

17th Sunday after Pentecost
Sermon 10.8.17
Scripture: Genesis 1:1-2:3
Revelation 21

Today is Bart's last Sunday with us. He'll move with his wife Marnie on Tuesday to Delaware, to be closer to their daughter.

September 16th, 2001 was Bart's first Sunday with us, which was my second Sunday leading worship here. He was on the board of trustees at Berkshire Country Day School and I was a new, part-time teacher there. The headmaster mentioned something about me to Bart—that one of the new teachers was also the new pastor at the church in Monterey. I have no idea why that piqued Bart's interest. I only know he was too naughty for really joining Trinity Episcopal Church where Marnie is a beloved participant. He needed something a little wilder than what well-appointed worship and fellowship can be found among the Episcopalians in Lenox. He needed something where you could have your say. And so it was a running theme in my occasionally crossing paths with the priest at Trinity. Stephen would say (fondly, I need you to understand), "Thank you for taking Bart off my hands," and I would say, "Thank you for letting us have him."

That Sunday, that first Sunday for Bart and second Sunday for me and perhaps 13,000th Sunday for this congregation (which was established in 1750), I preached on beginning in the middle of things. *In medias res* is the literary term for it, Latin for "in the middle of things," a term I'd use often as a once English major and now English teacher. *In medias res*: Homer, for example, begins *The Iliad* in the ninth year of the Trojan war and *The Odyssey* in the tenth year of the warrior Odysseys' journey home. Shakespeare begins *Romeo and Juliet* generations into the "ancient grudge" between the Capulets and the Montagues, and *The Tragedy of Hamlet* opens after King Hamlet has been murdered. *Macbeth* begins in the middle of a conversation, the three witches casting a spell, and (thinking of more recent literature) *The Catcher in the Rye* opens after Holden has been kicked out of his boarding school and has begun his three days of desperate wandering in New York.

As it happens, I began ministry just before the World Trade Towers came down, two days before September 11th, an event so significant that it seemed I'd stepped into something a long time in the making and would be a long time in the understanding, at least for me. I'd stepped into adulthood in the middle of things, and now I needed to play catch-up—catch-up

with the world, catch-up with this congregation and the people who were then active in the congregation. Just seven or so, your eighth had recently died, Ray, Sally's dad who used to sit right there.

There was a lot to catch up on.

It was a little disorienting.

One thing about being so new to ministry, not to mention to adulthood, is that everything that came to me to do really did feel like a revelation. What wisdom I could exercise I knew wasn't of my own making. I simply didn't have it. These days I can more easily believe I'm self-sufficient, but then I knew better—which was about all I knew.

So it came to me, to orient us all in the middle of things we should consider the one storybook I know of bold enough in its ambition to begin in the beginning and to end at the end. Departing from the lectionary, we'd consider the beginning and the end.

The beginning, this fresh take on how it began, on *that* it began: this origin story is remarkable for its take on creation as not having come of conflict. The created order that God began in the beginning didn't come from some cosmic struggle, according to this story. It came simply from the spoken word. "Light. Firmament. Sun and moon. Flying things and creeping things."

This is a different understanding of the nature and source of all that is—different from other stories about the beginning of things. Other origin stories (and there are many, countless, every tribe and society having developed one, it seems) imagine divine combat, a struggle between two willful primordial beings representing good and evil, a great existential battle between monsters of chaos and a god (or pantheon of gods) representing good order.

It should be said, we see remnants of these stories in our Bible. The oral culture of the Ancient Near East blurred the boundaries between nations and peoples, so we see remnants of stories that have otherwise lost central place.

Job, for example, whose story includes some of the oldest passages ever written down, confesses a God who, by his power and understanding, created the order of creation by striking down Rahab, the dragon of chaos, his hand "piercing the fleeing serpent."

The writer of the 74th Psalm confesses faith in the God who created by breaking the heads of the dragons in the waters, crushing the heads of Leviathan, a monster of the mythology of a pagan tribe neighboring the Hebrews in the land of Canaan. This Leviathan would resurface in

other parts of the Bible, like in the 104th Psalm, though here it's imagined as a sort of pet of God, a thing that God formed to sport in the sea—which is also to suggest that God is its creator and master. No monstrous threat here, now this once primordial force is but one more thing within the created order, and a sporting one at that.

So it is with this creation story, six days of speaking into being and a seventh day of rest: it suggests that God is one of absolute creative authority, whose voice but speaks and it is so. There is no struggle. There was no war. There is simply truth—named and made real. It's astonishing for its lack of anything all that astonishing. What's more, it more accurately parallels what science has had to say of the beginning. The so-called Big Bang is the genesis of something where before there was nothing.

