
Come, Lord Jesus!

Revelation 22:12-21

A sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on May 29, 2022 by the Rev. Bruce Puckett

A few weeks ago, the University community celebrated Commencement. We joined in the festive remembrance of the many great accomplishments of students who graduated from Duke this year. Like most years at the commencement ceremony, we were reminded that while this celebration marked the end of the journey for a student's particular degree, commencement was really a celebration of a movement into the future. In this way, commencement is as much or more about a beginning than it is about an ending.

Similar to this, the last chapter of the last book of the Bible, Revelation 22, is a sort of commencement. It is an ending that is a beginning. The end of the Bible is not as much about a completed past as it is about a coming future. Today is the last Sunday in Eastertide, the Sunday between Ascension Day—the day we remember Christ ascending into heaven and taking his place of authority and power at God's right hand—and Pentecost—the day we remember the giving of God's Spirit and the creation of the church. And on this Sunday, we have been assigned a reading from the end of the Good Book as if to remind us that Easter is not simply about what is completed, but it is about the future that is coming because of Jesus's life, death, and resurrection. In a way, today is a commencement Sunday in the liturgical calendar. The season of Easter is ending, and we are reminded of the forever reign and rule of Christ that is coming. It's an ending that is a beginning. This Sunday emphasizes the fact that Christians are a future-oriented people, always watching for the final breaking in of the reign of Jesus and his kingdom. This future orientation is so powerful that Christians are invited and called to live in the reality of this future even now.

But did anyone watch the news this week? Heaven knows this of all weeks is a bad one to imagine the rule of Christ's love and justice having broken into our world in any way that is ultimate, final, or perhaps even truly meaningful. Like so many parents, this week my wife and I had to look our 11-year-old in the eyes to tell him about a terror that happened in an elementary school to kids who were about his age. This week we witnessed violence turned on children, vulnerable and powerless as they are, and on teachers in their place of teaching, learning, and community—in their school, a space our children and teachers deserve to inhabit without fear for their safety or well-being. And that's only one space the violence and harm that we do to one another has cast a shadow of mourning on our world. You know the news headlines of just the last few weeks: the racially motivated mass shootings in a grocery store in Buffalo and a church in Laguna Woods, the murders in our city, and the continued decimation of war in Ukraine, Yemen, and Ethiopia, just to name a few. These only scratch the surface of the hurt we inflict on each other and God's good creation. From personal betrayals of trust to the economic deprivation of the powerless to the greedy pillaging of the earth, everywhere we turn, we can see humanity's depravity on full display. If this week is an ending that looks to a beginning, I'm left hoping there is no connection between what I'm seeing and what is to come. I'm left thinking this status quo of violence and hatred and harm will not due. I'm left looking for something new.

I wonder if the Christians to whom John the revelator wrote were hoping and looking for something similar. Those early Christians knew a few things about the violence and harm done to the vulnerable and powerless. In the early years of the church's existence, Christians were relegated

to the margins and pushed to the fringe. They were politically impotent, socially outcast, and economically vulnerable. The Roman Empire was not friendly to anyone who challenged the supremacy of the emperor's rule or disrupted the status quo. The emperor was lord and king, and it was treasonous for anyone to claim to serve a lord and king other than the emperor and punishable by death. So the early Christians faced regular persecution and even execution for following Jesus. They were always on the outside, alienated from the larger society, and in imminent danger. At different points, the emperors of Rome sought to systematically exterminate the church using whatever bloody means necessary. The threat of violence and harm was ever present—it was the status quo—and the early Christians had no political or social recourse to prevent what might come their way. For these Christians, to follow Jesus was a matter of life and death.

The message John received, his revelation, was to be proclaimed to these Christians who, like us, are in need of hope and encouragement. John shared his apocalyptic vision, his revelation, with a people who trusted that in Jesus's life, death, and resurrection all things had changed, that God had defeated the powers of sin and death once and for all. And yet, these early Christians were experiencing the dissonance between the reality they expected and the reality they lived. The message of John's revelation must be understood in light of the fact that these Christians were caught in the crush of oppression and violence when they expected to be caught up in the glory of the new life of Christ. John's encouragement to live faithfully when persecuted, the cautions against worshipping anything or anyone other than Jesus, the pronouncements of judgments on those who choose evil over good, and the dramatic reversals of the reality that Jesus's coming kingdom will bring all must be seen in the context of the dissonance between expectation and reality.

