

Morning Star

Revelation 22:12-14, 16-17, 20-21

¹² "See, I am coming soon; my reward is with me, to repay according to everyone's work. ¹³ I am the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end."

¹⁴ Blessed are those who wash their robes, so that they will have the right to the tree of life and may enter the city by the gates....

¹⁶ "It is I, Jesus, who sent my angel to you with this testimony for the churches. I am the root and the descendant of David, the bright morning star." ¹⁷ The Spirit and the bride say, "Come." And let everyone who hears say, "Come." And let everyone who is thirsty come. Let anyone who wishes take the water of life as a gift....

²⁰ The one who testifies to these things says, "Surely I am coming soon." Amen. Come, Lord Jesus!

²¹ The grace of the Lord Jesus be with all the saints. Amen.

This scripture reminds me of a song that I learned as a child. The words went:

Everybody aught to know,
Everybody aught to know,
Everybody aught to know who Jesus is.
He is the lily of the valley,
He is the bright and morning star,
He is the fairest of ten thousand,
Everybody aught to know.

This morning you we come to worship on this Mother's day morning. Some of came because it is a gift to your mother and some came because it is our way of life. But whatever our reason, we bring all sorts of expectations into the pews on Sunday mornings. Some of us bear personal wounds or burdensome responsibilities that have us panting for a word of comfort and consolation. Others of us are plagued with an awareness of our frailties and shortcomings and come seeking assurance. Still others of us bring a hunger to follow Jesus more passionately into the places where the Word and the world intersect, longing for a message of inspiration and hope. Some of us bring the simple desire to experience the familiar joy of connecting with others

who are on the same journey. At heart, we all want to hear the good news. We come to this worship for confession and pardon, petition and praise, conscience and communion. The epilogue of John's lengthy apocalyptic vision, Scripture's closing word, opens wide onto a spectrum of human longings and theological assurances. The passage is rich with declarations and symbols that meet us at our points of longing.

The passage begins with Christ's announcement that he is returning soon. While such a declaration usually carries overtones of judgment, John uses the language of reward. Christ is coming "to repay according to everyone's work" (v. 12). He will come to reward his followers for their faithful labor on behalf of the gospel.

Rather than be caught up in the emotions of anticipation, the text carries explicit instructions for those who are waiting. "Blessed are those who wash their robes, so that they will have the right to the tree of life and may enter the city" (v. 14). It points us away from sky gazing and orients us toward the everyday work of the faithful. Doing laundry is not glamorous or exciting. It can be mundane and tedious labor. Yet it is necessary.

The adrenaline high that is generated by speculations of Christ's return date is exciting. Every generation since Christ's ascension has seen the rise of religious leaders offering numerical calculations of a calendar date for Christ's return. In the United States of 1844, thousands of followers of William Miller gathered together in fervent anticipation on October 22, in response to the prediction that the day of return had arrived. As later noted by Hiram Edson, one of those participants, "Our fondest hopes and expectations were blasted, and such a spirit of weeping came over us as I never experienced before.... We wept and wept, till the day dawn." In the early 1970s the author Hal Lindsey published a hugely successful book, *The Late Great Planet Earth*, which cobbled together an assortment of twentieth-century international events that were loosely matched to Scripture, in order to determine a date of Christ's return.

The result of his book and related others was an eschatological orientation among many Christians of the late twentieth century that served only as a distraction from the practices and work of the faithful in a broken world. The instructions for those who are waiting are to concentrate on the tasks at hand and to be about the work of cleansing a world made unclean.

This is a call to ministry, not a ticketed invitation to sit in a stadium and watch a spectacle. It is a reminder that being a Christian assumes an active disposition and an attitude of grace-filled practice within the community of faith.

Everyone who is thirsty is told to come. No qualifications or prerequisites are given, outside of the request for attention to laundry washing. No limitations are posted regarding who is allowed to enjoy the drink of salvation. "Let anyone who wishes take the water of life" (v. 17d). All are invited: countless people of all nationalities, ages, languages, classes, and so forth drawing out water that is freely given as a gift.

Far too often we emphasize the particularity of Christ's return and grasp it as the personal possession for a favored community of which we claim membership. These closing verses of our Bible suggest, to the contrary, that such exclusivity is a manufactured interpretation that is truly separate from the design and will of the returning Christ. Perhaps this is part of the washing that the text is referring to, a cleansing of our own prejudices and assumptions, which must be addressed before we may enter the heavenly city that has descended to us.

