

Revelation 22:12-21

12 'See, I am coming soon; my reward is with me, to repay according to everyone's work. 13I am the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end.'

14 Blessed are those who wash their robes,* so that they will have the right to the tree of life and may enter the city by the gates. 15Outside are the dogs and sorcerers and fornicators and murderers and idolaters, and everyone who loves and practices falsehood.

16 'It is I, Jesus, who sent my angel to you with this testimony for the churches. I am the root and the descendant of David, the bright morning star.'

17The Spirit and the bride say, 'Come.'

And let everyone who hears say, 'Come.'

And let everyone who is thirsty come.

Let anyone who wishes take the water of life as a gift.

18 I warn everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book: if anyone adds to them, God will add to that person the plagues described in this book; 19if anyone takes away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God will take away that person's share in the tree of life and in the holy city, which are described in this book.

20 The one who testifies to these things says, 'Surely I am coming soon.'

Amen. Come, Lord Jesus!

21 The grace of the Lord Jesus be with all the saints. Amen.

Make of It What You Will

Congratulations, you made it to the end. It has been a long road. We have done our share of wandering, had some good times and some confusing times. Looking back, I

would like to think you have learned some things. More importantly, I hope you have experienced an occasional revelation, recognized God reaching into the world, all the while an admittedly strange man leading you, and here you are in this celestial sanctuary.

The end to which you probably think I am referring is Confirmation Class, and today is indeed Confirmation Sunday. However, I am referring to something else we just completed. Today's passage from Revelation contains the very last words of Scripture. Now that we have made it to the end...what did you think? With all that happened in Genesis and the garden, we might have guessed from the beginning it was going to be a long road. We watched the Israelites do plenty of wandering in the desert, saw some good times and some confusing times. We have witnessed bloody battles, sacred vows, wild dreams, epic journeys and interesting characters. We have seen intense revelation, times when the people recognized God reaching into the world. Then came this strange man Jesus Christ leading us, ultimately all the way to a Celestial City at the end of Revelation.

The stories of the Bible and our own are but mirrors. They are unpredictable, varied, filled with huge ups and downs, riddled with uncertainty, at times fraught with fear or pain, at times filled with joy and contentment. The stories housed in this room right now belong to those who have held rifles in war, hands of dying loved ones, deep secret treasures, and dreams never to be let go. They tell of incredible achievements, spanning far off lands and distant seas. And yet while most of us have traveled far to get to this point, few of us have stories that follow a straight line. We have come here, you have come here, by a long and winding road. That is precisely how we got here. Our journeys prepare us, don't they?

It took me a while to figure this out. I put off my decision to be a minister for years. When I finally told my parents, I expressed embarrassment for the rather long and circuitous route I had taken to where I needed to be, too much journeying, not enough settling down. I wrote to my dad and in so many words apologized for having not arrived at my decision earlier.

He responded by sharing with me a quote from a book he was reading by Rabbi Kushner:

“Maybe in plane geometry the shortest distance between two points is a straight line. But in life the shortest distance to our goal may be an indirect, roundabout route. The straight line between us and our goal may have hidden traps or land mines, or it may be too easy and never challenge us to discover our strengths or give us time to let those strengths emerge. When the Israelites left Egypt, we read that God did not lead them on the most direct route to the Promised Land precisely because it was short (Exodus 13:17). They needed extra travel time to make the transition from having been slaves to being a free people.”¹

I tell you this on Confirmation Sunday, because what is being confirmed in you—and hopefully what is confirmed in each you every week—is not your certainty. What is being confirmed in you today is your faith, your trust. As Anne Lamott reminds us certainty is the opposite of faith. By being confirmed, you are not declaring that you have all the answers, you are declaring your willingness to trust in a loving God who will lead you through the questions, and expressing your desire to be a part of a community whose members encourage one another to do the same. Confirmation, if anything, has

¹ Harold S. Kushner, *The Lord is My Shepherd: Healing Wisdom of the Twenty-Third Psalm* (New York: Anchor Books, 2003), 73.

been that extra time to help you transition, not from being slaves to a free people—I think far too highly of your parents, and my own job security, to say that—but to help you transition from being captive to the narrow plans you or others have for your life, to being free to experience and follow the leadings of a loving God in Jesus Christ, who will take you to places you could have never imagined. I know I am here because of where I have been, and I believe even more strongly that where I will one day be will be because I have been here.