And while some Christians have assumed that John's revelation was about predicting the future, the truth is he was more interested in inspiring hope and faithfulness among a persecuted people in their present than outlining an expected end of times. John's revelation is not so much about the end times as it is about finding one's end in Jesus. John's revelation provides hope and encouragement rooted in the truth that faithfulness to the future that will come with Christ's return is worth their present suffering. So, this revelation **is** concerned with the coming future. Yet, **it's not** so much concerned with helping Christians, past or present, forecast the coming of this future in a detailed way.

In the final words of the book of Revelation, John leaves these marginalized and persecuted followers of Jesus with an invitation to faithfulness inspired by hope in a future that is surely coming. John shares the words Jesus spoke, saying, "See, I am coming soon; my reward is with me, to repay according to everyone's work. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end." In these words, Jesus gives the people reason to hope in the midst of their distress. The challenges they face, the hardship they endure, the seeming victory of evil over good, will not be forever. "I am coming soon." Though the time of Christ's final return was not known to John or to the early church, and is not known to us, what is certain is that through Jesus an end is coming to loss, to heartache, to death, to pain, to violence, and to the harm we do to each other.

Jesus is the one who has been from the beginning and will be at the end. The Roman emperor was not the first and won't be the last. Jesus is the first and the last. Lack of resources and loss of life was not the first and won't be the last. Jesus is the first and the last. Racism wasn't the first and won't be the last. Jesus is the first and the last. Destruction of creation in our desire for more was not the first and won't be the last. Jesus is the first and the last. Our obsession with war and military might was not the first and won't be the last. Jesus is the first and the last. Assault rifles

against children was not the first and won't be the last. Jesus is the first and the last. You can name more. We all can. And still, Jesus is the first and the last.

The promise of John's vision is Jesus will come again to make all things right in the end. Jesus, the one who is the bright morning star, will drive out the night with all of its troubles and dangers and make for a new day. The directive of this revelation is not to grow weary in faithfulness. The message is to keep pressing on in the face of the grief and pain and rage we experience at the hurt and harm all around. The encouragement is to do the good work for Christ's merciful and just reward.

In response to this message, John says the Spirit and the bride, which is the church, say "Come." Jesus says, "I'm coming soon." And the church responds with the Spirit's prayer, "Come." And then all those around join in to pray, saying, "Come." One righteous response to Jesus's promise to come is to join the church through the ages in asking Jesus to come. If weeks like this one don't drive you to pray for Jesus to come, potentially nothing will. But the truth is we get tired of offering prayers in the face of the violence we see. People belittle how glibly others give out their "thoughts and prayers" next to the hashtag trending on social media. And perhaps there is good reason for criticizing this offering up of "thoughts and prayers." Yet, prayer **is** doing something. As my friend Keith always says, "Prayer is not a substitute for action. Prayer is the action for which there is no substitute."

Don't get me wrong. Christians are also called to other actions. In John's revelation, Jesus emphasizes this, too. Jesus reminds the church that our work matters. Jesus says, "My reward is with me, to repay according to everyone's work." Christians are called to act in the ways of Jesus's love, justice, and grace regardless of their present circumstance. The church is called to work and to the work of prayer. And in our work and prayer we align ourselves with the ways of Jesus, the one who has come and who is coming as judge of the living and the dead.

In this concluding chapter of the Bible, we see that as the church joins with the Spirit in prayer asking Jesus to come, the revelation expands and an invitation is opened to all who seek life. The prayer of the church becomes an invitation for all who are thirsty to come and receive the living water. The active prayer of the church serves for the healing and life of the world around, of all nations, and all peoples. As the church faithfully and earnestly looks toward and lives into the coming of Jesus, there is new opportunity for life. Life is the gift the church proclaims when through the Spirit, she lives in hope and faithfully follows Jesus. In a world as troubled as our own, as in need of hope as our own, as consumed by death as our own, the church is called to invite all who are in need of life to come to the living water and, with us, to receive life as a gift.

The final words of John's revelation are full of hope, prayer, and grace. At the end of our Holy Book, we are left with an invitation to a beginning. Jesus once again promises, "Surely, I am coming soon." And with Christians of all ages and with everyone who longs for a better world, a safer place for children, an end to pain, and a filling of the hungry we cry out, "Come, Lord Jesus." With Christians of all ages and with everyone who longs for a place where tears are no more, where hope is realized, where joy is true, where life is everlasting, and where God's glory resides, we say, "Come, Lord Jesus."

Revelation and the whole of Christian Scripture ends with a word of grace for all. "The grace of the Lord Jesus be with all." We are left with an invitation to a different way of life, ordered, marked, and shaped by Jesus's grace. It's commencement time. Let the reign of Jesus's love, justice, and grace commence. Come, Lord Jesus! Amen.