

## OMEGA AND ALPHA

A friend of mine said to me, “Oh Bruce, don’t preach from Revelation on your very first Sunday there. The people will think you’re weird.” “When *do* you want them to find out?” I asked. “Besides, don’t you think those folk in Corona del Mar read their Bibles?” “Well,” said my friend, “it *is* a UCC church, isn’t it? Most of the UCC people I know don’t read their Bibles very much.” “It will be okay,” I said. “It’s still a Christian church, and Christians love Jesus and read their Bibles every day. There are bound to be a few of them down there. Besides, there’s a shortage of lions this year.”

Now, of course I would never mention such things here. But that was a conversation I was holding far to the north. To you I will say that I am in the middle of a very poignant ending and a brand new beginning, and I need the comfort of Revelation’s perspective. God is always bringing some things to a close and some things to a new beginning. Not only that, it is important, whenever I am at the beginning of something, to remember that soon it will close. Otherwise I would lose humility and perspective. It is perhaps even more important to remember, each time I am losing something or it is shutting down, that God is also bringing a new beginning. Alpha to Omega – but also Omega to Alpha. I consider it to be one of the greatest promises we have from our Lord.

It is possible that each of you are going through some endings and new beginnings as well. If you don’t think so, just wait a couple of hours. We never know what a day may bring. Life is always in flux. Nothing is permanent here. Among other things, that’s why we enjoy it so. We have a God who does not like boredom. So the possibilities are endless, and we are never in as much control as we would like to pretend.

Well, maybe some of you *are* in control. I surely thought I had my own life well figured out. I love a place at the opening of the Strait of Juan de Fuca, called Port Townsend. It is surrounded by beautiful mountains and sparkling water, and sometimes the mountains hide just so they can surprise us all over again with how incredibly beautiful they are. Being an old California boy, I love wind and rain and snow and dark clouds chasing each other across an ever-changing sky. Anyway, Mariana and I have a place in Port Townsend where we love to go. A little over a year ago, we called an associate pastor, Michael, to the Mercer Island church. He turned out to be just wonderful.

So my schedule got halfway reasonable for the first time in thirty-seven years. Michael was preaching about half the time, and I got to concentrate more on retreats, Bible Study groups, studying, and even playing with friends. Well, I figured Michael could wax and I could wane and in a few years I would just stay longer and longer in Port Townsend. Besides that, we finally got our daughter out of Los Angeles and up to Washington state, and my son's wife was expecting a baby. They live up there, across the mountains. Perfect. Everything was getting just perfect.

Then about a year ago I started getting these little glitches in my prayers. Nothing unfriendly, just little hints and whispers that I should be on my toes – that a change was coming and that I should be careful not to miss it. Well, I knew what that was about – it was the new associate pastor coming. Dutifully I prepared and got ready for that, more thoroughly than I otherwise would have. But the whisper said, “Yes, that too, but that’s not really it.” Then one thing led to another in a series of steps I never could have organized – and would not have, even if I could have. And here I am. God knows why. I sure don’t. So far, I doubt if any of you do either.

Of course, I could be mistaken about the whole thing. With humans, that is always a real possibility. But I am here because I *believe* the Spirit asked me to come here. Maybe it was Satan; maybe it was an accident; maybe it was some sad misunderstanding. But I believe the Spirit asked me to come here. I tell you this because it is important for you to realize that whether right or wrong, I believe it. Because you see, that means I think something important must be supposed to happen here. It does not mean I think I am more important than any of God’s other loved children, although I could easily be convinced that some of *you* must be. In any case, I am faced with the realization that God messed up my life and my plans for a fare-thee-well, and now here I am. I can’t find anything; I don’t know anybody; the network for helping people that I carefully wrought for fifteen years is gone. And people around here drive like maniacs, and there are so many of them that it’s hard to believe even Almighty God could love them all (unless you stop to talk to them).

So I am delighted to be here. No, I mean it. I am very excited. There must be something really special in store, or why did we go to all this trouble? If you had been privy to my prayer life these last several months, you would know that the Christ did indeed go to a lot of trouble! I am amazed all over again at His patience and timing.

Now, I realize full well that in about two dumb remarks and three mistakes, none of this will cut any ice. And I *will* make them – you can be sure of that. Please, I am not saying, “Be nice to me; I’ve been through a lot.” You know as well as I do that we cannot get anywhere that way. We can only get to whatever God has in mind by living it through – as who we are, and as whatever we authentically become together. But in your own quiet times and prayers, you might be a little more alert than usual too. Alpha and Omega and Alpha is no joke – not if we are faithful to our Lord. Something important is supposed to be happening here, and you are all supposed to be part of it. We don’t even know yet which one of us is going to catch on first and help the rest of us to see it. So be on your toes – and also on your knees.