Nothing. Then, something.

I have to tell you, I think those who first gathered the stories and books that would become the biblical canon must have noticed this difference in conceiving of the creation and must have discerned that this one is truer, truer in what it suggests and truer in what it inspires. That the creative act is something other than a violent one means for us that genesis and generation of new forms of being, and of being together, can be simply creative, not necessarily violent at all, not even subtly so.

You know, we begin so much of our lives together out of violence—out of casting out an “other” to establish a new norm. What if he didn't have to do that? What if we trusted in another way as just as essential, as just as true?

James Baldwin, in his brilliant interview with Dick Cavett in 1963 and recalled in the documentary out last year, *I Am Not Your Negro*, had this to say: “I'm a man, but if you think I'm a nigger, it means you need it. . . . [and] you, the white people, . . . have got to find out why. And the future of the country depends on that. What white people have to do is try and find out in their own hearts why it was necessary to have a nigger in the first place.”

The God whom we worship, and who created something out of nothing, would have as asking the same question. Why must we create an underclass of people in order to know, and to esteem, who we ourselves are?

How about instead we begin each new beginning resisting, *prayerfully* resisting, the scapegoat impulse? How about we also go back and make right the times when we've botched the beginning, working a little redemption in the middle of things...?

Revelation, the Revelation to John: this book, the final one of the biblical canon and the latest one of all sixty-six to be written, probably around the year 100 or even later, recalls the notion that there's some great, cosmic battle taking place. Sad to say, this Revelation or Apocalypse to John re-energizes the impulse that a creator-god is warring against a rebellious beast of chaos, and that history hangs in the balance, so we should behave likewise.

But, to give John his due, this was likely John's experience of life—that there really was a terrible battle taking place, and one side seemed deeply evil and tremendously powerful, while the other side was good while also strong though only in faith.

A political prisoner on the Greek island of Patmos, John likely suffered terribly under the rule of Rome, or knew people who had. After all, it was around this time of the turn of the 1st century that Nero was in power, an emperor whose brutality was well known. In fact, it's thought that he was the one whom John meant as bearing the mark of the beast, the number 666. Roman numerology has the letters N, R, and O as represented in the number 6. It was a code to communicate by letter to his fellow Christians that the emperor, and the empire, were to be resisted as if they were evil manifest, resisted at any cost. Banishment, beheading, crucifixion: they'd stop at nothing, neither the empire who'd dole out such terrorizing punishment nor the Christians who were strong in their resolve to take whatever came because no one is Lord but the Lord, Jesus Christ and him crucified.

Lordship is revealed in grace, in self-giving; and true kingdoms expand because of the appeal of love.

The urge to stay in faith amidst terrifying governance was essentially the message of the Revelation of John, one he received in a vision and which he then wrote down and sent out as letters to the churches of Asia Minor—letters because he himself was a prisoner, deported to the island of Patmos about 37 miles off mainland in the Aegean Sea. Here would be banished any people who were perceived as posing a social threat, through the practice of magic or astrology or, as in John's case, prophecy.

And who knows under what conditions he was prisoner? You look at pictures of Patmos today, and see it's breathtaking in its beauty and I imagine mild in climate. But then you consider other places of banishment and deportation throughout history—Alcatraz, Siberia, Bergen-Belsen, Nauru Island where Australia detains asylum seekers, where some are still being held even after several years—these aren't good places. People suffer here. Some lose their lives.

Others lose the minds. Who knows what John's life was like on the Roman prison island of Patmos? Who knows? As we say today, perhaps he'd been radicalized.

However we might understand it, it's clear he had little doubt that things would go a certain way, that God would come to certain judgments as to who was good and who was wicked and so who was worthy of eternal glory and who was worthy of eternal torment. To John's way of thinking, it was clear who was on the right side of history and who was in the wrong.

But this runs contrary to much of what Jesus had to say, not to mention what he revealed in living as he lived and in dying how he died. Really, much of what is actually of Christ would have us recognizing how everything is not so very clear-cut, is instead a deep morass of wheat and weeds. Indeed, Jesus seemed often eager to underscore the ambiguity of things. In his parables, in his interactions with "sinners" and his resistant of the righteous, Jesus' teaching can be summed up as he once did sum up, that the Father in heaven makes the sun rise on the evil and on the righteous, and send rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous.