God is with us in this journey, beginning to end. “I am the Alpha and Omega” says the risen Christ in Revelation, the first and last letters of the Greek alphabet. I am throughout. The next line is admittedly a little strange to us, “Blessed are those who wash their robes.” Apparently, first century Christians had trouble getting their teenagers to do their laundry too. Then the serious warning: there are dogs and sorcerers out there, plenty who will practice falsehood and encourage you to do the same. You might in the concluding lines of the Bible we would find a predictable strategy for dealing with these realities, perhaps a reminder to love our neighbor, resist temptation, or stand fearless for God is in charge.

No, the final words of the Bible advise us to do one simple thing, invite Christ into the world. “The Spirit and the bride (the church) say, ‘Come.’ And let everyone who hears say, ‘Come.’ ” Tell Jesus to come in.

Then, in a miraculous move, to those too weary to call on him, Jesus issues the invitation, “And let everyone who is thirsty come. Let anyone who wishes take the water of life as a gift.”

Did you catch that? Christ says, you invite me into your life, for I am inviting you into mine. The Bible essentially concludes with Jesus saying, I want to meet you in the middle. What do you need to know now that we are finished? You need to know how to ask, how to ask God into your life, not into a segment of your life, but into your life in its entirety, which means the most important thing you will learn to do in your life is pray. That is the beginning of freedom, for it recognizes the essential need for relationship, especially with God.

If praying is still strange to you, just think of the simple pattern outlined for us in the Lord's prayer, the prayer many of us have come to know in a new way lately: Praise God (Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name), call for God to be active in the world (Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven), lift up not your wants but your daily needs to God (Give us this day our daily bread), confess wrongs and ask for forgiveness to the measure you can forgive (forgive us our debts or trespasses as we forgive others), invite God into your struggles (lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil) and conclude, again, by praising God (for thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever).

The task, then, for each of us in this community of faith is to both issue and receive the invitation to live a life within God's leading, transforming our twists, turns and uncertainties into part of the blessed journey.

There is a character in the Wendell Berry Novel *Jayber Crow* who says all of this well, and issues us a final challenge. With it I will conclude:

“If you could do it, I suppose, it would be a good idea to live your life in a straight line—starting, say in the Dark Wood of Error, and proceeding by logical steps through

Hell and Purgatory and into Heaven. Or you could take the King's Highway past appropriately named dangers, toils and snares, and finally cross the River of death and enter the Celestial City. But that is not the way I have done it, so far. I am a pilgrim, but my pilgrimage has been wandering and unmarked. Often what has looked like a straight line to me has been a circle or a doubling back. I have been in the Dark Wood of Error any number of times. I have known something of Hell, Purgatory, and Heaven, but not always in that order. The names of many snares and dangers have been made known to me, but I have seen them only in looking back. Often I have not known where I was going until I was already there. I have had my share of desires and goals, but my life has come to me or I have gone to it mainly by way of mistakes and surprises. Often I have received better than I have deserved. Often my fairest hopes have rested on bad mistakes. I am an ignorant pilgrim, crossing a dark valley. And yet for a long time, looking back, I have been unable to shake off the feeling that I have been led—make of that what you will.”²

Today you begin to make of it what you will, for Christ is here to take you, literally, on the ride of your life. Amen.

² Wendell Berry, *Jayber Crow: The Life Story of Jayber Crow, Barber, of the Port William Membership, as Written by Himself* (Washington, D.C.: Counterpoint, 2000), 133.