**No one can get very far on the Christian WAY without coming to terms with death.** And I do not mean simply believing that there is some kind of Heaven. We must come to the place where we are at peace with the thoughts of our own demise on this planet, and we must come to a non-surrendering acceptance of all the little deaths that remind us of it all along the way: failures, losses, setbacks, sickness, etc. None of this acceptance is any excuse for negativity, discouragement, loss of hope, or the cessation of our striving. After all, we trust God, not this present world. Nevertheless, we cannot come to fullness of LIFE until we have faced and accepted all that death can throw at us.

Our Leader does not see Life in terms of this world only. I need to say it stronger than that, but our language hardly knows how to put it. Jesus does not believe that the battles we fight here are won or lost here. Life is vast, God is beyond our comprehension, and this brief experience – here in this world – is but one tiny piece of what is really happening. Much of Christian lore and teachings sound negative to us at first because we will not break our minds open to hear: this place is a prison – until we come to terms with death; until we know that LIFE is bigger than death; until we trust God to be the God of Life.

The statements about “dying to self” and “take up your cross” and “dying daily” – these are victory cries! These are release from bondage. These are declarations of independence from anything and everything this world can throw at us or claim as authority over us. We will be who we really are, live for what we truly believe, and serve the God who gives us LIFE and who ranks far higher than anyone or

anything here. *“Looking to Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.”* (Hebrews 12:2) Death – and the fear of death – can no longer contain or control us.

Jesus did not live like maybe He believed there was life after death – He lived like death was irrelevant! So it was built into the WAY of His followers. Baptism pledges us to have died with Him – to have faced and overcome death in His name. *“Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life.”* (Romans 6:3-4)

**No one can get very far on the Christian WAY without coming to terms with death.** The records are clear on this point. Not only in theory but in fact, Jesus’ followers changed. They lived and died on this new premise. No one could take LIFE from them. So from time to time they died in this world when it tried to prevent them from living this WAY. Sheer existence here is not Life, and Life is not found in survival. Life is found in God. Today I find more and more people trying to live as if Life were irrelevant, instead of living as if death were irrelevant. That is a terrible reversal of all that Jesus showed and taught.

So why are we reading from the Book of Revelation? It’s around fifty years after Jesus’ crucifixion. What do they think of Him now? *“Grace to you and peace from him who is and who was and who is to come.”* That is what they think of Him! That is just what we have been talking about. Death is irrelevant. We worship the God of Life, and we live in a Kingdom of Life.

It is no accident that we encounter this theme about the Alpha and the Omega – the beginning and the end – in both the first and last chapters of Revelation. All the New Testament writers (except for James) quickly realize that Jesus’ coming has boosted us into a many-dimensional reality. Presumably the reality has always been here, but He has boosted our awareness so we can discern it. Everything here that matters is connected to realities far beyond this world.

Track Revelation with me for a moment. After greetings from God and from Jesus Christ – and John purposefully jumbles the two together because, for him, God is always the God who reveals himself in Jesus Christ – we get a full theological disclosure (we are only in chapter one, verse five): “To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood and made us a kingdom, priests to his God and Father, to him be glory and dominion for ever and ever. Amen.” He loves us, frees us from our sins, makes us a kingdom of priests – and He has dominion (sovereignty). Funny how many of the New Testament writers were Calvinists.

Next it is made clear that the *churches* are important. There is not just one of them, and they are not all the same. Christ is in the midst of the churches, concerned and caring about how they are doing and how they are carrying the Message – bearing witness to His truth.

Shifting to the last chapter: “*Let the evil doer still do evil, and the filthy still be filthy, and the righteous still do right, and the holy still be holy.*” Remember Jesus’ teaching about the wheat and the tares? We are at the end of The Book, folks. It is not our job to stop all the evil or to fix it all – neither the world’s nor our neighbors’, and maybe not even our spouse’s. I’m sure it’s too bad that we do not have the wisdom or the resources or the power, but we do not. Only God does. Be who *you* are supposed to be and carry the Message of God’s love. The rest is up to God. We are not sovereign; we are not going to “save the world.” It is called “humility” to admit this, and humility is often lacking in liberal churches. Therefore we often pretend a counterfeit love, give charity for the wrong reasons, and squander our resources in ways that help nobody.

Then John reiterates the classic mistake: “I am coming soon.” But there has been a misunderstanding; it has been *two thousand years*. That is not “soon”! When will the church get around to admitting its mistakes? We do not get a “close-out” in any way or manner we have been expecting. We must put all concepts and notions of the end times back into God’s hands. We simply do not know. We have been wrong about everything we have said or thought about it so far. Unless, of course, you translate back to the individual level: For you, the close-out is soon. For you, He is coming soon. (“Sing Hallelujah! Hallelujah!”)