We should be cautious, then, of too strong a conviction that we know who's got damnation coming their way. We should also be cautious when we conceive of God as a warrior rather than as sovereign and so creative in an ultimate and absolute way. Finally, we should be skeptical when someone swears otherwise, even when that person's sworn testimony shows up in the Bible, or perhaps especially when that person's sworn testimony shows up in the Bible.

As it happens, those who established the canon were similarly cautious, and for this reason the Revelation of John nearly didn't make the cut. Around the turn of the 4th century, when the canon was being set, the Revelation of John remained an open question. What's more, Martin Luther, a thousand years later, reopened the question. In revisiting the canon for the Protestant church he was formulating (though largely unbeknownst to him), and in cutting out many books that are still in the Catholic Bible, Luther almost cut Revelation too, and for its nearly not meeting the criteria he set, the question put to each book: "Does it teach Christ?"

Of this book, the answer is, "Sort of."

For much in the book seems not to. Its blood-thirst and envisioning vengeance, its regressive notion that the Lord is a god of war, and is ever at war: much in this book runs contrary to theological gems such as these, that God's sovereignty makes conflict with God a thing of sport and little more, and that Christ's rule is one of self-giving love and eternal peace freely offered to be freely received.

But here is something of Christ the Revelation to John *does* do: it imagines the end.

A city at peace; all history in praise; an entire new (or renewed?) creation with all wrongdoing and unrighteousness and tragedy and heartbreak worked out of it, like clay that has had air pocks worked out by the potter who doesn't give up and doesn't settle for good enough, like silver that has had impurities refined out; a consummation of all creation brought back to God that all shall be filled with the knowledge of God as the waters cover the sea; and a redemption that all suffering and injustice might be brought to right: Revelation imagines an end to which we might all be going and by which all that is and all that happens is charged with meaning and purpose, is filled and fulfilled. This sense of an ending gives shape to all that has come before, shores up the sloshing mess of history or happenstance or good fortune and misfortune, contains and accounts for the rising and falling tides of history, and the plodding and thrashing of each and any of us who lack sight, not to mention foresight or insight, as we stumble along, tossed to and fro.

This sense of an ending: this assurance that Christ will come and all will be peace. I'm in no huge rush to get there. I like being charged with the gospel to do its work amidst history. But I also rely on this promise, that the end is glory and thanks and praise, and it also shines its light back onto history's unfolding, that such glory and thanks and praise might also enlighten our living. With that assurance, I often join John in his final words of this grand storybook, "Come, Lord Jesus."

Another thing this sense of an ending: it provides a holding environment. This is a phrase that comes to us from the world of psychoanalysis and early childhood development. Donald Winnicott, English pediatrician and analyst, came up with the phrase to name what was a child needs in order to mature into a psychologically healthy adult: a holding environment. Be it homes and families of origin, neighborhoods and towns, schools and congregations of faith, a holding environment is essential for human wellbeing—which God, it seems, knows, and those who've testify to the reality of God, it seems, know. God who is proclaimed to be the alpha and the omega, God who is felt to be our beginning and our end, God who is source and sustainer and aim of all: God holds us and the whole world in his hands.

This is a truth we realize for one another. And for me, it's a truth that makes letting people go easier.

We let a lot of people go in this congregation. Maybe that's true for all congregations, especially these days. People move more than before. But that's long been the way of things here. Monterey has always been a place of people coming and going.

Seasonal members of the community aside, though, until recently, the people we've let go were then moving into the rest of their life. Having come to Monterey because of Gould Farm, these people found their calling and their footing in life while here, and then they set off. For a decade or so, we were quite consistently what's known as a calling congregation—a congregation that prepares young people for what their lives will be. We've formed a social worker, a pastor, a church musician, a church history scholar.

This year, though, our sending off is something else. George Emmons, Mary Landor, Terry Wing, now Bart: these whom we're letting go are toward the end of their lives, which makes it a different sort of parting ways. I can't say I like it, but I can say I trust it. What distance there is between us and others with whom we've been close comes to nothing when you consider the grand holding that God does for all. And I really mean that. I'm not spouting platitudes. That's a felt truth for me. The more I cultivate for my own imagining the vision set forth in the Bible, the more I trust that everything coheres, that what distance there seems to be between I and thou is less important than the fact that we hold one another as we are all held by God.

Bart, as we began together, so now we end—yet still in the middle of things. I'll miss you. We will not be the same without you. But trusting that you go in love, we send you forth with our blessing that you might be a blessing in your new place.

Thanks be to God.