Alpha and Omega

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Revelation 1

Opening:

William Loader said, “In the beginning: God; in the end: God; in the midst of life: God. “

Today we are not speaking about the God of Ray Lewis who decides football games, for we know if God did indeed decide football games the Notre Dame Fighting Irish would have prevailed in the BCS championship this year.

I have had the opportunity while studying at the University of Notre Dame to enjoy celebrating Mass in the Basilica of the Sacred Heart. My catholic brothers and sisters are so devout, they go to Mass every day. I tell them, they got the short end of the deal as we Protestants are only required weekly attendance.

I go into this beautiful domed sanctuary, to sit beneath the rainbow of colors dancing, stained glass shot through with sunlight to sing the liturgy, offer the prayers, to smell the incense and to be reminded of the mystery of God. I pause to celebrate how big God is, to remember how small I am, to ponder this God, the alpha and omega, the beginning and the end.

Text:

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, who testified to the word of God and to the testimony of Jesus Christ, even to all that he saw.

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.

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, 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, and made us to be a kingdom, priests serving his God and Father, to him be glory and dominion for ever and ever. Amen.

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.

‘I am the Alpha and the Omega’, says the Lord God, who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty.

**Background:**

It is important here to give some context, to say that the writer of and the first hearers of this text lived under a perceived sense of persecution.

Perceived persecution because historically we know that it is not into the 3rd century and the reign of Decius that we see a state sanctioned, empire wide persecution of Christians. However, in the testimony of the Apocalypse, a text we date to about 90-100 CE we know there were occurrences of persecution that seem to be localized rather than universal. It does seem that these Christians identify as persons who feel they are under persecution and it is this notion that colors this received text.

This material is written under the emperor Domition who is known in history as “the other Flavian son” and the “Nero redux.” Unimpressive when compared to Titus and Vespasian, the empire anticipated Domition as the return of Nero. Domition’s son died in childbirth, images of this son are found on coins where the son holds the stars in his hands; so that Revelation is a direct challenge, Revelation asks who is God??

We must be careful as we approach this text to allow it to be what it is, that is to say, allow the mystery, the monsters, the metaphors to remain. It is not incumbent upon us to decode a formula because God is not a formula to be solved, not a riddle to be explained. God is God. We come humbly before this text and must be resolved to resist any attempt to domesticate the supernatural.

Caird says, to compile a catalogue and identify each element in the vision is to "unweave the rainbow."

In the text of the Apocalypse we are invited into the supernatural realm into which John sees, at issue is not whether what John sees is future or past, what he says is “And I saw!” The veil is lifted and he sees into the other dimension, into the worship service that rolls on through the ages, the worship service that was witnessed by Isaiah and Ezekiel before him.

God says, “I am the Alpha, Omega, First, Last, the one who Was, Is, and IS to COME, Lord God…pantokrator, YHWH”

Revelation isn’t so much about a new world as it is about the reclamation of this one, of Creation being set back to order of all things being redeemed, rocks, rivers, trees; it is not so much about destruction as it is about new beginnings.

This is not a formula, neither is God

This is not a book for wealthy Christians in the west to comprehend, this book is not for the Empire but for those who have been squashed and squandered by it.
It is a text for when we come to the end of ourselves and realize finally there are things only God can do.

This is a relevant text for ministers then, for persons called to the proclamation and representation of Jesus Christ because there is something built into our DNA that might keep us from coming to the end of ourselves far too long. We want to give answers, to help, to heal, to make right, Revelation reminds us God is God, what we see is not always what is real, that this world is not all.

As ministers of the Gospel, we will always fight the temptation to “tell me about the end times, tell me what to do, move, act, do, become,” but there are times when it is ours to bow and know God is God and we are not.

**Story:**

Are you all familiar with the term “over function”

I’m not exactly sure when my “over-functioning” began, however, I do have a very early memory of being a child of 5 or 6 and waking one night to the fear that my family would stop breathing in their sleep. I decided the only thing to do was to drag my pillow and my blanket out into the hall to keep watch. I situated myself between my sister’s room and my parents and stayed awake as long as I could watching over them.

