

Dry Our Tears

Revelation 21:1-6a

Yesterday I attended an ordination council where a few members of the Commission on Ministry and elders of Journey of Faith Christian Church (formerly Memorial of Ann Arbor) examined the candidate for ordination. During the second half of our session we offered suggestions for planning the June 9th worship celebration when she will be ordained. As we left there were tears in her eyes – tears of joy, not of sadness, because of the affirmation that she was experiencing. As she dried her tears I remembered this scripture where God promises to dry our tears.

We are all familiar with "stories of origin" that describe the circumstances from whence we come. These "stories of origin" have a logical counterpart: "stories of destination," which tell us where we're going. For people in the ancient world, the past was not that much more understandable than 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.

But in our Christian life it is a bit misleading to think of "where we are going" only in terms of the future, because a *destination* is not limited to earthly progression. 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 questions "Where are you going?" Where are you headed? In what direction is your life taking you? What is your true destination? What is your sense of purpose or goal?

The book of Revelation is intended to help us understand our ultimate destination. The answer to the 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. Or all things come forth from God, and all things ultimately return to God.

Our scripture is the vision of the heavenly Jerusalem where God and human beings dwell together, just as they did at the beginning, before the fall—for God is the beginning and the end. (David S. Cunningham)

In some churches this scripture in Revelation is used on the first Sunday of November on All Saints day. I also discovered in many Christian it is a day that many traditions 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.

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 the first saints of the church, brothers and sisters in the faith, risking all that they had for the sake of a name—the name of Christ, which they knew was above all other names, including the name of the emperor himself. For Diocletian, 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 how these people suffered, how they recanted, how they died, how they escaped such persecution. But we do know how they imagined their freedom. In their vision of God's triumph, we catch a glimpse of their fears and hopes and begin to see our own fears and hopes. These people were Jews who become Christians in a Roman world, members of a misunderstood 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." In a world of shifting values and imperial terror, they knew that these words of consolation and promise were "trustworthy and true."

Some of us have heard these trustworthy words in a Sunday morning sermon, or from a radio or television evangelist that echo the ancient cry of the persecuted and the dispossessed. To hear this reading is to hear a summons to solidarity with all those who have suffered in their witness to Christ—whether in the farthest reaches of the first-century Roman Empire or in the urban streets of American; whether on a hard to travel road in Honduras or India or in the faces of Angel Tree children or residents and guests of Carriage Town ministries.

"Write this, for these words are trustworthy and true." (Roger A. Ferlo)

The book of Revelation concludes with a word of hope and the promise of new beginnings. The vision describes the holy city, "the new Jerusalem," coming down from God (21:2; see also 3:12). The new Jerusalem is described as "prepared as a bride adorned for her husband." Revelation has previous allusions to a marriage of the Lamb and the bride (19:6-9, see also 22:17). The new Jerusalem is the realization of the ideal community, which promotes the continuous presence of

God among God's people (21:3-4). That God establishes a dwelling place among humans is another way of expressing God's continuous presence with the people. Community and communion unite God and the inhabitants of the new Jerusalem, which include people from "every tribe and language and people and nation" (5:9), people "from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages" (7:9). There is no racial, language, or ethnic discrimination in the new Jerusalem. (David Cortes-Fuentes)

This new Jerusalem is a model for the church. Where we allow God's presence to influence everything word we say, everything we do, every relationship.

Today we baptize Austin and Ryan. There may be tears from family and friends, and who understand the meaning of this special moment. It is like our scripture where the new Jerusalem has come down and you are becoming a citizen of that great city. Today is your birthday. Today you are adopted into the family of God! There will be people who do not understand – some will criticize – some will think you are strange – when are stressed or in doubt remember your birthday – remember your baptism.

You don't need to wait until you are grown – when you are men – when you are old – when you die – to experience God's love, comfort and hope – these belong to you right now. Your heavenly Father and God says to you "it is done...I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end." God will dry our tears in both joy and sadness. God will take away our fear of death because when we have no need for this body, we will continue to live in God's presence for eternity. There will be no crying or pain because God makes everything new!

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