

**“Sometimes It’s ‘O.K.’ to Know How a Story Ends”**

**Revelation 21:10, 22 — 22:5**

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There are very few things as irritating as having someone spoil the ending of a show we are watching, a book we are reading, or a game we have recorded, though I have to confess that I have been guilty of doing this. I have done it in sermon illustrations, though over time, and after receiving some well-deserved grief, I have tried to be more careful. And on one occasion, I misunderstood what the daughter of family friends was saying about a Harry Potter book. I thought she had finished it. So, I referred to the outcome of a character, and thus ruined the book for her.

But sometimes it’s “O.K.” to know how a story ends. A recent study published in *Psychology Today* found that of the 800 participants presented with stories with up to 4,200 words, some of which were preceded by spoilers, a surprisingly high percentage gave high ratings to stories that had been spoiled in advance (as recounted in *Monday Mornings* from Gardner-Webb University, May 16, 2022). Knowing the ending doesn’t necessarily ruin a story. In fact, sometimes it actually enhances a story.

The book of Revelation is a prime example of this reality. It is easy to get bogged down in the confusing imagery or be misled by people who read the book as some kind of encoded message which gives us the exact date the world will end. For these reasons, many church leaders through the ages, including Martin Luther, have wanted to remove the book from the canon, which in practical terms, many churches have. But the basic message of the book is much needed.

Revelation is a spoiler on the human story, it tells us how the story will end — with goodness and mercy prevailing, with love and justice reigning, with God winning. Even though we may not know exactly when this will happen, it is helpful to know that goodness will prevail. It gives us hope to keep working for good in spite of everything we see in the world around us.

It is easy to feel hopeless in light of the pandemic. Every time we think we are done with it, there is another variant or subvariant, and there are more positive tests, hospitalizations and deaths, not to mention life adjustments, decisions to be made, and head-scratching debates.

It is easy to feel hopeless about the realities of gun violence. Every time we have mass shootings like we did last weekend, we recycle the same old arguments, express the same passionate concerns, and then do absolutely nothing as a nation to make any difference.

It is easy to feel hopeless about current political realities. Every election cycle, we are reminded of just how divided we are between and within parties, between urban and rural areas, between races and ideologies, so much so that we can't solve problems that affect us all, we are more interested in winning and in placing blame.

It is easy to feel hopeless about global realities, with war raging in Ukraine, conflict continuing in Afghanistan, poverty increasing, and climate change threatening to make every other challenge insignificant.

It is easy to feel hopeless about the church as fewer and fewer people have any interest in organized religion, yet ironically, it is also easy to feel hopeless about the human capacity to solve problems. In postmodernity, we have encountered the limits of human ingenuity. We can't seem to solve every problem on our own doorstep, much less fix the world anymore, if we ever could. But if we have given up on God and ourselves, what hope can there be?

In such a time, it helps to know how the story ends. Our reading from Revelation presents a vision in which the new Jerusalem comes down from the heavens. God and goodness are at the center of everything. It is always light, there is no darkness. The gates of the city are always open and people from all nations are welcome, there are no divisions. Only those who practice abomination and falsehood are kept out, lying and evil are no longer tolerated. Though hopeful for any reader, all of this has added meaning for people living in a time of persecution, like this book's author. It is a vision of peace.

As the vision continues, the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flows through the city from the throne of God and the Lamb. It

is a symbol of spiritual life, a powerful symbol in a part of the world where water is scarce yet essential. The city of peace and joy, light and hope, satisfies every need. There is no thirst of any kind. Bodies, minds, hearts and souls are filled to overflowing.

And according to Revelation, this is not just a future hope, it is an accomplished reality. “I am making all things new,” God says earlier in this chapter, “It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end (21:5–6).” It is done, it is finished, it is accomplished!

Now, this is a vision, it is not to be taken literally, but it is to be taken seriously. The message is true. The author is saying that this is what we have to look forward to, this is how things will end — God ushers in a realm where everyone is welcome and loved, no one suffers or goes without basic needs.

Of course, we may wonder how this helps now. It is a lovely image of the future, but how does it help those of us living in a pandemic, with hatred and division, with gun violence and warfare and various global threats. How does the vision help us now? It helps because it lets us know our efforts are not futile, even if we do not see any immediate results. There is reason to believe that things will change for the better, if not in our lifetime, someday.

I read a story recently about a man who decided to start moving a small mountain that was a barrier to community one turn of the shovel at a time. People said he was crazy. He couldn't move the mountain, even if he spent the rest of his life shoveling. He knew that, he said, but he would move what he could, trusting that after he was gone, his children would continue the work, and after they were gone, with enough generations continuing the effort, they would move the mountain. His belief in a future possibility kept him engaged in the present day, and as the story goes, the gods were so impressed by his efforts that they moved the mountain for him. Hope does make a difference.

Knowing how the human story ends also gives us perspective. Children and teenagers are often anxious about changes and basic realities of life, as are their parents, and young adults as well. The latter

seek clarity on vocation, someone to share life with, perhaps a better understanding of their identity. But with any of these issues, at any point in life, it is helpful to get the perspective of someone on the other side of our struggle.

In working with youth, for example, we have to involve in the planning the youth themselves and some parents, but it can also help to involve other adults who have survived their own adolescence and perhaps their children's as well. They bring a sense of calm and hope. In the midst of any challenge with an unknown outcome, it is helpful to have some assurance that things will eventually be "O.K."

But knowing how the human story ends not only lets us know our efforts are not futile and gives us perspective, it empowers us to participate with God in moving this world in the direction God intends. Early twentieth-century Jesuit Priest and paleontologist Teilhard de Chardin was a Christian and an advocate of Darwin's theory of evolution, not as odd a combination as some think, but Teilhard put a twist on Darwin's theory. The world is evolving, he argued, but not in a mechanical way from a random starting point. The world, with all the creatures in it, is being pulled toward an ultimate conclusion by the God who created it, and we are part of the process, we work with God to get the world there.

We pray every week, following Jesus' example, "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven." If we genuinely yearn for God's realm, the least we can do is put feet on our prayers, act in ways that move the world toward healing and wholeness, justice and peace. Jesus begins this work with his preaching and teaching, his acts of healing like the one we read about today from John 5, his welcome of outsiders and the marginalized, his death and resurrection. As we follow him in service and love, in witness and advocacy, we continue this work. Knowing that it will come to pass empowers us to do so.

This may involve simple things like following public health recommendations, supporting reasonable gun legislation, confronting hate speech, addressing mental health concerns, making friends across party lines, recycling everything we can, working in our clothing

ministry, participating in the CROP Walk, inviting a friend to church. But whenever we do anything to address the hopelessness around us, we participate in a story that we know will have a happy ending.

Fourteenth-century English anchoress Julian of Norwich lived in a time of many challenges, but she received sixteen revelations or showings that gave her a sense of peace. One of the best known of these includes these words. “For the Passion of our Lord is comfort to us against all this, and that is his blessed will for all who will be saved. He comforts readily and sweetly with his words, and says: But all will be well, and every kind of living thing will be well (*Showings*, p. 149).”

It is a simpler way of saying what the author of Revelation says. In the end, goodness and love prevail, God wins; all will be well, every kind of living thing will be well. It may be a spoiler, but we’re “O.K.” with this spoiler. It lets us know we can breathe. It lets us know there is hope. “And there will be no more night; they need no light of lamp or sun, for the Lord God will be their light, and they will reign forever and ever.” Thanks be to God!