

Alpha and Omega

Revelation 21:1-6a

We are all familiar with "stories of origin"—narratives that describe the circumstances from whence we come. We have family stories that chart the journeys of our ancestors, whether long ago or relatively recently, to the places that we have learned to call home. From childhood, we listened to fanciful tales of the origin of things, like Rudyard Kipling's *Just So Stories* (How the Leopard Got Its Spots, How the Whale Got His Throat, How the Camel Got His Hump, How the Rhinoceros Got His Skin, The Beginning of the Armadillos, among others). And of course, Christianity and Judaism point to the book of Genesis as something like the *ultimate* story of origin: how the world, and everything that dwells therein, came to be created by God. These stories tell us something about *ourselves*; they focus our attention on our roots, the ultimate *sources* of our lives. These stories have tremendous explanatory power in helping us understand where we came from and why we are here.

These "stories of origin" have a logical counterpart: "stories of destination," which tell us where we're going. Typically, we find it easier to look into the past than to look into the future. Of course, we have access to various technologies that keep the past relatively "present" to us in ways that would have been incomprehensible to people in the ancient world. For them, the past was not that much more transparent than was the future; in both cases, *stories* were what one had to rely on in order to understand anything outside of the present—whether past or future.

In fact, it is even a bit misleading to think of "where we are going" only in terms of the future, because a *destination* is not limited to chronological

sequence. To speak of "where we are headed" in a larger, broader sense is to inquire into our ultimate destiny. So, just as a story of origin offers us more than just a descriptive play-by-play account of events that led up to our present moment, so do "stories of destination" provide more than a sequence of future events. Rather, they answer the question "Where are you going?" in a much broader sense: Where are you headed? In what direction is your life taking you? What is your true destination? Such stories are the converse and counterpart of origin stories. They are destination stories: accounts of the end (and not just in the sense of temporal finality, but also in the sense of purpose or goal).

The book of Revelation is an destination story in this larger sense...just as the book of Genesis is meant to help us understand our origins in the broadest terms, so the book of Revelation is intended to help us understand our ultimate destination. The answer to both questions—where we are from and where we are headed—is the same: God. Our ultimate origins are in God, and our ultimate end is in God as well. As T. S. Eliot wrote, "In my end is my beginning": our final destination is the same as where we started. Some ancient Christian thinkers identified this pattern with the Latin words *exitus* and *reditus*: all things come forth from God, and all things ultimately return to God. **David S.**

Cunningham

The book of Revelation can make some people nervous. So why invoke a reading from Revelation on a feast day like All Saints? In many Christian denominations, All Saints is a great feast of the church *as* church. It is a day that some churches set aside for public baptisms, where the candidates are said to be newly numbered in the company of the saints, adopted children of God destined to become citizens of a heavenly city, the new Jerusalem. It is no accident that this reading from Revelation, celebrating the holy city where "death will be no more," as we remember and celebrate the saints who have gone before us into

the Church Triumphant. This association is not accidental. Revelation is at its heart a book of consolation, a vision of comfort for a people persecuted and in distress. It is often hard for us Western Christians to imagine what persecution might be like—a life lived in fear and trembling, always on the run, always faithful, never sure. It is the kind of life that the emperor Diocletian inflicted on the early Christians who wrote and preserved this book. They were saints of the church, brothers and sisters in the faith, risking all that they had for the sake of the name of Christ, which they knew was above all other names, including the name of the emperor himself. For the emperor, what was at stake was a matter of state control, including control of the religious imagination. For Christians, what was at stake was control of their inmost identity. In putting on Christ in baptism, they had been made citizens of a heavenly city, a city not made by human hands, and could do no other than act in the name of the Christ for whom they themselves were named, the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end.

We don't know all these people suffered, but we do know how they imagined their freedom, should it ever come. And even after two millennia, in this startling vision of God's triumph, we contemporary Christians can catch a glimpse of their own fears and their own hopes. What these people saw was extraordinary. They were Jews become Christians in a Roman world, members of a heretical wing of a minority faith barely tolerated by a brutal empire. Yet what they saw and preached was a vision of universal humanity, a new heaven and a new earth, a holy city coming down from heaven, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. "And the one who was seated on the throne said, "See, I am making all things new." **Roger A. Ferlo** We see how they envisioned their end.

Our culture is much less effective at developing persuasive end time stories than it is at developing origin stories. We tend to operate with a concept of time that is largely linear and points indefinitely into the future. We have some idea of where we came from, but we are less specific about where we are going. Think of the time lines that are depicted along the bottom edge of the pages in a history book: they mark certain years as important, but they have no definitive end. They just point vaguely into the future, suggesting that "time marches on" and that everything will continue to grow and develop (presumably in a beneficial, or at least a relatively benign, form). But where, exactly, are we headed? The dominant story of our culture seems to be that we are headed "everywhere at once"—which means, of course, that we are headed nowhere in particular.

One of the most significant features of the Christian narrative is our clear conception of our destination. This story of our true destination it can provide real healing—particularly when contrasted with indistinct arrows pointed vaguely toward an indeterminate future. We Christians believe that we are headed *somewhere in particular*: we are headed back to God. This is true not just for us as individuals but in a larger, collective, sense: eternal communion with God is the proper destiny of the church, the nations, and the entire created order. **David S. Cunningham**

Last night I watched a movie called *Where Was God?* It was about families and a community in Oklahoma where a devastating hurricane had hit and destroyed many homes and an elementary school. The faith community rallied around the people of the town. As I sat watching and crying, I was surprised that the people interviewed were not angry and hostile toward God. Rather people talked of miracles! Even a father and mother of a kindergartener who was killed told of their story of coming to faith. The father had a childhood

illness and was told that he would never have children. However, in his mature age he fathered a son. The neighbors and teachers told of this child's special acts of kindness, which they shared with the father. The churches and disaster relief chaplains worked with the family. The father found faith and has committed his life to helping other child come to faith. He said he had never known that he needed to be such an example to his son, but he would now help others. Through his tears he explained that he looks forward to seeing his son in heaven and being introduced to Jesus face to face! Others gave their testimonies of God's faithfulness including one of the pastors whose wife was extremely ill. His message was that God is where God always is. God is our beginning and our end, no matter what we are going through. God is always our faith parent.

This is the vision of the heavenly Jerusalem in our scripture. God and human beings dwell together, just as they did at the beginning, before the fall—for God is the beginning and the end; the Alpha and Omega. No surprise, then, that the description of that new city includes a garden with the tree of life, endlessly fruitful, with leaves that heal the nations (Rev. 22:2). **David S. Cunningham**

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