Why? Well, Revelation is bringing us full-circle on purpose. The little excursion into this earthly realm is brief, traumatic, and filled with trouble. But *“Fear not, I am the first and the last, and the living one; I died, and behold I am alive for evermore, and I have the keys of death and Hades.”* (1:17-18) So if Jesus has the keys and if He loves you, just exactly what is going to keep you in death or in Hell? Nothing! No power on earth or in Heaven is going to steal you or keep you from Him. That’s Gospel!

By the way, in chapter twenty-two, verse sixteen, John has Jesus saying: *“I Jesus have sent my angel to you with this testimony for the churches. I am the root and the offspring of David, the bright morning star.”* This is five verses from the end of the Bible. Jesus clearly states that Joseph is His earthly and biological father. Now, since He is speaking from Heaven, surely He must know. I will eventually give you abundant evidence to back this up, from the first chapter of the New Testament through the last. You don’t have to believe me, but you might as well get used to hearing it.

But what we really care about is verse thirteen: *“I am the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end.”* **No one can get very far on the Christian WAY without coming to terms with death.** Otherwise, you see, we start basing faith on what is happening to us in this world. If so-and-so dies, there must be no God. If God does not save me from this or that situation, there must be no God. It is only a short step from there to: “If I don’t win the lottery, then God must not love me.” Some people tell me we can prove anything by the Bible. Are you willing to show me where it says that if God loves you, you will win the lottery? (*“Give, and it will be given to you; good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap. For the measure you give will be the measure you get back.”* (Luke 6:38) There you go. Those of you who have not won the lottery yet, it is because you have not been doing enough giving.)

**No one can get very far on the Christian WAY without coming to terms with death.** It is essential that we transform all our fear into the fear of displeasing Christ. You will tell me you do not like to think of faith in terms of fear, lest you start thinking that fear is what motivates your faith. I understand. We want and desire to please Christ. We want to live out of love and gratitude. Agreed. (Funny isn’t it? Greed is bad, but *agreed* is good.) The point is, most of us still have some fear left in our lives. However philosophically or

theologically correct our theories may be, if we do not transform the fear we have into a fear of displeasing Christ, then that fear will remain to control us and throw us off the Christian Path.

Continuing with our realities: Some people try to come to terms with the big death but neglect to come to terms with all the little deaths. Some of the little deaths are pretty big too, from our perspective, but none of them seem quite as final as our dying out of this world. Losing a loved one is for most of us the biggest of the “little deaths.” But sometimes we lose a loved one for only a short time, like when we get into an argument. That is a little death too, even if you win the argument.

We could trivialize it and lose the point, but every serious disappointment, every lost opportunity or dashed expectation, every major transition in life is a little death. All the rules of faith must apply to all the little deaths too or we have not yet come to terms with death. We are not yet free to serve Christ in joy or to live Life to the fullest.

I can still remember my fear on the first day of kindergarten. Home was safe and familiar. This “Stranger Mommy” (the teacher) and this horde of “brothers and sisters” were neither safe nor familiar. I was told everything would be just fine; that was, of course, a bold-faced lie. I would learn to survive; that was closer to the truth. And after a while, as everybody knows, some people turned out to be wonderful and others horrid. But Daddy said one thing that stuck: all children my age had to go through this. That was comforting. If they could endure it, so could I. I was not being singled out for special punishment.

There were lots of other “little deaths,” some of them much more dramatic, but nothing else in quite this vein until the first day of high school. They bused eight of us from this tiny rural school into a big-city high school. Older kids told me stories that were not designed to make me comfortable. But it didn’t matter so much anymore. I already had a mission. And it was still comforting to know that everybody else my age was going through the same thing.

It keeps happening, doesn’t it? College. Seminary. My first church. Death. All of them a little Alpha and Omega. The beginning is scary and the end is sad. We wish it wouldn’t start, and we wish it wouldn’t end. But each beginning is mixed with an ending. And each ending is mixed with a new beginning.

So I hated to leave Mercer Island. So I am scared to come here. So what? Life is full of little deaths. Every death is a new beginning. *"I am the Omega and the Alpha."* We have a God of endless new beginnings.

What if we get daring and open ourselves to the Spirit of Jesus the Christ more than ever before and fail miserably? In this world, that is always a genuine possibility. Are we – people who know the love of Christ Jesus our Lord – to be terrorized by temporary earthly experiences? The Kingdom we live in is bigger than that. The grace of Jesus Christ is bigger than that.

So let us go on serving the Lord we love and being filled by His goodness and mercy. And maybe we should get ready for some changes and some newness and some surprises. And I don't mean the little stuff from me. There will probably be some of that too, but those changes are not the ones that will matter.

Let us trust God, for he is the Alpha and the Omega and the Alpha: the end that turns into ever-new beginnings.