamb who was slain has begun his reign. This is the feast of victory for our God.” The end. Amen.