



October 1, 2006  
*Fully Alive in Christ*

Revelation 22:1-5  
**Jesus the Healer of Nations**  
World Communion Sunday  
M. Craig Barnes

I want you to listen to the following quote and take a guess at who said it:

Our citizens have given up believing in the future. Especially those who live in the poorest parts of the city. They have no work, little food, and no opportunity to better their lives. In some quarters of the city riots have broken out. But for the most part there is too much despair to riot. Surely Christ will hear our cries and come soon.

So, from where do these desperate words come? The minority church in Baghdad? The Christian community in Beirut? Maybe the persecuted church in Sudan? No, the quote comes from the fifth century. Pope Leo wrote these words as he lamented the fall of Rome. When he saw all of that destruction, he was just certain that the world was coming to an end.

As the historians of Christianity remind us, the world is always coming to an end. They say this not just to critique the miscalculations of the end-times enthusiasts, but also to say, "Of course, the world we know is always coming to an end." It does not matter how carefully we construct our empires, peace accords, or our lives, they always seem to crumble so easily. How long did it take the World Trade Towers to crumble to the ground? Not that much longer than it takes a bulldozer to level a Palestinian home in the West Bank. How long does it take a crazed teenager to open fire in a high school or college? Not long, but always the world has come to an end for someone.

Even if you are blessed to avoid these types of tragedies in your own life, it is only a matter of time before you, too, watch as your carefully constructed life begins to crumble. Maybe it all started with a chronic complaint. Eventually you go to a physician. They run some tests and find a dreaded disease. You fight it as long as you can, and maybe you even beat it. But it is only a matter of time before either that disease returns or another comes that you cannot beat. And when that happens to you, or someone you love, it sure feels like your world has come to an end. As it does when someone you loved leaves. As it does when you've lost your job, and you have no idea how to find another. But. But. But, the Scriptures boldly claim that even when these horrific things happen, we are not really at the end.

The book of Revelation was written to provide us a clear vision about the end of the story. The most important claim it makes is that God has already written the ending, and it doesn't end in horror and destruction. "I am the Alpha and the Omega," says the Lord. "I am the first and the last, the beginning and the end."

Why do Christians stand in a world that is being torn apart by violence, disease, and loss and yet still insist on hope? Why do we still speak of vision, mission, and dreams? Why do we get up the next morning and continue with our lives even when tragedy finds our homes? Because we know how the story ends. It ends with the triumph of Jesus' Kingdom, with the City of God descending to mortals, with the death of death, and with every tear being wiped from every eye.

History, the history of the world and the history of your life, is not running loose. It began with the decisive act of what God created; it finds its decisive center in the God who became flesh in Jesus Christ; and it is moving toward a decisive fulfillment called the Kingdom of Christ. From the beginning to the end, you see, all the decisive events are controlled by a Savior.

It is the easiest thing in the world to say that things are getting bad, or the political and military options are not working, or those devoted to violence just keep coming. Yes, all of that is true. But do not glance out the stained glass windows of the church to say, "The world is in trouble," and think that you are being prophetic. It doesn't take vision to believe that. If you want to be a leader in your part of the world, then say something unique and useful. Be a man or woman of hope who lives as if the story is not over yet. Not by a long shot.

We are not writing the story of our lives. God is, and we have not yet arrived at the ending he's already determined to give us. This is one of the most hopeful things I have to tell you. Since God has already written down the end of our story, there is nothing we can do to screw it up. It will come.

According to Revelation, our end looks like this: "The angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal flowing from the throne of God and the Lamb. On either side of this river is the tree of life, and the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations." That's how the story ends, with striking similarity to its beginning.

Now hear me carefully. Christian hope does not promise that life will soon improve for you or for the nations. What it promises is that the Lamb of God still walks down every city street making it holy and filled with possibility. Hope promises that, from the beginning to the end, Christ the Savior is at work. That may be a very different work than we had imagined, which is why we live by faith. Faith is a way of seeing the Savior at work even when it feels like the world is coming to an end.

People who live without faith in the future are always tempted to two extremes. Either they become cynical and frivolous with lives that make no difference, or they become control freaks determined to engineer the future they want for themselves, which usually means they hurt others along the way. Between these two extremes lies the narrow road taken by those who really believe that from beginning to end God is with us.

That vision is what frees them to see the holiness of every moment. And since they see the holiness of the day, they are also free to live with God's own passions for doing justice, loving mercy, and walking humbly.

Think about it. Every person who has ever made a difference in our history has had a vision of tomorrow. Whether it was old Pope Leo who eventually gave up his despair and went to the collapsed gates of Rome to talk the Barbarians out of sacking the city again, or Dr. King, or Nelson Mandela, or the anonymous young man we will never forget who stared down a tank in Tiananmen Square, or even the late mayor of our city—they were all passionate about making a difference because they just knew the story wasn't over yet.

That is how you find your passion as well. The holy vision of the end makes you passionate about loving God with all your heart and your neighbor as yourself. It makes you eager to care for the hungry, the naked, the stranger, and the prisoner as if you were doing it all to Jesus. It gives you a mission that alters the world around you. And maybe best of all it becomes your secret to living with joy, because you are constantly living in the present by the light of an incredibly hopeful future.

Benediction: *The end of the story is beautiful. If life does not seem so beautiful to you, then you are not at the end. Amen.*