I’m not sure what I thought I would do, would I have rushed in to deliver mouth to mouth resuscitation, how was I even going to be able to remain awake to hear someone quietly cease to breathe. It was as if I thought I was the giver of life and breath, as if I could cause people whom I loved to live or die.

“Over-functioning” that’s what my counselor calls it. A temptation to be smarter, work harder, give more, do more…then all will be well instead of admitting there are struggles that are beyond us, power not of this realm.

A couple of years ago I had the occasion to be at a leadership meeting for the national church. We were discussing team and the role of a coach and as an illustration, the speaker used the movie “Facing the Giants.” In this movie, a coach wants to teach a football player that he is capable of more than he knows so he blindfolds the player and have him get on his hands and knees and crawl to the finish line. Weak as he is they decide to blow his mind at his ability so they put someone on top of his back and he now has to struggle to carry that person across the line. All the while, other team mates are yelling and cheering him on, “don’t give up” “you can do it!” they scream. Finally, the weak, weary player makes it across the line.

The room was filled with men who began to wipe their eyes and nod their heads and then the speaker asked me for my opinion of the clip. At first I declined citing that since it had not been about the sport of shopping for shoes on a sale rack I really could not comment intelligibly but he pressed so finally I said, “I’m not sure. I think this is an example of what we do too often.” “What?” he asked, “We encourage people to keep going, we push them beyond the breaking point and add more on top of them when really what they need is to be reminded it is not all up to them and that maybe they need to take a minute, sit on the side line and take a knee.”
“I loved this clip!” another friend said. “It reminds me of when I played football, one time I came off the field and showed my coach my thumb was hanging loose from my other fingers. The coach said, ‘Is your neck broke? Then tape it up and get back out there!”’

Yes, this is mostly how we respond in church work, we go past our own abilities, take on more than is humanly possible and go far too long without a break or reflection or refuel. We sometimes forget God is God and we are not, we sometimes forget there is work that only God can do.

Confession:

Control is my own response to fear, a need to take hold of, to rule over something, anything when the world is in disarray. This is a weakness, a hazard a pitfall waiting to happen for those of us in the pastoral office because if we are not very careful, we find ourselves wanting to rush in, lunging forward to save, reaching to make right. I certainly do not mean that as followers of Christ it is not incumbent upon us to work towards justice, to do our part to embody and envisage the kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven; but I do mean that there are moments along the journey, hard places that we will no doubt come upon, rugged terrain that we can not in our own power make smooth again.

There will be dreams and loved ones to bury, there will be appointments we fail to keep, there will be moments lost and seasons of desperate, crushing defeat and it is in these hours when you will best understand the heart of this text of hope, you will find the rhythm of life not measured by human time and space, you will need to know what it means to sing, “There is coming a day…”

It will be in these dark hours, in these most uncertain times when what is up seems down, when what you thought was right looks wrong when you question all that is in you that you must come humble and broken and if I might borrow a phrase from George Martin, “God blind” before this text and hear the words again, “I am the Alpha, the Omega, the one who was and is and is to come, the Almighty, the pantakrator, I AM.”

It is in these hours, in the shadow lands when this text must call you back to the bush aflame in the desert, where you take off your shoes because you are on holy ground. Where you curl up before a God who is bigger and greater than your imagination can allow and you release yourself to float upon the seas that obey this God’s command.

Closing:

I heard a story once about the life of Pope John XXIII prior to his ordination as pope and while he was serving as a Cardinal in the Church of Rome. Born, Angelo Roncalli, he, of course, held a very prominent position within the Catholic Church. Every night before he would go to bed, it is said that he would ask himself this question, “Angelo, does the church belong to you or God?” Reminded then, that it was not all up to him, he would say, “Go to sleep Angelo, go to sleep.”

In the beginning: God; in the end: God; in the midst of life: God. Wm Loader