Southern writer Flannery O'Connor addressed these matters repeatedly in her fiction. In her well-known short story "Revelation," she brings this biblical message to the fore through a character whose narrow-mindedness and intolerance for others are revealed through the unexpected (and undesired) experience of a divine vision that comes to her in the waiting area of a doctor's office. The character's pride and self-importance are mortally punctured as she glimpses a celestial bridge to the

heavens filled with persons that she judges to be unworthy and grotesque. It is an ironic apocalyptic vision borrowed from John that points to our own need of preparation to be worthy of Christ's greeting. **(Paul "Skip" Johnson)**

Christ's enduring presence. The first proclamation is followed by a second: "I am the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end" (v. 13). This reinforces the truth of Christ's existence from the beginning of time and his promise to be present for all eternity. He encompasses the whole range of human history, the entire alphabet of life's experience, "the beginning and the end." Nothing—no wound, no sorrow, no joy—lies outside of Christ's enduring and embracing presence. As Oecumenius (the sixth-century commentator) put it, "And so he is Immanuel, of divinity and of humanity, possessing both [natures] perfectly, according to the traditional language, unconfusedly, unchangeably, immutably, really." **(Joseph H. Britton)**

Salvation at hand. "Blessed are those who wash their robes, so that they will have the right to the tree of life and may enter the city by the gates." This blessing is a word of reassurance. No one comes to the end of life unmarked, free of stains and smudges, but all can symbolically "wash their robes" and, by doing so, have access to salvation.

The robe is the symbol of worthiness of heaven. The tree of life is the metaphor for salvation and eternal life, an echo of the access denied to Adam and Eve in the garden but restored to those who are righteous and worthy. The tree stands on the bank of the river of the water of life. "Let everyone who is thirsty come. Let anyone who wishes take the water of life as a gift" (v. 17). Those who thirst for justice and hope are invited to quench their heart's longing in the life-giving water. Drink, wash, be baptized and healed.

Those who are thirsty for salvation will receive it as a gift, as the Samaritan woman at the well received the "living water" from Jesus: "Those who drink of the

water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life" ([John 4:14](#)). Those who receive this salvation are ushered through the gates into the city of God. To enter by the gate is to enter as a citizen of the new Jerusalem, the city without fear, without tears, without pain. To enter by the gate is to enter as a forgiven and beloved child of God.

Then Jesus identified himself as the one who sent the angel who brought the vision to John and the testimony to the churches. "I am the root and the descendant of David," Christ proclaims, confirmation of the messianic mantle he wears. The "bright morning star," a messianic symbol, which conjures images of the nativity star that rested over the stable and guided the magi to the scene of the miraculous birth.

This Messiah was an early disappointment—not the crusading warrior on a mighty steed that the Jews hoped would rout the brutal Roman occupiers, but a baby, naked and vulnerable, his only crib a feeding trough. Yet he is the one who announces the reign of justice, who turns the social order on its head and creates a community of compassion among those who have been marginalized, rejected, and despised: "He has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty" ([Luke 1:51b-53](#)).

The gift of grace. How marvelous that the last word in Scripture is a bestowal of grace: "The grace of the Lord Jesus be with all the saints. Amen" ([v. 21](#)). Grace is perhaps the greatest longing in human hearts and the most difficult gift to accept. Too many of us are like the older brother in Jesus' parable of the Prodigal Son—the one who stayed home, worked hard, kept out of trouble, and resented his father's lavish love for the wandering, squandering son. Where is the party for the tireless, faithful one? Where the luxurious robe and the gold ring?

We covet a fatted calf and overlook the fact that we have been given the keys to the kingdom. Grace upon grace. We do not get what we deserve. Thank God. "Come, Lord Jesus!" (**Joyce Hollyday**)

The response, our response, "Amen. Come, Lord Jesus," echoes the response found in early liturgies: "Remember, Lord, *your* Church, to deliver it from all evil and to make it perfect in *your* love, and gather it together in its holiness from the four winds to *your* kingdom which *you have* prepared for it. For *yours* is the power and the glory for ever. Let grace come and let this world pass away. Hosanna to the God of David. *If any one be holy, let them come! If any one be not, let them repent: Maranatha, Amen*" (*Didache* 10:5-6). (Christopher Rowland)

Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary - Feasting on the Word – Year C, Volume 2: Lent through Eastertide.